**Title**

Elevating the Voices of Low-Income Latina/o/x and Black Community College Completers: Using a Systems Thinking Approach to Advance Equitable Practices

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**Publication Date**

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Elevating the Voices of Low-Income Latina/o/x and Black Community College Completers:

Using a Systems Thinking Approach to Advance Equitable Practices

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Edith Lorena Gutierrez Aguayo

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Elevating the Voices of Low-Income Latina/o/x and Black Community College Completers:

Using a Systems Thinking Approach to Advance Equitable Practices

by

Edith Lorena Gutierrez Aguayo

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Cecilia Rios Aguilar, Co-Chair

Professor Mark P. Hansen, Co-Chair

California community colleges are undergoing massive systemwide policy reform with the goal of transformational change that increases student success. Their open-access nature makes them the most accessible higher education system for historically underserved communities. As a result, community colleges serve as a gateway to higher education for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students, yet most students never complete. Currently, there is a lack of empirical research that analyzes community colleges as a system through the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Therefore, a phenomenological qualitative research design was used in this study to elevate marginalized student voices. The study focused on learning about the challenges students experienced as they navigated the

community college, the support they found to be most beneficial in helping them achieve their educational goals, and the recommendations they made to improve student support. Findings suggest that the college system lacked an integrated, student-centered design, resulting in inconsistent support. The burden of responsibility fell on the student to figure out how to braid resources to create a roadmap to completion. Students overcame systemic challenges by relying on navigational, social, familial, and resistance capital to achieve their educational goals. The most helpful supports identified were knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents and peer networks that made students feel welcomed and connected. Students recommended proactive efforts to increase awareness about college processes and resources that make them feel supported. The most frequently offered recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs, and financial aid. The study concludes with recommendations for adopting a student-centered design through equitable practices where community college practitioners take individual and institutional responsibility for student success.

The dissertation of Edith Lorena Gutierrez Aguayo is approved.

Daniel Gilbert Solórzano

Cecilia Rios Aguilar, Committee Co-Chair

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University of California, Los Angeles

2024

# DEDICATION

*Le dedico este doctorado a mi familia especialmente a mis padres, María y Tomas, que sacrificaron todo y dejaron su país nativo en búsqueda de mejores oportunidades. Les agradezco su apoyo incondicional. Gracias por enseñarme los valores de la humildad, integridad, el trabajo duro, y la perseverancia. Todas las metas que he logrado son gracias a ustedes.*

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**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The California Community College system is the largest system of higher education in the nation, comprised of 116 colleges serving two million students annually (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office [CCCCO], 2022). Community colleges serve as a primary vehicle of postsecondary access and social mobility for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Nevertheless, social mobility remains an elusive dream given the disparities in completion rates for these students, which undermines the value proposition of a community college education. Less than four of every 10 students who enroll in a community college complete a degree or certificate within six years (Bailey et al., 2015). There is a need to redesign the structure of community colleges to create a coherent and integrated system for students to connect and receive personalized support throughout their community college journey (Bailey et al., 2015).

In recent years, California Community Colleges have undergone systemwide policy reform with the aspiration of achieving transformative institutional change in support of an equitable student-centered approach: for example, the system has established a Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) program, revamped course placement and remediation (with Assembly Bill 705 and 1705), adopted the Guided Pathways framework and implemented a student-centered funding formula (CCCCO, 2021). Despite these efforts, there continues to be a disconnect between the policy's intent and its practical implementation that considers the student experience. Community College leaders must reframe how they think about student success and take on institutional responsibility by asking, "How can community colleges be more student-ready?" as opposed to "How can students be college-ready?"

Understanding the demographics of students served by community colleges is critical in developing structures that advance equitable completion outcomes. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2021), in Fall 2020, national data indicated community colleges served significant percentages of the total nationwide population of Students of Color in college, including 53% of Native American college students, 50% of Hispanic college students, 40% of Black/African American college students, and 36% of Asian Pacific Islander college students. During the 2022–2023 academic year, statewide data indicated the race/ethnicity of students enrolled in California Community Colleges consisted of 48% Hispanic, 23% White, 11% Asian, 5% African American, 4% Multiethnic, 2% Filipino, less than 1% American Indian and Alaskan Native, less than 1% Pacific Islander, and about 5% unknown (CCCCO, 2024). In 2021–2022, 65% of CCC students were identified as low-income using the Perkins Economically Disadvantaged metric that measures a student's income status based on the amount of financial aid and other social benefits received (CCCCO, 2024).

Despite the open-access nature of community colleges, inequities in persistence and completion rates remain along racial and class lines (Strumbos et al., 2018). Disparities between the high enrollment of Students of Color in community colleges and the low completion rates for those same students have resulted in the CCCCO (2021) engaging in systemwide reform that centers equity and calls for institutional transformation to support student success. This systemwide reform focuses on institutional responsibility for student success. It acknowledges systemic barriers in college structures and processes that may produce inequities rather than solely placing responsibility on individual students for their lack of success (Strayhorn, 2022). Community colleges must center the student experience and critically review existing processes and practices to uncover systemic barriers in the onboarding, enrollment, financial aid,

educational planning, classroom experience, and student support, which may contribute to persistent disparities in educational outcomes along socioeconomic and racial lines. Therefore, from a critical perspective, the implementation of policy reform must consider the experiences of historically marginalized students, and it cannot be color-blind (Chase et al., 2014).

According to Strayhorn (2022), existing research on student success models promotes an integrationist approach that forces students to break ties with their communities to assimilate to the expectations of what a traditional college student should be; this places "undue burden and responsibility on the student to get involved, get engaged, or seek help" (p. 27) without considering the systemic barriers that may exist. Community colleges must understand the student experience holistically, inside and outside the classroom, to inform student-centered policy reform implementation. Therefore, this study uses a systems thinking approach that centers on the lived experience of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who completed their educational goals at a California Community College in 2022 and 2023. This asset-based reframing uplifts the voices of historically marginalized students who have succeeded despite the systemic barriers that may exist. The study provides insight into the community college completers' student characteristics (e.g., time to completion, unit accumulation, major, participation in support programs, financial aid, and age), aspirations, perceptions, and experiences navigating the community college environment. The study sought to understand the perceived challenges low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students faced as they navigated the community college, the supports they found to be most beneficial in helping them achieve their educational goals, and the recommendations they made to improve support for students. This insight provides a critical perspective for policy implementation that is student centered and equity minded. For this study, completion refers to

students who completed a certificate, associate degree and/or transferred from a California Community College.

Data collected from this study can help inform the implementation of policy reform grounded in the student experience within the context of a systems thinking approach. The goal is to use the findings of this study to identify, develop, and institutionalize equitable practices that increase low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American student retention and completion in California Community Colleges. Equitable practices acknowledge that disparate outcomes in completion rates stem from historical, political, and structural injustices perpetuating socioeconomic stratification (Bensimon et al., 2016). Colleges must engage in continuous learning informed by appreciative inquiry, disaggregation of data, and analysis that inform the development of intentional activities and services to address educational inequities in student outcomes (Bensimon et al., 2016). Equitable practices are purposeful activities, services, and programs designed to address racial inequities in educational outcomes; critically analyzing the systems that produce inequities is foundational to implementing equitable practices.

## Statement of the Problem

Community colleges provide a critical entry point to higher education for low-income, first-generation, and ethnic minorities (Bailey et al., 2015). In recent years, the most significant increase in enrollment of low-income and minority undergraduates happened in public 2-year colleges and the least selective universities (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). Nevertheless, most students who enroll at a community college never complete a degree (Evans et al., 2017). The persistent socioeconomic challenges and racial disparities in community college completion undermine the social mobility goal of education and perpetuate social and racial stratification (Chase et al., 2014). As a result, national attention has shifted from access and enrollment to improving student

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outcomes: persistence, retention, graduation, and transfer (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Ching et al., 2020). According to the Public Policy Institute of California (2019), there are significant completion gaps between Latina/o/x and Black/African American students compared to Asian American and White students enrolled in community college.

The 2022 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Report noted, for first-time, degree-seeking students who started their postsecondary education at a 2-year public college in the Fall 2016 cohort, the overall completion rate within six years was higher for Asian (53.4%) and White students (50.6%) than Hispanic (37.9%) and Black/African American (31.1%) students. On a statewide level, these completion gaps are substantiated with data provided by the CCCCO's (n.d.-b) *Student Success Scorecard* for students who began as first-time students in 2012–2013 intending to earn a degree, certificate, or transfer. The CCCCO tracked these students for six years (from 2012–2013 through 2017–2018), and the findings showed an overall completion rate of 48.9%. When data were disaggregated by race/ethnicity, sizable completion gaps were evident, with completion rates of 37.7% for African American students, 42.2% for Hispanic students, 66.7% for Asian students, and 55.3% for White students (CCCCO, n.d.-b). These inequities in completion trends are consistent over time.

Furthermore, when data are disaggregated by the intersectionality of race and economic disadvantage, the inequities in outcomes are magnified. For example, for students who began at a California Community College in the 2011–2012 academic year and whose outcomes were assessed in 2016–2017, 35.5% of economically disadvantaged African American students completed, compared to 50.3% of those who were not economically disadvantaged; among Hispanic students, 40.5% of economically disadvantaged students completed, compared to 48.6% of those who were not economically disadvantaged.

In the face of persistent racial inequities in outcomes, systemwide policy reform in California Community Colleges provides opportunities for colleges to critically assess their existing structures and processes to develop integrated equitable practices that intentionally target support for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Therefore, this study elevates the voices and lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers who earned a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from a California Community College to help inform the implementation of equitable practices.

## California Community Colleges: Vision for Success

In 2017, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors adopted the *Vision for Success*, establishing 5-year systemwide goals to improve student outcomes. In July 2021, an update reaffirmed the importance of equity in a time of recovery, acknowledging the socioeconomic and racial injustices magnified during the pandemic for low-income communities of color. The California Community Colleges' systemwide policy reform is grounded in the *Vision for Success*, which outlines seven commitments to drive systemwide improvement, student success, and equity:

> (1) Focus relentlessly on students' end goals, (2) Always design with the student in mind, (3) Pair high expectations with high support, (4) Foster the use of data and inquiry, (5) Take ownership of goals and performance, (6) Enable action and thoughtful innovation, and (7) Lead the work of partnering across systems. (CCCCO, 2021, p. 3)

These commitments establish expectations for institutions to engage in intentional, data-informed efforts that put students first, remove institutional barriers, and provide coordinated and

purposeful student support. Expanding upon the groundwork established by the *Vision for Success*, *Vision 2030* focuses on transforming the student experience by advancing equity in success, equity in access, and equity in support through continuous improvement and intentional efforts that remove systemic barriers faced by students (CCCCO, 2023). There is a strong emphasis on developing systems that expand proactive and strategic support to increase successful outcomes for low-income and underrepresented Students of Color. In the next section, I provide an overview of the existing research on community college student success.

**Existing Research: California Community Colleges**

It is critical to examine the disparities in completion outcomes for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students through an equity-minded approach that centers students' lived experiences within the context of understanding the whole community college system. According to Bensimon et al. (2016), an equity-minded approach begins with a critical consciousness that considers equity within the historical and political context of stratification. They underscore that equity practitioners should call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. Bensimon et al. (2016) distinguish between equity and equality: Equity requires practitioners to understand differences and individual student attributes, whereas equality means all students are treated the same regardless of differences in individual needs. According to the Center for Urban Education (2016), equity requires intentional, regular data disaggregation and analysis. Equity helps redirect resources to address institutional barriers and provides intentional support for disproportionately impacted students. In addition, equity work requires an understanding of the systems that produce inequities in student outcomes. Senge (2006) underscored the importance of systems thinking as a discipline to understand the complexity of wholes and the interrelationships of its parts; this framework can be used to gain a deeper

understanding of community college structures and processes and how students experience them. A systems thinking approach encourages a critical analysis of inequities in outcomes by gaining a deeper understanding of the community college as a system. As a result, this study took a student-centered approach that elevates the voices and experiences of students who have been historically marginalized and experience inequities in completion outcomes.

Recent research on California Community Colleges indicated a disconnect between the intent of policy reform and its actual implementation. For example, this disconnect is evident in Ching et al.'s (2020) exploratory study of Student Equity and Achievement Plans (SEAPs) in California Community Colleges. Ching et al. (2020) used an equity-minded framework combined with a critical policy analysis to examine a sample of 28 out of 112 SEAPs in California Community Colleges. Their study found eight plans incorporated strategic approaches, and only three centered on equity as part of an institutional transformation process to address racial inequities. In a similar study, Felix (2020) reviewed 33 SEAPs to learn how Hispanic-serving community colleges used equity planning to address transfer disparities for Latina/o/x students. Of the 33 SEAPs analyzed, only five explicitly addressed Latina/o/x transfer by allocating *significant funds* for intentional and tailored activities for students with the greatest needs. The lack of intentional work and critical analysis creates challenges for engaging in transformational and systemic change supporting low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Implementing an equity-minded approach requires race-conscious efforts that are intentional and strategic to achieve transformational and systemic change. Felix (2020) claimed California's Student Equity Policy has not been "comprehensive or race-conscious" (p. 26), which has fallen short in the implementation stage.

**Student-Centered Research**

To gain a deeper understanding of the community college as a system and how students experience the entire journey from onboarding through completion, researchers and practitioners must intentionally listen to the voices and experiences of students. The Research and Planning (RP) Group for California Community College's study of community college students (Booth et al., 2013) asked 887 students attending 13 California Community Colleges what they thought were the crucial factors to their success. The RP group identified themes from their literature review and student interviews that helped create and inform the following six success factors:

(1) *directed*-students understand what it takes to achieve their goals, (2) *focused*-students stay on track, (3) *nurtured*-students feel somebody cares about their success, (4) *engaged*-students actively participate in class and are involved in extracurricular activities, (5) *connected*-students feel that they are part of the college community, and (6) *valued*-students feel like their experiences are validated. (Booth et al., 2013, p. 3)

Furthermore, Booth et al. (2013) suggested students can benefit from comprehensive support that is integrated, structured, and intentionally addresses the academic, financial, and personal needs of students. Although the student surveys revealed the importance of valuing family history and culture in the educational setting for students of color, Booth et al. did not center race and its intersectionality with class as part of their research. Community college students must be understood holistically if colleges seek to improve the organizational structure, processes, policies, and services that foster overall student success, especially for historically marginalized students. California community colleges have started implementing campus-wide efforts such as Guided Pathways to create clear pathways to minimize time to degree (Rose et al., 2019) and improve the strategic connection of academic and support services students need

throughout their college journey. Rose et al. (2019) recommended that the Guided Pathways model, a structured pathway that helps students clarify, enter, and stay on the path, be grounded in an understanding of students' lived experiences and the cultural knowledge and strengths they bring to the college.

Prior research has suggested students benefit from deliberate, comprehensive, and holistic support systems that address academic and nonacademic needs (Booth et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2017; Klempin & Lahr, 2021; Weiss et al., 2019). Existing research has focused on increasing completion rates overall but has not identified promising equitable practices that explicitly target support for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students with an understanding of their perceptions and lived experiences navigating the entire community college journey.

The current study addresses a critical research gap by focusing on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who have completed a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from a California Community College using a systems thinking approach to understand the student's entire college journey from onboarding to completion. Understanding the low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American student experience can help educational practitioners implement policy reform that promotes strategic and campuswide equitable practices to increase student success and completion for historically marginalized students in California Community Colleges.

## Study Overview

California Community Colleges and systemwide reform that centers on equity have received national attention as part of policy reform that attempts to address students' low college completion rates by transforming the student experience through structured educational pathways embedded with support throughout the college journey. Nevertheless, policy reform on its own

does not result in equitable practices. Educational practitioners play a crucial role in bridging theory and practice by conceptualizing the practical implementation of systemwide reform in support of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American Students. This study elevates the voices of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students by using a systems thinking approach to help inform the implementation of systemwide policy reform with a focus on equitable practices that address disparities in educational outcomes for this student population.

**Research Questions**

Through this study, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers report facing as they navigated the community college environment?

2. What supports do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers identify as having been most helpful to achieving their educational goals at the community college?

3. What recommendations do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers provide for better supporting the success of students from similar backgrounds?

**Study Design**

For this study, I used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers from Adelante Community College (ACC) who completed a certificate, degree, and/or transferred in 2022 and 2023. The site was selected because it is typical of an urban

community college with a large percentage of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students with equity gaps in student outcomes. I reviewed institutional data to identify low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American student characteristics and trends such as time to completion, unit accumulation, major, participation in support programs, financial aid, and age. This information provided context to understanding the low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completer student population. In addition to descriptive statistics, the study also included a short survey and 15 semistructured individual interviews. This research sought to gain a deeper understanding of California Community College completers who are low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American to learn about their aspirations, perceived challenges, and the supports they identify as having been the most helpful to achieving their educational goals. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning at the college provided a list of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers from 2022 and 2023. Completers were emailed information about the study to recruit participants. Given the scope of this study, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method to elevate the voices and experiences of students themselves to help create meaning and understanding that informs the implementation of systemwide policy reform. Understanding the student experience is the first step to addressing inequities in outcomes for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college students. While a quantitative study might help demonstrate correlations between specific student characteristics and completion, it would not be able to examine student experiences and provide insight into how students navigated the college environment and overcame challenges.

**Study Significance**

Large-scale policy reform allows educational practitioners to design equitable practices that are responsive to the needs of students by critically examining the college structure through a systems thinking approach informed by the student experience. My research explored how California Community College practitioners can be more intentional as they undergo systemwide policy reform and implement equitable support for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students by centering the student experience. Most research on increasing student success in community colleges fails to address the centrality of race and its intersectionality with class in understanding systemic injustices and institutional barriers students face. In addition, existing research focuses on individual programs or interventions without considering the intersectionality and complexity of the entire system and its impact on the student journey.

**Conclusion**

California Community Colleges are undergoing massive systemwide policy reform with the goal of transformational change that increases student success. The open-access nature of community colleges makes it the most accessible higher education system for historically underserved communities: low-income, first-generation, and ethnic minorities (Bailey et al., 2015; Strumbos et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). In 2021, the California Community College's Board of Governors reaffirmed the importance of equity in its *Vision for Success* for systemic transformation. The updated *Vision for Success* clarified that equity considerations should be front and center: no longer an afterthought of policy implementation and transformational efforts. In 2023, *Vision 2030* further elevated the idea of equity in college access, student support, and success (CCCCO, 2023). Educational practitioners have an opportunity to reimagine policy reform and its practical implementation in support of transforming the

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community college student experience, especially for historically underserved students such as

low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students.

**CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study elevates the voices of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who have completed a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from a community college to understand the student experience and inform policy reform implementation. The goal is to identify equitable practices that increase completion rates. This literature review begins with operationalizing definitions of key terms and provides a brief history of the California Community College system, followed by an overview of recent policy reform. This provides the context for a discussion of existing research on the characteristics of California Community College students and the college journey, focusing on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students, Guided Pathways, and the importance of taking an equity-minded approach when implementing policy reform. The chapter concludes with an overview of systems thinking and community cultural wealth to connect the student voice and overall experience to policy implementation that advances equity.

**Operational Definitions**

*Low-Income Students:* This study defines low-income students as those who received a Pell Grant or California College Promise Grant (CCPG), formerly known as the Board of Governors Fee Waiver. Pell Grant is a federal grant program awarded to undergraduate students with exceptional financial need who have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Furthermore, a CCPG is awarded based on financial need, and it waives enrollment fees and tuition for eligible California residents attending a California Community College (I Can Go To College, n.d.). For example, to be eligible for a CCPG, a student must be a California Resident (includes AB 540 eligible students) and either (A) receive TANF/CalWORKs, Supplemental Security Income/SSP, or General

Assistance, or (B) meet low-income standards based on federal poverty guidelines, as published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (n.d.).

*Completion/Completer:* In this study, this term refers to a student who earned a certificate, associate degree and/or transferred from a California Community College.

*Equitable Practices:* Equitable practices refer to ongoing learning, appreciative inquiry, data disaggregation based on race and income, and analysis that informs development of intentional activities and services to address educational inequities in student outcomes (Bensimon et al., 2016).

### Brief History of California Community Colleges: Understanding the System

The mission and purpose of California community colleges have evolved throughout the years. In this section, I provide a brief history of California Community Colleges while highlighting efforts to increase college access and completion for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. As part of the California Master Plan of Higher Education, California Community Colleges were designated as open-admission institutions, making them the most accessible public higher education system in the state. In comparison, the University of California system was to admit from the top one eighth (12.5%), and the California State University was to accept from the top one third (33.3%) of high school graduates (Boggs & Galizio, 2021).

According to Boggs and Galizio (2021), California Community Colleges were responsive to the local community and led the nation in developing career programs. The California Community College system later evolved to include vocational education, adult education/noncredit courses, associate degrees, and transfer to 4-year universities. In 2014,

Senate Bill 850 authorized a baccalaureate degree pilot program at 15 California Community Colleges. Most recently, in 2021, Assembly Bill 927 approved expanding the baccalaureate degree program to establish up to 30 baccalaureate degree programs annually at California Community Colleges (CCCCO, n.d.-a).

In 1969, the passage of Senate Bill 164 established the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) in California Community Colleges to increase access, retention, and success for students affected by language, social, and economic disadvantages. Senate Bill 164 expanded the college access mission of the California Community College system to low-income students: this piece of legislature was passed due to pressures from the social unrest witnessed throughout the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement (Salas, 2021).

Later, the Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) was established in 1982 as a supplemental program of EOPS designed to support single-parenting students receiving public assistance to help them acquire the education, training, and marketable skills needed to transition from welfare dependency to self-sufficiency. The CARE program was the first statewide program dedicated to supporting low-income, single-parenting students attending California Community College. Salas (2021) described the expansion of student services to include extended access and support to students with disabilities, veterans, undocumented students, Mexican American/Latino students through the Puente Project, African American students through Umoja, CalWORKs participants, foster youth, and formerly incarcerated students, to name a few. Salas also highlighted the expansion of financial aid, including the Board of Governors Fee Waiver (now known as the California College Promise Grant) to cover enrollment fees.

By the early 2000s, California Community Colleges focused on the completion agenda. In 2017, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors adopted the *Vision for Success*, establishing five-year systemwide goals to improve student outcomes. Since 2017, California Community Colleges have undergone systemwide reform with the aspiration of achieving transformative institutional change. In the 2022 California Community College State of the System Report, the Chancellor's Office emphasized that policy reform seeks to align programs and support into the Guided Pathways framework to achieve the following systemwide goals: (a) increase certificates and degrees, (b) increase transfer to California State Universities (CSUs) and Universities of California (UCs), (c) decrease units to complete, (d) increase employment in field of study, (e) close equity gaps, and (f) close regional achievement gaps (CCCCO, 2022).

Furthermore, community colleges and the Guided Pathways framework have received national attention as part of policy reform that seeks to close equity gaps and address students' low college completion rates by systemically transforming the student experience through structured educational pathways (Bailey et al., 2015). Given this renewed interest, it is imperative that we elevate the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who are more likely to access higher education through the community college route yet continue to experience disparities in completion outcomes. A systems thinking approach provides a broader lens to examine inequities in a complex system of interconnections (Senge, 2006) that students experience in their college journey.

**Policy Reform: Seeking a Systemic Integrated Approach**

In 2018, the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) program was established to eliminate achievement gaps for students from traditionally underrepresented populations. To encourage an integrated approach, the Chancellor's Office merged funding from the Student

Success and Support Program, Basic Skills Initiative, and Student Equity. The SEA program required colleges to implement the Guided Pathways framework, structured pathways for students, and maintain a Student Equity and Achievement Plan (SEAP). Furthermore, SEAPs required California Community Colleges to measure specific indicators from access to completion, including course completion, basic skills completion, degrees/certificates awarded, and transfer rates (CCCCO, 2021). In the 1990s, the CCCCO mandated student equity plans that were continuously abandoned and never implemented due to inappropriate funding and institutional commitments (Boggs & Galizio, 2021).

**Basic Skills Reform: Addressing Systemic Barriers**

In 2017, as part of the basic skills reform, Assembly Bill 705 was signed into law to maximize the completion of transfer-level courses. AB 705 changed how California Community Colleges placed students into college-level English and math courses. Gaps in access to transfer-level English and math had disproportionately impacted low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who, once placed in remedial classes, were less likely to ever enroll in transfer-level courses (Bailey et al., 2015), thereby limiting their ability to transfer or complete a degree. Most recently, in 2022, Assembly Bill 1705 was signed into law; it built upon AB 705 by providing more clarity and additional guidance to California Community Colleges on placement in college-level English and math courses aligned with a student's intended educational goal.

**Guided Pathways Framework: Structured and Cohesive Student Support**

Furthermore, in 2017, as part of the completion agenda, the CCCCO launched Guided Pathways as a new framework focused on institutional transformation grounded in a student-centered approach that sought to create structured educational pathways to degrees and

certificates for students. According to the CCCCO (2021), the Guided Pathways framework was based on the idea that students need structured and cohesive support to reach their educational and career goals. Although Guided Pathways provides a comprehensive approach to improving student success, it may inadvertently undermine equity efforts if not implemented with this goal in mind (Bragg et al., 2019). Bragg et al. (2019) stated equity considerations must be at the forefront of decision making in implementing policy reform.

**Student-Centered Funding Formula: A Focus on Low-Income Students and Completion**

The California Community College's Student-Centered Funding Formula (SCFF), first adopted in 2018–2019, placed an emphasis on low-income students. The SCFF consists of three elements: a base allocation determined by enrollment, a supplemental allocation based on the number of low-income students (i.e., California Promise grant, Pell grant, and AB 540 eligible) enrolled, and a student success allocation based on degrees and certificates awarded. Colleges serving a higher percentage of low-income students who achieve their goal of transfer or certificate completion have the potential to receive additional funding (CCCCO, 2021). Having a financial incentive resulted in a renewed interest to measure and increase support for low-income community college students.

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**Community Colleges: General Student Characteristics**

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Many studies report that community college students are more likely to be low-income, racialized/ethnic minorities, first-generation, part-time, nontraditional, have dependents, and be academically underprepared (Deil-Amen, 2015; Kimbark et al., 2017; Strumbos et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). Therefore, adopting an equity-minded approach to gain a deeper understanding of the students served by community colleges is critical. Most research on best practices to increase student success has concentrated on full-time enrolled students and those

interested in transferring (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Strumbos et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). Existing research focuses on the individual student rather than on a holistic analysis of the community college systems and processes that students interact with on their educational journey. Low-income students face tremendous academic and nonacademic challenges as they pursue higher education. According to Evans et al. (2017), existing research and policy reform have focused on academic challenges contributing to the high dropout rates of low-income students in community colleges. However, they argued it is crucial to also consider nonacademic challenges such as low-income status, lack of navigational capital, and the complex community college system students are expected to navigate without adequate guidance and support.

Although the previously mentioned research has focused on individual student characteristics and the academic and nonacademic challenges students face, other studies have examined individual programs and services that support community college student success. For example, research on specific programs demonstrated that students benefited from intentional, comprehensive, and holistic support systems that addressed academic and nonacademic needs: academic advisement/counseling, navigational support, financial aid, mentorship, tutoring, career development, and student engagement/connection (Booth et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2017; Klempin & Lahr, 2021; Weiss et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research that considers the community college as a whole system and how low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students experience it. In addition, most research has taken on a deficit approach by identifying what students lack instead of focusing on the assets they bring to the college.

**Low-Income Students and Financial Aid**

A holistic view of community college students has become more prevalent, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Goldrick-Rab (2021) called attention to the significant drop in college-going rates of high school graduates from high-poverty schools, with community colleges having the most significant drop in enrollment for first-time college students among all higher education institutions. The author posited students' basic needs, such as food, housing, transportation, and childcare, were conditions for learning. In 2021, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 132, which secured ongoing funding to support California Community Colleges in establishing Basic Needs Centers. However, recent studies have demonstrated that Black/African American and Latino students, especially male students, are less likely to access campus resources (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). In 2020, the California Community Colleges Black and African American Advisory Panel reported financial aid is a significant barrier to Black/African American students attending community college, specifically the lack of financial support and knowledge about financial aid availability. Davidson (2015) noted community college students are less likely to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). As a result, colleges must establish structures and practices that intentionally target support for students to help them understand the financial aid process.

According to Taylor and Turk (2019), undergraduate students of color were more likely to be low-income than White students. For example, 59.8% of Black/African American and 52.9% of Hispanic undergraduate students were low-income, compared to 33.6% of White undergraduate students. Most low-income students (88.6%) enrolled in public 2-year institutions received financial aid (Taylor & Turk, 2019). Overall, students living in poverty were more likely than their peers to take out loans (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019), including 71.1% of low-income

Black/African American students pursuing an associate degree. Furthermore, Fry and Cilluffo

(2019) noted, "At community colleges, the share of independent students who are in poverty has

doubled from 13% in 1996 to 27% in 2016" (p. 8).

Among students who completed the financial aid process and received financial aid,

Huerta and Martinez (2022) indicated Latino male students were more likely to lose their

financial aid due to academic probation policies. Students who lost financial aid were less likely

to complete their educational goals. The authors underscored that students' academic probation

status did not indicate their academic potential. Instead, it revealed the numerous demands and

responsibilities students must juggle to attend college, which can interfere with their academic

progress (Huerta & Martinez, 2022). The authors also examined institutional structures and

practices outside of the student's control, such as the delay in financial aid disbursement and the

adverse effects this practice had on academic progress by creating additional barriers for students

who do not have the resources to pay for textbooks and supplies at the beginning of the semester.

Huerta and Martinez suggested community colleges should take more responsibility for how

academic probation practices and the lack of strategic support for students create barriers to

completion. In a recent case study on student parents of color in community college, Huerta et al.

(2022) reported the significant financial challenges students faced as they navigated community

college, such as struggling to pay for rent, childcare, food, and clothing in addition to their

academic expenses. These challenges were exacerbated by the lack of institutional structures and

centralized support for student parents. Prior research suggested financial aid paired with

intensive case management was the most effective in supporting low-income students (Evans et

al., 2020). Furthermore, Huerta et al. (2022) stressed the critical role of personal connections

with institutional agents such as counselors or success coaches in normalizing help-seeking behaviors for students.

**Latina/o/x and Black/African American Community College Students**

According to a Pew Research Center report (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019), the most substantial increase of racial or ethnic minority undergraduate students has occurred in public 2-year and less selective universities. Most Latina/o/x students in community colleges are concentrated in California and Texas (Santiago, 2016). According to Santiago (2016), Latinos were more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to be enrolled in community college; they were also more likely to be part time, have dependents, and work while attending college. Most colleges perpetuate a deficit ideology of the Latina/o/x community college student population. There are parallels in student characteristics for Black/African American students in community college. Although generally published research on Black/African American college students focuses on 4-year universities, national data indicate most Black/African American college students attend urban community colleges (Bivens & Wood, 2016). According to Bivens and Wood (2016), a high percentage of Black/African American community college students are low income and first generation, including 58.5% of Black/African American men and 65.3% of Black/African American women. As a result, they are more likely to work while attending community college, some of whom work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Only one third of Black/African American students complete their educational goals at a community college within six years (Bivens & Wood, 2016). For Black/African American community college students, "barriers while in college include institutional racism, financial constraints, and limited academic preparation" (Atwater & Holmes, 2016, p. 48).

**Comprehensive Support for Community College Students**

Structured and comprehensive support for students that integrates academic and non-academic components has been the focus of nationwide policy reform. One comprehensive program studied extensively is the City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). Weiss et al. (2019) conducted a multisite randomized trial study of CUNY's ASAP. This comprehensive 3-year program provided services to low-income community college students placed in remedial courses. CUNY's ASAP program also offered wraparound services to meet students' academic and personal needs. ASAP's services include comprehensive advising, weekly tutoring sessions, career and employment services, tuition waivers, transportation services, textbooks, and dedicated success courses during the first year.

In their study, Weiss et al. (2019) identified barriers to academic success for low-income students, such as a lack of academic preparation for college-level courses, underutilization of student support services, financial concerns, and competing demands between work, family, and school. In addition, they acknowledged that community colleges often could not provide personalized or timely advisement to students in need due to large caseloads. The lack of timely and personalized support is especially problematic for low-income, first-generation students who need guidance to navigate an unfamiliar college environment. Therefore, the researchers noted that CUNY's ASAP program addressed these challenges through its intentional wraparound services, which provided comprehensive academic and nonacademic support for low-income students in remedial education to help them succeed. Weiss et al. acknowledged full-time enrollment contributed to maintaining academic momentum for students in CUNY's ASAP program. Nevertheless, Strumbos et al. (2018) underscored that many community college students attend school part-time because of work and family obligations, and attending part-time

decreases a student's momentum toward graduation. Much of the current policy reform implemented in California Community Colleges aligns with CUNY's ASAP's integrated, structured, and coordinated support model. The focus tends to be on full-time students. González-Rivera (2016) claimed it was unclear if ASAP would be effective for part-time students because one of the program's requirements is that students be enrolled full time. Furthermore, existing research has prioritized studying specific programs or activities without systemically centering equity and the student's lived experiences to help inform policy reform implementation that targets support for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Despite its shortcomings, Weiss et al. (2019) claimed CUNY's ASAP is one of the most effective college completion programs with positive outcomes on graduation rates. At the three-year mark, ASAP participants achieved graduation rates 18 percentage points higher than nonparticipants (40% vs. 22%). This illustrates the positive impact of comprehensive, intentional, and tailored services to meet students' academic and nonacademic needs. The study investigated two cohorts of students randomly assigned to the ASAP program group or the control group. Participants in the control group could access the college's programs and services but not the ASAP program.

Although the researchers found ASAP had a positive effect on graduation, they did not analyze the components of the ASAP program separately to determine if any specific service had a more significant influence on graduation rates. In an earlier study, Kolenovic et al. (2013) attempted to analyze the services separately by using a logistic regression analysis to examine the relationship between variables and their potential influence on student graduation outcomes. Kolenovic et al. discovered a strong correlation between intentional advising support and student success, especially when advising support was provided over multiple semesters. The authors

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suggested that an intensive, structured, and supportive program can improve outcomes for community college students. Nevertheless, the studies (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2019) did not analyze the intersection between race and low-income status and its impact on the experience of students and their educational outcomes. Furthermore, the studies did not account for how students experience and navigate the college system: its structures, policies, and procedures.

**Intensive Case Management**

Existing research has primarily examined individual interventions without examining the entire college system. For example, Evans et al. (2017) conducted a randomized controlled trial evaluation of "Stay the Course" (STC), an intensive case-management program led by a trained social worker consisting of four main elements: mentoring, coaching, referrals, and access to emergency financial assistance. They sought to determine the impact of a case-management program on persistence and degree completion. The study was conducted at a large community college in Texas that enrolls over 50,000 students in associate degrees and technical programs. The community college was selected because it enrolled a significant number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and had low completion rates for these same students. Each student enrolled in STC was assigned a social worker, also known as the "navigator," who helped them develop a comprehensive plan that outlined the steps they needed to take to accomplish their academic goals. The plan included timelines and identified potential barriers based on the student's circumstances. Building a trusting relationship between the navigator and the student was the foundation for the mentorship relationship. Evans et al. observed increased school persistence and degree completion through six semesters for female students. Interestingly, the study results suggested providing low-income students with access to cash aid without a case

manager is ineffective. This study discussed the importance of offering comprehensive and personalized support systems for low-income students to help them navigate the college environment effectively.

**Structured Student Success Course**

Kimbark et al. (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study on the effectiveness of a student success course (SSC) on persistence, retention, and student engagement in the community college setting. The SSC helped orient new students to various campus services and resources, provided students with the tools to navigate the college setting successfully, and assisted students in making connections by integrating support services within the classroom. The study consisted of 432 students attending a midsized community college in Texas who completed the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) questionnaire. CCSSE asks students about their community college experience in areas such as active learning, student effort, academic challenges, student-faculty interactions, and learning support. Among the study respondents, 197 were SSC participants, and 235 were not. Kimbark et al. (2017) followed the survey with semistructured interviews with students who had taken the SSC course the previous academic semester. Their research findings indicated participation in SSC was positively correlated with increased persistence, retention, student engagement, and academic achievement in gatekeeper courses such as English and math. They recommended SSC be mandatory for all students taking developmental courses in their first semester. An interesting finding was that students expressed their initial confusion about the purpose of SSC and having to take the course. However, once they participated in the course, they found value in learning new skills, developing connections with faculty and peers, and engaging in the campus community.

Similarly, Duggan and Williams (2011) conducted a qualitative study on student engagement and connection by interviewing 60 students from various community colleges who had taken an SSC. They had comparable findings to Kimbark et al. (2017); most students found value in the course, explicitly noting learning information on campus resources and clubs, strategies for balancing school, home, and work responsibilities, study skill development, learning about Blackboard, understanding financial aid, and career development skills. Nevertheless, Duggan and Williams (2011) went further, suggesting the diverse student populations that attend community colleges require the creation of specialized orientation courses that consider student characteristics and needs; a one-size-fits-all model is not as effective. For example, first-time college students may need different support systems and course content than returning adult learners, just as first-generation, low-income students' needs may differ from those who do not face socioeconomic challenges. Although Duggan and Williams (2011) acknowledged most students found participating in orientation courses beneficial, additional research is needed to determine which aspects of the courses may be strongly correlated to improved student success rates for specific student populations. Existing research has focused on the information, skills, and resources students lack without exploring the structural barriers students face and the strengths they bring to the college environment. This is where my study fills a critical research gap.

## Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Given the high enrollment of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students in community college and the persistent inequities in educational outcomes for these students, a critical analysis that centers their experiences within the college structure is necessary. Research on community colleges, student success, and completion tends to ignore the

intersectionality of complex systems and socioeconomics, which creates a gap in understanding; for example, the relationships between college structures, organizational culture, race, and class are traditionally not fully explored in existing research. Community colleges serve as a gateway to higher education for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students, yet most students never complete a degree, certificate, and/or transfer. Therefore, in this research, I elevate the voices and experiences of students who have succeeded in completing a degree, certificate, and/or transferred from a community college to inform practice. Using a conceptual framework grounded in systems thinking (Senge, 2006) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) provides a broader understanding of the barriers and challenges that low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students experience and the cultural wealth they draw upon as they pursue their community college education. I situate my research by acknowledging systemic injustices and racism color-blind or race-neutral policies have perpetuated and how educational practitioners can take action to advance equitable practices.

Using a systems thinking approach enhances our ability to reflect critically and analyze the entire college structure and processes to better understand the institutional barriers low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students face. Senge (2006) encouraged the development of learning organizations that seek to understand the root causes of problems and advance a culture of learning and improvement. Educational practitioners must first understand how systems produce the problems they seek to solve (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Meadows (2008) defined a system as "an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something" (p. 11). Systems are complex and achieve a particular purpose, even if it is not always the "espoused purpose" or what the system is promoted to achieve (Rohanna, 2022; Stroh, 2015). Community colleges are seen as open-access institutions that

promote social mobility for historically marginalized students. However, data indicate low-income students of color continue to be excluded from these benefits. Systems thinking allows practitioners to examine the complexity of problems and their root causes with an understanding that these may not be easy to identify. To understand the persistent inequities in educational outcomes for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students in community college, we need to explore the perceptions and experiences of students navigating the community college system and how they experience the structures and processes established by the college to uncover and address institutional barriers that may exist.

In this study, I center the student experience through an asset-based lens. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework challenges the mainstream assumptions that students come to the school setting with cultural deficiencies and instead advances the notion that students of color bring cultural strengths that are often not valued within educational institutions. According to Yosso (2005), "Community cultural wealth involves a commitment to conduct research, teach and develop schools that serve a larger purpose of struggling toward social and racial justice" (p. 82). She outlined six forms of capital students of color bring to the educational setting: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, linguistic, and resistant capital. These forms of capital help students navigate institutions and overcome systemic injustices while pursuing their educational goals. Critically examining alternative perspectives allows practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who have historically been underserved in higher education.

Figure 2.1 visually represents the key milestones a community college student experiences as part of the college system from onboarding to completion: onboarding, financial aid, educational planning, classroom experience, outside-of-classroom connections, and

completion. The process is not linear, and low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students may face systemic barriers every step of the way, such as confusing and complicated college processes and policies that are not integrated or coordinated to support student success. Therefore, the system may be challenging to navigate. This is especially problematic for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who rely on the college structure and institutional agents for guidance, support, and resources to help them stay connected and successfully navigate the college. Students are expected to be "college ready," so when they do not meet their educational goals at the community college, they tend to be blamed for their lack of success without the college critically analyzing the opportunity gaps that may have contributed to the inequities in completion rates. Therefore, this study challenges the deficit discourse often used to describe the lower completion rates of historically underserved and marginalized student populations. Students bring community cultural wealth that helps them navigate a system that was never intentionally designed to serve them.

**Figure 2.1**

*A Systems Thinking Approach to Understanding the Community College Student Journey*
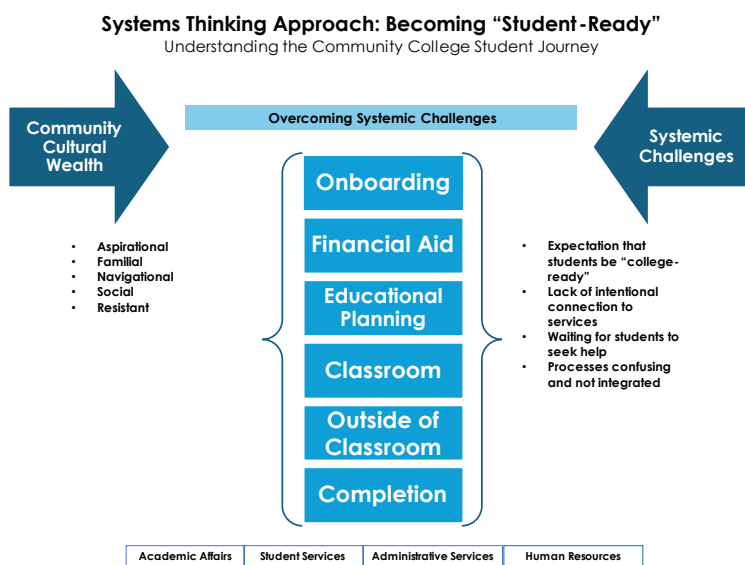
**Conclusion**

This study elevates the voices and experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students to inform policy implementation when there is an increased financial incentive for colleges to address educational disparities in student completion outcomes. Currently, there is a lack of empirical research that analyzes community colleges as a system through the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who have completed their educational goals at a community college. Existing research focuses on one program or initiative and its impact on student success without looking at the entire system and how the intersectionality of income and race influences the student experience throughout the college journey. In addition, most research is based on a deficit ideology that focuses on what individual students lack without looking at the community college as a system, its structures, and processes that impact the student experience and may perpetuate inequities in completion outcomes. We know little about how centering the student experience within a systems thinking approach and community cultural framework can inform policy implementation that improves the outcomes of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students in California Community Colleges.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This qualitative study aimed to elevate the voices of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers through a systems thinking and community cultural wealth approach. Community colleges must understand the student experience holistically and use that to inform policy reform implementation. This understanding will help advance equitable practices supporting historically marginalized students' retention and success as low-income Latina/o/x, and Black/African American students are more likely to access postsecondary education through community college. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study's research questions, research design, and methodology.

## Research Questions

1. What challenges do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers report facing as they navigated the community college environment?

2. What supports do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers identify as having been most helpful to achieving their educational goals at the community college?

3. What recommendations do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers provide for better supporting the success of students from similar backgrounds?

## Research Design and Rationale

For this study, I used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who completed a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from a large urban community college in

Southern California. I began by reviewing data on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers who met the research criteria. Institutional data were reviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the student characteristics: time to completion, unit accumulation, major, participation in support programs, financial aid, and age. Beyond descriptive statistics, I conducted 15 individual semistructured interviews, which allowed me to ask follow-up questions and gain a deeper understanding of the student experience. The study sought to understand the experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American California Community College completers to learn about their perceived challenges navigating community college and the supports they identified as having been most helpful to achieving their educational goals. I also wanted to learn about the recommendations the completers gave to support the success of students from similar backgrounds. Given the scope of this study, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method to elevate the voices and experiences of students themselves to help create meaning and understanding that informs the implementation of systemwide policy reform with a focus on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college students. Although a quantitative study might help demonstrate correlations between specific student characteristics and certificate/degree completion, it would not be able to examine the college experience from the student's perspective.

## Population and Sample

Adelante Community College (ACC) was selected because it is a large, single-college district that enrolls a significant number of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students and has equity gaps in student outcomes for these student populations. The college has reaffirmed a commitment to advancing equitable student outcomes and is implementing Guided Pathways as a framework. Centering the students' voices and gaining a deeper understanding of

the low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American student experience will help inform the implementation of policy reform that advances equitable practices. The following data were obtained from the ACC Institutional Research and Planning Office, Student Services Dashboard. From Summer 2018 through Spring 2022, the college enrolled a total of 37,356 students who were identified as Hispanic (51% of all students) and 10,353 students who were identified as Black/African American (14%). In this study, the terms Hispanic and Latina/o/x are used interchangeably.

From Fall 2020 to Fall 2023 (fall terms only), an average of 56.8% Black/African American students and 64.1% Hispanic students who received financial aid successfully completed their courses, compared to 75.8% successful course completion for White students and 79.7% for Asian students. Successful course completion is defined as completing a course with a grade of A, B, C, or P (passing). From the 2018–2019 to the 2021–2022 academic years, Black/African American students represented 9% of associate degrees, associate degrees for transfer, and certificates awarded, even though they represented 14% of students enrolled. Latina/o/x students represented 48% of associate degrees, associate degrees for transfer, and certificates awarded, compared to 51% of enrollment.

Latina/o/x and Black/African American students made up a larger proportion of the total student enrollment at ACC compared to statewide percentages. Using enrollment data for the 2022–2023 academic year, Black/African American student enrollment was 5% of all students enrolled in California Community Colleges, and Latina/o/x student enrollment was 48%. In comparison, Black/African American student enrollment was 13% of all students enrolled at ACC, and Latina/o/x student enrollment was 50%. Figure 3.1 compares the total enrollment percentages of Latina/o/x and Black/African American students in California Community

Colleges and ACC. ACC had a higher enrollment of Latina/o/x and Black/African American students in proportion to total student enrollment.

**Figure 3.1**

*Latina/o/x and Black/African American Community College Enrollment, 2022–2023*
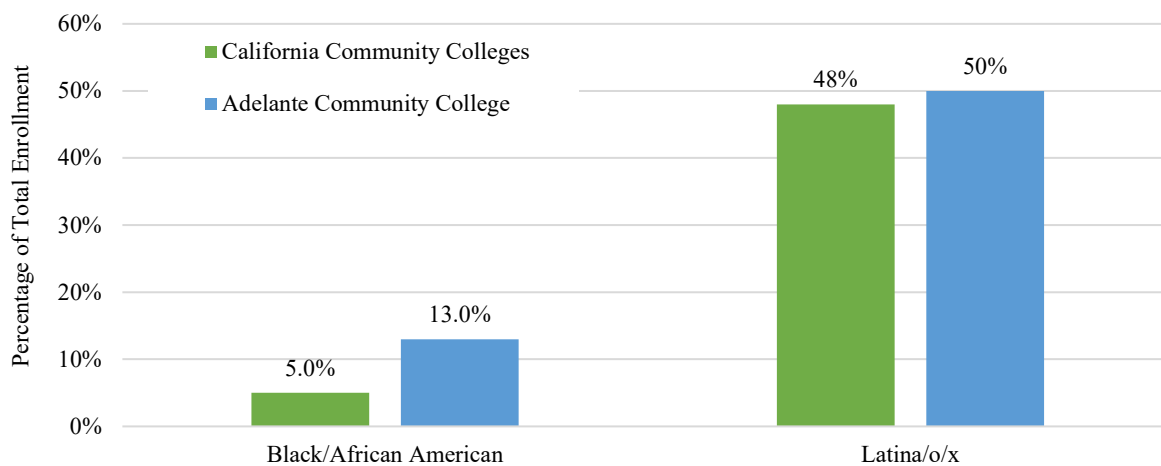


*Note.* California Community College enrollment numbers were retrieved from https://datamart.cccco.edu/Students/Student_Headcount_Term_Annual.aspx. Adelante Community College enrollment numbers were retrieved from the ACC Student Services Dashboard. The term Hispanic was changed to Latina/o/x.

National data indicate low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students have some of the highest enrollment percentages in community colleges. However, they lag White and Asian students in terms of completion. Identifying trends and understanding the perceptions and experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students helps inform the implementation of policy reform such as Guided Pathways, which seeks to systemically transform the student experience and advance equitable practices with intentional support and services. California Community Colleges must submit a scale of adoption assessment on their efforts, and equity considerations are at the forefront of those discussions.

The ACC Office of Institutional Research and Planning provided a report of students who met the research criteria: low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who

completed a degree, certificate, and/or transferred in 2022 or 2023. Table 3.1 outlines the inclusion criteria.

**Table 3.1**

*Criteria for Inclusion in Study*

| Criteria | Description |
|---|---|
| Completer | Met any of the following.<br>• Earned certificate in 2022 or 2023<br>• Earned associate degree (AA/AS and/or ADT) in 2022 or 2023<br>• Transferred to a 4-year university in 2022 or 2023 |
| Low-Income | Received Pell Grant or California College Promise Grant |
| Latina/o/x and Black/African American | Race/Ethnicity categories used in the study.<br>• Hispanic-Hispanic only, or Hispanic and any race category<br>• Black or African American-Not Hispanic; Black or African American only<br>• Multiracial Black-Not Hispanic; Black or African American and more than one race category |

*Note.* The ACC Office of Institutional Research and Planning used race/ethnicity information from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Latina/o/x and Hispanic were used interchangeably.

ACC completers who met the research criteria were contacted via personal emails on record, informing them of the study and inviting them to complete a short survey via Qualtrics. The survey was used to identify a purposeful sample for the semistructured interviews. Fifteen completers were selected for the individual 60-minute interviews conducted via Zoom.

The original intent was to select a purposeful sample of 12 low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who completed with equal numbers who obtained a certificate, earned an associate degree, and transferred. However, among the low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers in 2022 and 2023, transfers comprised 60.6%. Meanwhile, 34.4% earned an associate degree without transferring, and only 5.5% earned a certificate. The final interview sample included 15 students, including nine who transferred (60%), five who

earned an associate degree (33.3%), and one who earned a certificate (6.7%). Table 3.2

summarizes the initial targets for the interview sample and its final composition.

**Table 3.2**

*Interview Sample Targets and Final Sample Characteristics*

|  | Latina/o/x | | Black/AA | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | *n* | *%* | *n* | *%* | *n* | *%* |
| Initial Target (*n* = 12) | | | | | | |
| Certificate | 2 | 16.7% | 2 | 16.7% | 4 | 33.3% |
| Associate Degree | 2 | 16.7% | 2 | 16.7% | 4 | 33.3% |
| Transfer | 2 | 16.7% | 2 | 16.7% | 4 | 33.3% |
| Total | 6 | 50.0% | 6 | 50.0% | 12 | 100.0% |
| Final Sample (*n* = 15) | | | | | | |
| Certificate | 1 | 6.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 6.7% |
| Associate Degree | 2 | 13.3% | 3 | 20.0% | 5 | 33.3% |
| Transfer | 5 | 33.3% | 4 | 26.7% | 9 | 60.0% |
| Total | 8 | 53.3% | 7 | 46.7% | 15 | 100.0% |

**Data Collection**

This study examined demographic data to provide context to the qualitative

semistructured interviews. Institutional data for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African

American students who completed a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from ACC in

2022 and 2023 was reviewed to understand the student population and its characteristics.

Characteristic data such as time to completion, unit accumulation, major, participation in support

programs, financial aid, and age were requested from the Office of Institutional Research and

Planning. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. A review of institutional data

provided context for understanding the qualitative study.

A purposeful sample of 15 low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American

completers who completed the interest survey was selected from the larger pool of survey

participants. The interest survey (see Appendix A) was used to identify a purposeful sample that

included completers in each category, certificates, associate degrees, and transfers. Follow-up semistructured 60-minute interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Conducting the interviews via Zoom facilitated participation because students who were interviewed had already completed their educational goals at the community college, and many no longer lived near the college. These interviews helped address Research Questions 1–3 by providing greater depth and understanding of the student experience for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. I obtained consent to record the interview session and followed an interview protocol for each interview. Students were asked in-depth questions to understand their experiences navigating ACC, the challenges they experienced, and the most helpful support they identified as having helped them achieve their educational goals at the community college (see Appendix B). Interview participants were also asked what ACC could do better to support students with similar backgrounds. Interview recordings were stored in a secured cloud-based drive.

## Data Analyses

Data analysis consisted of an interactive process to categorize and code the most salient themes from the interviews. This process began during the interviews to identify common themes among student responses related to their reasons for pursuing a community college education and their perceptions of the challenges and the most helpful support they received. I also coded all recommendations from low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers to better support students with similar backgrounds. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), data collection and analysis are simultaneous processes within qualitative research. I paraphrased and checked in with interview participants during the interviews to ensure that I categorized their responses accurately.

Transcripts were reviewed following each interview to capture observational notes and memos while developing tentative ideas to preliminary form categories and relationships. Themes were organized based on the student's recollection of experiences with the onboarding process, financial aid, educational planning, in-the-classroom and outside-of-classroom experiences, and completion. Student responses were categorized based on each research question and aligned with the study's purpose. The study focused on understanding the challenges students reported facing as they navigated the community college environment, the most helpful support they identified, and their recommendations to increase support for students with similar backgrounds. Themes emerged once all interviews were coded and frequencies were analyzed. Institutional data and survey responses were used to set the context for the student success profiles of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers.

## Positionality

For this study, I positioned myself as a UCLA doctoral student and practitioner in college access, retention, and success for low-income and historically underserved students. As a scholar–practitioner at a large urban community college, I see firsthand the intersection between income and race and the inequities in educational outcomes for Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Nevertheless, despite the systemic challenges faced by students, I also have the honor of witnessing the success of hundreds of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students every year. I am inspired by their resilient spirit and drive. Therefore, I challenge the dominant narrative that promotes a deficit discourse by uplifting marginalized student voices to inform policy implementation that advances equitable practices. I believe it is crucial to uplift the voices of those students who are often on the margins. I am a first-generation Latina college graduate of a low-income background who believes in the transformative power

of education for historically marginalized communities. I have a deep passion for systemically advancing equitable practices that support low-income students of color who experience inequities in educational outcomes. My positionality is important as it informed this study's qualitative design and methodology. As a scholar–practitioner, I seek to examine the college system critically through the experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students themselves. I am aware that my lived experience and work influenced how I approached this study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated, "Qualitative research is interpretative…. inquirers explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, cultural, and socioeconomic status (SES) that shape their interpretations formed during a study" (p. 183). Therefore, I engaged in reflexivity through written notes and memos while conducting this study.

## Credibility and Trustworthiness

Maxwell (2013) noted that qualitative research often deals with two credibility and validity threats: researcher bias and reactivity. In this study, researcher bias was addressed by critically reflecting on my values, beliefs, and ideas and conducting member checks during the interviews. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), member checks are when you solicit feedback from the people you interviewed. Member checks allow the researcher to confirm that the researcher's interpretation, coding, and preliminary themes align with the intent of the responses provided by the research participants. Regarding reactivity, the participants who were interviewed were no longer students at the college, which minimized the influence of my role as an administrator employed by the college. The purpose of the study was articulated clearly to participants via email, in the short interest survey, and at the start of the interview. In addition, I conducted pilot interviews and had experts in the field review my interview protocol. I decided

on semistructured interviews that allowed flexibility in asking participants probing and follow-up questions. Lastly, I triangulated information from various sources such as institutional data, the short interest survey, and semistructured interviews. Generalizability was not a goal of this qualitative study.

## Ethical Considerations

Several steps were taken to maintain confidentiality and protect the privacy of individual student information. Participants who were interviewed were no longer students at the community college; they had already completed their educational goals at the college site. Consent was obtained at the start of the semistructured interview, and participants were asked to select a pseudonym. Zoom was used to conduct the interviews and as part of the interview protocol, participants were given instructions on how to update the name as displayed on their Zoom screen. Recordings were saved in a password-protected cloud storage software. I reiterated the purpose of the study before the start of each interview and discussed how the research would be used to help the college understand the voices and lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers to inform practice. I also reminded study participants that participation in the study was voluntary.

## Study Limitations

This qualitative study focused on one community college site; therefore, the findings are not generalizable beyond the reported experiences of those students who participated in the study. Nevertheless, my goal was to identify the emergence of general themes that could help other community colleges engage in appreciative inquiry to understand the experiences of historically marginalized students at their specific institutions. By focusing on the student journey, practitioners can better understand how students interact with systems and structures

that produce inequities in outcomes across racial and economic lines, so they can take steps to eliminate systemic barriers, advance equity, and positively transform the student experience.

## Conclusion

Community colleges serve as the gateway to postsecondary education for low-income communities of color. The goal of this qualitative study was to elevate the voices of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers in the context of a systems thinking and community cultural wealth approach to understand the student experience within key student milestones from onboarding to completion: onboarding, financial aid, educational planning, inside- and outside-of-classroom experiences, and completion. I used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who completed a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from a community college in 2022 or 2023. Policy reform in California Community Colleges strongly emphasizes centering the student experience for systemic transformation of the college structure into clear and integrated pathways incorporating student support throughout the college journey. Therefore, this study models how a college can engage in appreciative inquiry, data analysis, and intentional efforts to understand marginalized student experiences with the existing structures and processes of a college. What is unique about this study is that it incorporates systems thinking, community cultural wealth, and a strengths-based approach by focusing on the counterstories of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers to make recommendations on ways policy reform can be implemented to improve educational outcomes for these students.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study centers on the low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American student experience through a strengths-based approach that elevates historically marginalized voices. I examined the student journey from onboarding to completion as students experienced it using the lenses of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and systems thinking (Senge, 2006) to analyze the data. Centering the student perspective allowed me to better understand the interactions between the student and the institution: its systems, policies, procedures, programs, services, and institutional agents. This study aimed to learn about the experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers. I sought to understand the challenges students experienced as they navigated the community college, identify the support they found to be most beneficial in helping them achieve their educational goals, and obtain their recommendations for improving support for students with similar backgrounds. All study participants completed a degree, certificate, and/or transferred from ACC in 2022 or 2023. I reviewed existing institutional data, conducted a short interest survey, and facilitated 15 semistructured individual interviews via Zoom.

This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What challenges do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers report facing as they navigated the community college environment?

2. What supports do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers identify as having been most helpful to achieving their educational goals at the community college?

3. What recommendations do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers provide for better supporting the success of students from similar backgrounds?

My data analysis resulted in three principal findings related to the student experience and my research questions. With respect to Research Question 1 about the challenges faced, I found that the college system lacked an integrated and student-centered design, resulting in inconsistent support for students. Therefore, the burden of responsibility fell on the student to figure out how to braid resources and support to create a roadmap to completion. Students overcame the challenges by relying on navigational, social, familial, and resistance capital to achieve their educational goals. Regarding Research Question 2, I found that the most helpful supports were knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents and peer networks that made them feel welcomed and connected to resources. Lastly, regarding Research Question 3, students recommended proactive efforts to increase awareness about college processes and resources that make them feel supported. The most frequently offered recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs and financial aid.

In this chapter, I review and analyze institutional data, survey results, and interviews for Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers from 2022 and 2023 at ACC and discuss the research findings. The chapter concludes with recommendations given by low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers on ways the college can improve support for students with similar backgrounds.

**Institutional Data on Completers**

This study focuses on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers at ACC. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning at ACC reported 3,562 low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college students who earned a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred in 2022 and 2023. Table 4.1 shows the breakdown of completers by award type. There were 1,086 students who earned an Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree only. In addition, 261 students earned an AA or AS and transferred. Three hundred ninety-eight students earned an Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) without transferring, and 788 earned an ADT and transferred. An ADT allows students to complete an associate degree while meeting the lower division general education and major requirements for transfer. There were 179 students who earned a certificate only and 18 who earned a certificate and transferred. Lastly, 1,093 students at ACC transferred but did not earn an associate degree or certificate. Overall, 60.6% of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers transferred, whereas 39.4% earned an associate degree or certificate, but did not transfer.

**Table 4.1**

*2022 and 2023 Low-Income Latina/o/x and Black/African American Adelante Community College Completers (n = 3,562)*

| Highest Award | No Transfer | | Transfer | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| AA/AS | 825 | 23.2 | 261 | 7.3 | 1,086 | 30.5 |
| ADT | 398 | 11.2 | 788 | 22.1 | 1,186 | 33.3 |
| Certificate | 179 | 5.0 | 18 | 0.5 | 197 | 5.5 |
| No certificate or degree | 0 | 0.0 | 1,093 | 30.7 | 1,093 | 30.7 |
| Total | 1,402 | 39.4 | 2,160 | 60.6 | 3,562 | 100.0 |

Among the 3,562 completers included in this study, 2,768 were identified as Latina/o/x, 700 students were identified as Black/African American only, and 94 were reported as Multiracial Black, which included Black/African American non-Hispanic students and one or more race categories. The Institutional Research and Planning Office at ACC used the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System definitions to retrieve data on the race/ethnicity of their completers. Therefore, for this study, I created the Multiracial Black category to capture students who were not already captured in the Black/African American category. Table 4.2 summarizes the race/ethnic subgroups for the institutional data sample. Table 4.3 summarizes the highest degree earned by race/ethnicity for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers at ACC.

**Table 4.2**

*Student Race/Ethnic Subgroups for Institutional Data Sample*

| Reporting Categories | Hispanic Ethnicity | Race |
|---|---|---|
| Any Latina/o/x | Yes | Any category |
| Black/African American | No | Black/African American only |
| Multiracial Black | No | Black and ≥ one other race |

**Table 4.3**

*2022 and 2023 Low-Income Latina/o/x and Black/African American Completers*

| Highest Award | Latina/o/x | | Black/AA | | Multiracial Black | | Combined | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | *%* | *n* | *%* | *n* | *%* | *n* | *%* |
| AA/AS | 636 | 23.0 | 175 | 25.0 | 14 | 14.9 | 825 | 23.2 |
| AS/AS & Transfer | 197 | 7.1 | 54 | 7.7 | 10 | 10.6 | 261 | 7.3 |
| ADT | 323 | 11.7 | 63 | 9.0 | 12 | 12.8 | 398 | 11.2 |
| ADT & Transfer | 672 | 24.3 | 102 | 14.6 | 14 | 14.9 | 788 | 22.1 |
| Certificate | 150 | 5.4 | 26 | 3.7 | 3 | 3.2 | 179 | 5.0 |
| Certificate & Transfer | 15 | 0.5 | 3 | 0.4 | 0 | 0.0 | 18 | 0.5 |
| Transfer | 775 | 28.0 | 277 | 39.6 | 41 | 43.6 | 1,093 | 30.7 |
| Total | 2,768 | | 700 | | 94 | | 3,562 | |

On average, low-income Latina/o/x completers were 24.65 years old, completed (i.e., earned their degree, certificate, and/or transferred) within 5.35 years, and earned 66.26 units. In comparison, Black/African American completers were an average of 27.78 years old, completed in 6.26 years, and earned an average of 57.37 units. Lastly, for Multiracial Black students, the average age of completers was 25.65, time to completion was 6.12 years, and average units earned was 67.66. Table 4.4 summarizes the means and standard deviations for age, time to completion, and units earned by low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers. The table also shows Black/African American completers were older, took an average of one more year to complete, and earned almost 10 units less than Latina/o/x students and Multiracial Black students.

**Table 4.4**

*Demographic Information: Age, Time to Completion, and Units Earned for Low-Income*

*Latina/o/x and Black/African American, 2022 and 2023 ACC Completers*

| | Group Size | | Age | | Time to Completion | | Units Earned | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Latina/o/x | 2,768 | 78% | 24.65 | 6.10 | 5.35 | 4.04 | 66.26 | 29.62 |
| Black/AA | 700 | 20% | 27.78 | 9.76 | 6.26 | 5.38 | 57.37 | 32.29 |
| Multiracial Black | 94 | 2% | 25.65 | 7.24 | 6.12 | 5.04 | 67.66 | 32.88 |

*Note.* Time to completion appears in years.

Figure 4.1 shows a distribution graph for time to completion in years (rounded up) disaggregated by race. The minimum time to completion in years for Latina/o/x was less than one year, and the maximum was 24 years. The minimum for Black/African American students was also less than one year, and the maximum was 29 years. For Multiracial Black students, the minimum was one year, and the maximum was 29 years. Most low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students took more than two years to complete their educational goal at

ACC, averaging 5.35 to 6.26 years. The median for Latina/o/x students was 4.5 years, for

Black/African American and Multiracial Black students the median was five years.

**Figure 4.1**

*Time to Completion by Race/Ethnicity*

Black/African American Completers (*n* = 700)    Latina/o/x Completers (*n* = 2,768)
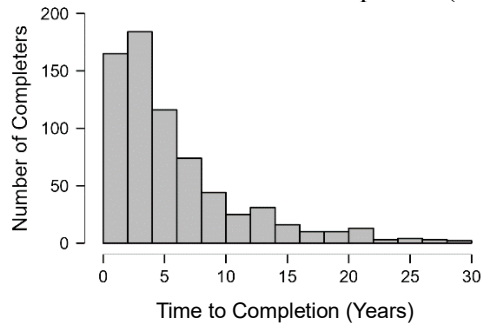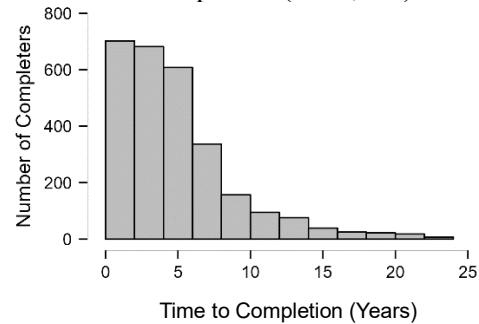


Multiracial Black Completers (*n* = 94)
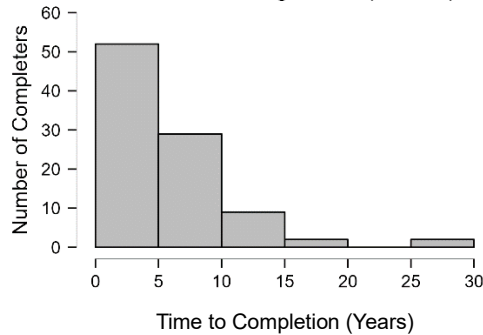


Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers had the highest

representation in the behavioral and social sciences (BSS) meta-major. Meta-majors were

developed as part of Guided Pathways implementation, and they are designed around seven

broad subject areas that allow students to explore their major options and career interests. The

BSS meta-major is promoted for students interested in learning about cultures, communities, and

human behavior. Thirty-eight percent of low-income Black/African American completers were

in the BSS meta-major compared to 37% for Latina/o/x and 32% for Multiracial Black

completers. Table 4.5 shows the percentage of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African

American completers by meta-major, including undeclared students.

**Table 4.5**

*Meta-Major by Race/Ethnicity*

| Race/Ethnicity | Meta-major | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Black/AA | Behavioral & Social Sciences | 263 | 38% |
| | Business | 94 | 13% |
| | Creative Arts | 37 | 5% |
| | Health & Community Wellness | 136 | 19% |
| | Industry & Technology | 13 | 2% |
| | Language, Composition & Journalism | 53 | 8% |
| | STEM | 81 | 12% |
| | Undeclared | 23 | 3% |
| | Total | 700 | 100% |
| Latina/o/x | Behavioral & Social Sciences | 1,034 | 37% |
| | Business | 389 | 14% |
| | Creative Arts | 195 | 7% |
| | Health & Community Wellness | 443 | 16% |
| | Industry & Technology | 148 | 5% |
| | Language, Composition & Journalism | 171 | 6% |
| | STEM | 316 | 12% |
| | Undeclared | 72 | 3% |
| | Total | 2,768 | 100% |
| Multiracial Black | Behavioral & Social Sciences | 30 | 32% |
| | Business | 11 | 12% |
| | Creative Arts | 8 | 9% |
| | Health & Community Wellness | 21 | 22% |
| | Industry & Technology | 1 | 1% |
| | Language, Composition & Journalism | 6 | 6% |
| | STEM | 14 | 15% |
| | Undeclared | 3 | 3% |
| | Total | 94 | 100% |

California Community Colleges strongly emphasize the completion of transfer-level English and math within the first year of enrollment. As part of basic skills reform, students are no longer required to take remedial English and math, which had created barriers, especially for Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. According to ACC's institutional data, 35% of low-income Latina/o/x students who completed a degree, certificate, and/or transferred in 2022 or 2023 completed transfer-level math within a year of the first term of enrollment, compared to

51

24% for Black/African American students and 26% for Multiracial Black students. Table 4.6

shows the percentage breakdown disaggregated by race/ethnicity of those who completed

transfer Math within the first term of enrollment at ACC. The completion rates are higher as it

relates to completing transfer English within a year of the first term of enrollment. For low-

income Latina/o/x completers, the percentage was 59% compared to 46% for Black/African

American completers and 52% for Multiracial Black students. Table 4.7 shows the percentage

breakdown disaggregated by race/ethnicity of those who completed Transfer English within the

first term of enrollment at ACC. Black/African American students had the lowest completion

rates of transfer-level English and math within the first year of enrollment.

**Table 4.6**

*Completion of Transfer Math Within a Year of First Term by Race/Ethnicity*

| Race/Ethnicity | Transfer Math | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Black/AA | Yes | 166 | 24% |
| | No | 534 | 76% |
| | Total | 700 | 100% |
| Latina/o/x | Yes | 959 | 35% |
| | No | 1,809 | 65% |
| | Total | 2,768 | 100% |
| Multiracial Black | Yes | 24 | 26% |
| | No | 70 | 74% |
| | Total | 94 | 100% |

**Table 4.7**

*Completion of Transfer English Within a Year of First Term by Race/Ethnicity*

| Race/Ethnicity | Transfer English | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Black/AA | Yes | 325 | 46% |
| | No | 375 | 54% |
| | Total | 700 | 100% |
| Latina/o/x | Yes | 1,621 | 59% |
| | No | 1,147 | 41% |
| | Total | 2,768 | 100% |
| Multiracial Black | Yes | 49 | 52% |
| | No | 45 | 48% |
| | Total | 94 | 100% |

Of the 3,562 low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who completed a degree, certificate, and/or transferred in 2022 and 2023, 1,792 (a little over 50%) were in a support program with an academic counseling component. Table 4.8 shows the number and percentage of completers in support programs. Multiracial Black and Latina/o/x completers were more likely to be in a support program with a counseling component than Black/African American completers. Fifty-three percent of Black/African American completers, 49% of Latina/o/x completers, and 47% of Multiracial Black completers were not part of a support program at the college.

**Table 4.8**

*Low-Income Latina/o/x and Black/African American Completers in Support Programs with a*

*Counseling and/or Advising Component Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity*

| Race/Ethnicity | In Support Program | *n* | % |
|---|:---:|---:|---:|
| Black/AA | No | 373 | 53% |
| | Yes | 327 | 47% |
| | Total | 700 | 100% |
| Latina/o/x | No | 1,353 | 49% |
| | Yes | 1,415 | 51% |
| | Total | 2,768 | 100% |
| Multiracial Black | No | 44 | 47% |
| | Yes | 50 | 53% |
| | Total | 94 | 100% |

*Note. n* = 3,562.

The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) had the highest enrollment of low-income Latina/o/x (552) and Black/African American (156) students who completed within the 2022 and 2023 academic years. It was followed by the First Year Experience (FYE) program, which supported 519 Latina/o/x students and 55 Black/African American students. Table 4.9 shows the number of 2022 and 2023 low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students each program supported. Some completers received support from multiple programs, which speaks to the intersectionality of identity and experiences.

**Table 4.9**

*Support Program Participation of Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American*

*Completers From 2022 and 2023*

| Support Program | Black/AA (*n* = 700) | | Latina/o/x (*n* = 2,768) | | Multiracial Black (*n* = 94) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Athletics | 46 | 6.6 | 104 | 3.8 | 5 | 5.3 |
| CalWORKs | 24 | 3.4 | 40 | 1.4 | 5 | 5.3 |
| EOPS | 156 | 22.3 | 552 | 19.9 | 21 | 22.3 |
| FIRST | 0 | 0.0 | 9 | 0.3 | 0 | 0.0 |
| First Year Experience (FYE) | 55 | 7.9 | 519 | 18.8 | 11 | 11.7 |
| Guardian Scholars | 9 | 1.3 | 9 | 0.3 | 1 | 1.1 |
| Honors Transfer Program (HTP) | 28 | 4.0 | 200 | 7.2 | 7 | 7.4 |
| MANA | 2 | 0.3 | 6 | 0.2 | 0 | 0.0 |
| MESA | 15 | 2.1 | 130 | 4.7 | 4 | 4.3 |
| Project Success/Umoja | 29 | 4.1 | 7 | 0.3 | 3 | 3.2 |
| Puente | 0 | 0.0 | 72 | 2.6 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Special Resource Center (SRC) | 44 | 6.3 | 170 | 6.1 | 15 | 16.0 |
| Undocumented | 31 | 4.4 | 128 | 4.6 | 2 | 2.1 |
| Veterans | 18 | 2.6 | 42 | 1.5 | 2 | 2.1 |

*Note.* Support Programs: CalWORKs= California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids, EOPS= Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, FIRST= Formerly Incarcerated Re-Entry Students Thriving, MANA= concept drawn from Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander values, MESA= Mathematics, Engineering & Science Achievement.

### Analysis of Survey Respondents

The Office of Institutional Research and Planning at ACC retrieved personal emails for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American former students who completed in 2022 or 2023. An email was sent to the personal emails ACC had on file for the 3,562 low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers. After students leave ACC, their college email accounts are deactivated. Therefore, we had to rely on personal emails. Even though hundreds of emails bounced back or were undeliverable, 197 individuals accessed the survey, and 136 completed the entire survey.

The short survey asked community college completers demographic information and questions about their experience accessing academic counseling, paying for college, the messages they received about being a successful college student, and any recommendations they had for improving the college's support for students with similar backgrounds to them. Table 4.10 summarizes the student responses regarding their experience accessing academic counseling, educational planning, and enrolling in classes.

**Table 4.10**

*Summary of Survey Responses: Counseling and Courses*

|  | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| *How frequently did you meet with an academic counselor while attending community college? (n = 156)* | | |
| Very Often | 19 | 12.2% |
| Often | 45 | 28.8% |
| Sometimes | 47 | 30.1% |
| Rarely | 36 | 23.1% |
| Never | 9 | 5.8% |
| *How would you describe your experience when trying to access counseling appointments? (n = 156)* | | |
| Very positive | 42 | 26.9% |
| Positive | 48 | 30.8% |
| Neutral | 45 | 28.8% |
| Negative | 10 | 6.4% |
| Very Negative | 5 | 3.2% |
| N/A (I did not try to access counseling appointments) | 6 | 3.8% |
| *Did you have an educational plan or roadmap for your academic journey while attending college? (n = 154)* | | |
| Yes, I had an educational plan | 127 | 82.5% |
| No, I did not have an educational plan | 27 | 17.5% |
| *Were you able to enroll in classes when you needed them? (n = 154)* | | |
| Always | 69 | 44.8% |
| Most of the time | 71 | 46.1% |
| Sometimes | 13 | 8.4% |
| Rarely | 1 | 0.6% |
| Never | 0 | 0.0% |

An interesting finding was that of 156 respondents to the counseling question, 28.9% rarely or never met with an academic counselor while attending community college. Another

30.1% stated they met with an academic counselor sometimes, and less than half of respondents, 41%, stated they met with an academic counselor often or very often. Respondents were asked about their experience accessing counseling appointments; 26.9% selected very positive, 30.8% selected positive, 28.8% selected neutral, 6.4% selected negative, 3.2% selected very negative, and 3.8% stated they did not try to access counseling appointments. Of 154 respondents to the educational plan question, 82.5% stated they had an educational plan, whereas 17.5% said they did not. Of those 17.5% who did not have an educational plan, 25% were Black/African American, and 75% were Latina/o/x completers. Lastly, 44.8% of survey respondents stated they were always able to enroll in classes when they needed them, and 46.1% stated they were able to enroll in classes most of the time.

About 84% of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers who responded to the survey paid for their community college education by accessing scholarships and grants, 25.3% worked to pay for school, 25.9% relied on personal/family contributions, 3.8% took out student loans, and 10.3% selected Other. Those who selected Other had the option to write in a response; those responses included FAFSA, part-time work, financial aid, GI Bill, and Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E). Table 4.11 summarizes the responses completers provided on how they paid for college.

**Table 4.11**

*Summary of Survey Responses: Paying for College*

|  | *n* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| *How did you pay for your community college education?* (*n* = 154) | | |
| Scholarships & Grants | 129 | 83.7% |
| Work-Study/Employment | 39 | 25.3% |
| Student Loans | 6 | 3.8% |
| Personal/Family Contributions | 40 | 25.9% |
| Other | 16 | 10.3% |

*Note.* Respondents could select multiple options.

Of 154 responses, 98.1% said they applied for financial aid. One hundred thirty-six students who applied for financial aid and responded to the logic question stated they learned about it from counselors/advisors (42.6%), teachers/professors (15.4%), family or friends (30.9%), financial aid workshops (25%), the college website (16.9%), direct mail/email from the college (8.1%), or other (7.4%). When selecting Other, students wrote that they learned about financial aid to help pay for college from their high schools and by conducting their own research. Of the 136 who rated their experience with the process of applying for financial aid, about 29% of respondents indicated applying for financial aid was very easy, 34.6% felt it was somewhat easy, 16.9% were neutral, 15.4% found it to be somewhat difficult, and 4.4% stated it was very difficult. Of the 19.8% who found it somewhat difficult or very difficult, 78% were Latina/o/x, and 22% were Black/African American. Table 4.12 summarizes respondents' experience applying for financial aid.

According to survey respondents, institutional agents such as counselors/advisors (53.6%) and teachers/professors (27.5%) provided the most information about what it took to be a successful community college student, followed by family/friends (19.6%). When students selected "Other," the most common themes noted were them conducting their own research and

staff in support programs sharing information on how to be a successful community college

student. Table 4.13 summarizes the survey responses on this topic.

**Table 4.12**

*Summary of Survey Responses: Financial Aid*

| | *n* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| *Did you apply for financial aid? (n = 154)* | | |
| Yes | 151 | 98.1% |
| No | 3 | 1.9% |
| *How did you find out about financial aid to help pay for college?\* (n = 136)* | | |
| Counselor/Advisor | 58 | 42.6% |
| Teacher/Professor | 21 | 15.4% |
| Family or Friends | 42 | 30.9% |
| Financial Aid Workshop | 34 | 25.0% |
| College Website | 23 | 16.9% |
| Direct Mail/Email from College | 11 | 8.1% |
| Other | 10 | 7.4% |
| *How would you rate your experience with the process of applying for financial aid? (n = 136)* | | |
| Very Easy | 39 | 28.7% |
| Somewhat Easy | 47 | 34.6% |
| Neutral | 23 | 16.9% |
| Somewhat Difficult | 21 | 15.4% |
| Very Difficult | 6 | 4.4% |

*Note.* *Respondents could select multiple options.

**Table 4.13**

*Summary of Survey Responses: Sources of Information*

| | *n* | *%* |
|---|---|---|
| *Who Provided the Most Information About What It Took to Be a Successful Community College Student? (n=138)* | | |
| Counselor/Advisor | 74 | 53.6% |
| Teacher/Professor | 38 | 27.5% |
| Family or Friends | 27 | 19.6% |
| Other | 26 | 18.8% |

*Note.* Respondents could select multiple options.

Survey respondents were asked to self-report how long it took them to achieve their

educational goal at the community college. Out of 138 who responded to this question, 73.9%

stated they completed their educational goal at ACC within four years. Figure 4.2 summarizes self-reported time to completion based on years.

**Figure 4.2**

*Summary of Survey Responses: Time to Completion*
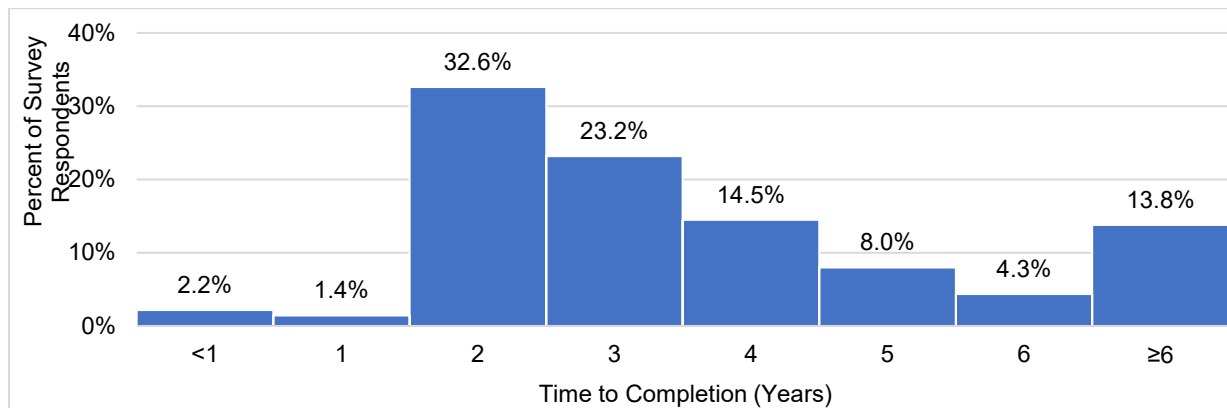


*Note. n* = 138.

Overall, low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers had an educational plan, relied on financial aid to pay for their college education, and the majority could enroll in the classes they needed to complete their educational goals. Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American survey respondents received most information about what it took to be a successful college student from institutional agents, family, and friends. They also relied on conducting their own research to learn how to navigate the college environment.

<div align="center">

**Profile of Interview Participants**

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One hundred twenty survey respondents expressed that they would be willing to be contacted by the researcher for a potential interview. A purposeful sample of 15 community college completers was interviewed, which included representation from Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers. Table 4.14 provides summary profiles of the 15 interview participants with their selected pseudonyms, race/ethnicity, goal(s) achieved at ACC, major, age,

gender, and a list of support programs they were part of. Support programs with a counseling/
advising component were the only ones included in this study.

**Table 4.14**

*Summary Profile of 15 Interview Participants*

| Pseudonym | Race/Ethnicity | Goal(s) Achieved | Major | Age | Gender | Support Programs Accessed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bree | Black/AA | ADT, T | Sociology | 21 | F | Veteran |
| Eddie | Latinx | C | Auto Tech | 19 | M | EOPS, Puente |
| Jade | Black/AA | ADT, T | Childhood Ed | 30 | F | EOPS |
| Arthur | Black/AA | AA/AS, T | Nursing | 22 | M | HTP |
| Sam | Black/AA | AA/AS, T | General Studies | 21 | F | HTP |
| La Joy | Black/AA | AA/AS | Real Estate | 45 | F | EOPS, CalWORKs |
| Peter | Latinx | T | Studio Art | 27 | M | None |
| Alex | Latinx | T | Paralegal Studies | 32 | M | EOPS |
| Ferrari | Latinx | T | Undeclared | 20 | F | None |
| Nicole | Latinx | ADT, T | Philosophy | 20 | F | Puente |
| Lorena | Latinx | ADT | Business Admin | 42 | F | EOPS, Undocumented |
| Assaku | Black/AA | AA/AS | Art | 21 | M | SRC, EOPS, FYE |
| Jacky | Latinx | ADT | Psychology | 33 | F | None |
| Chris | Latinx | ADT, T | Engineering | 19 | M | MESA, HTP |
| James | Black/AA | AA/AS | Real Estate | 54 | M | None |

*Note.* Each student chose their own pseudonym. Goal(s) Achieved: AA/AS = Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree, ADT = Associate Degree for Transfer, C = Certificate, T = Transfer. Support Programs: CalWORKs = California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids, EOPS = Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, FYE = First Year Experience, HTP = Honors Transfer Program, MESA = Mathematics, Engineering & Science Achievement, SRC = Special Resource Center (for students with disabilities).

### Elevating the Student Voice: Understanding the Student Experience

This study was designed to elevate the voices of historically marginalized low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers. There are many reasons why students who participated in the study enrolled at ACC: affordability, proximity to home, not feeling prepared to go straight from high school to the university and beginning at the university but having to transfer back (reverse transfer) due to academic, financial, or personal challenges. Overall, they enrolled because they wanted better opportunities for themselves and their families. The diversity in reasons reflects the diversity of the demographics served by community colleges. Despite the aspirational capital that brought them into the community

college in the first place, students faced numerous challenges once they were at the college. Each community college completer reflected on their entire student journey from when they decided to attend ACC through completion: onboarding, applying for financial aid, educational planning, experiences inside and outside the classroom, and completion. They also reflected on the support that made a difference in their educational journey.

In this section, I honor them by highlighting their student journey and elevating their voices as they shared why they enrolled at ACC, the challenges they faced, and the support they found to be the most beneficial to their success. These counterstories demonstrate the incredible resilience and strength of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students in the face of institutional challenges and systemic inequities. I intentionally use a strengths-based approach that highlights the student experience through success profiles that center the students' voices as they navigate the community college system. In doing so, I challenge the deficit discourse about low-income students of color.

**Student Success 1: Bree**

Bree is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in sociology, earned an ADT, and transferred to a local California State University. She began her higher education career at an out-of-state university, but the cost and distance made it difficult for her to continue beyond the first year. She decided to attend ACC because of its affordability and proximity to her home. She had a friend who helped her apply to ACC and, as a result, found the process easy. Nevertheless, she expressed that she experienced difficulties the first time she applied for financial aid because "nobody teaches you how to do it." In addition, she went from earning a 4.0 GPA at the university to her GPA dropping below 1.5 during her first year at ACC. She attributed the drop in GPA to the expectation that she had to navigate everything

independently and felt ACC did not have as many resources that catered to her as the university did. Her friend played a critical role in helping her make progress by guiding her, tracking her classes, and helping her stay organized.

Bree shared that when she began at ACC, her classes were in-person, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, all her classes transitioned to remote. She acknowledged that online classes created flexibility. However, she felt there were fewer connections; she stated, "I was pretty much on my own." Nevertheless, Bree eventually made at least two meaningful institutional connections that helped her achieve her educational goals at ACC: a counselor and a caring elementary statistics professor. Bree's original goal was to earn an AA degree, but when she met with the counselor, she learned about the ADT. Bree shared:

> At first, I was gonna go there just to get an associate's degree, but then I found out
> through the school by meeting with my counselor that I can just get an ADT, and with
> that, it was like fewer requirements. So, it was like a transfer degree.

This newfound knowledge allowed her to expand her options and goals. The counselor was also instrumental in helping her get credit for the courses she had already completed at the university level. Furthermore, Bree made it a point to highlight her elementary statistics professor because she felt "a lot of math professors just expect you to get it, and that's it . . . they continue to move forward" whether students understand the material or not. Nevertheless, this math professor was different; she took an interest and cared for her success by ensuring she and other students understood the material.

## Student Success 2: Eddie

Eddie is a Latino community college completer who earned a certificate in automotive technology. During the pandemic, he developed a passion for cars when many car repair shops

were closed, and he had to learn to do his own car maintenance. He decided to attend ACC to enhance his technical skills and gain experience to become an automotive technician. He attended orientation and found it helpful because he learned more about the resources ACC offered and received guidance to access financial aid.

Nevertheless, after attending orientation, he found it difficult to connect with a counselor, which resulted in him taking incorrect courses that were not required for his certificate. Eddie felt "the information was just hard to find." For example, he shared:

> During my first year, it was a bit difficult because for me, I had a hard time reaching out to a counselor . . . I didn't know what classes to take in regard to what was required for my degree. That was a bit challenging, so I wasn't able to complete some classes that were required, so I took some incorrect classes.

Eddie learned about the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) from a fellow student. This program is designed for low-income and educationally disadvantaged students. He found counseling support and direct aid, such as book vouchers and school supplies, to be the most beneficial services offered by the program. In addition, he also connected with the Puente program, which helped him learn more about his cultural background. Eddie felt it was a smoother process once he was connected and had an educational plan because he was confident he knew the correct classes he needed to enroll in for his major. It was also noteworthy to him that his professors demonstrated a deep dedication and passion for the subject, which sparked his own interest. He felt his automotive professors "were there for you if you need any help. They are willing to support you even if you are not on track . . . willing to help you to get back on track and make sure you are not failing the class." Eddie appreciated that his professors shared practical information about what to expect in the workforce, taking the learning beyond the

classroom. Nevertheless, he wished the college would have offered tutoring specific to his automotive courses.

**Student Success 3: Jade**

Jade is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in childhood education, achieved an ADT, and transferred to a California State University. She completed her degree at ACC in 2022, 11 years after starting. She graduated from high school in 2009 and went directly to the university. Nevertheless, she was academically disqualified from the university and enrolled at ACC. Jade found balancing her full-time work schedule challenging while trying to be a full-time student. In addition, she felt she did not receive much direction during that time regarding what classes she needed to take that were transferable back to the CSU system. In fact, she stated she received contradictory information about a class she was told she needed to take, and it later turned out she did not need it. Therefore, she decided to stop going to school and focus on work.

In 2018, while working at a private school as an aftercare program supervisor, she began to consider returning to school again, as she was interested in transitioning to the classroom; she was encouraged to return to school and earn her degree. Nevertheless, it was not until the pandemic, when her hours at work were reduced and more classes became available online, that she felt she could return to school. Her mother also encouraged her to go back. Jade felt there was much more flexibility during the pandemic in the delivery of instruction and services, including emergency financial aid to support her with her studies. One of her aunts was also working at a high school, and she shared information about EOPS and other academic resources at the college level with her. Jade joined the EOPS program and leveraged financial aid resources to return to school. She appreciated having consistency in access to counselors, which allowed

her to explore more transfer options. Jade stated, "I was just kind of thinking small for myself and speaking with counselors, they opened my eyes and stuff to be like, yeah, you could apply here [referring to competitive universities]." She appreciated having the flexibility to do drop-in counseling and access services online, which she could do during her lunch break at work. Jade felt she benefitted from the constant reminders that EOPS provided, especially as a returning student. She shared:

> When you're getting back after taking a hiatus of years of not going to school, I feel like that's important because things have changed from those four to five years that I took a break. And as I said, it was just from the smallest things to deadlines or something, the deadline to apply for graduation, whether this course will transfer to the school. I'm going over my transcripts and making sure I am on track with everything, and that I don't have to take this course. I feel like those things were all very helpful and just pushing resources to me, different grant opportunities, and whatnot. And even them asking if I needed help applying for my teaching permit . . . my resume, too.

Jade appreciated the comprehensive support she received from EOPS. She acknowledged that her childhood education professors were also instrumental in her success because they shared resources and opportunities outside the classroom. Despite benefitting from the flexibility that online and remote services provided her, she shared that connections with others happen more organically when you take courses and receive services in person.

**Student Success 4: Arthur**

Arthur is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in nursing, achieved an AS degree, and transferred to a local California State University. He decided to attend ACC because of the affordability; he was accepted to a local university as an

engineering major but was informed he would need to take out $14,000 in loans. As a result, he applied to ACC late because that was not his original goal. Arthur shared that he faced a few challenges; one was at the beginning of his educational journey when he applied late and needed prerequisite clearances to enroll in his classes. He stated:

I had to go to the dean of math and bring in my high school transcripts to get cleared because the process would've taken three to five days, and that class would've filled up. Then, I also went to a counselor to get cleared, so it was just a lot of different things that I was running around to do. I wish the process was more streamlined, and I wish it was a lot easier to just get cleared and just show your transcript in one place.

He took advantage of express counseling because he felt it was more accessible since he did not have to wait to schedule an appointment. He feared his classes would fill up if he waited. Even though his original interest was engineering, his girlfriend introduced him to the health care industry. Arthur's girlfriend was instrumental in helping him navigate the college system, but it was not a smooth process as they both struggled to find the correct classes to take. He stated, "We did run into a lot of difficulties to find the actual classes that we needed . . . we actually ended up taking three to four classes that were not necessary because we were getting conflicting information." Even though he was able to transfer, he mentioned that he recently found out at his transfer institution that he is missing a class he should have taken at the community college.

Despite the challenges, Arthur shared that what helped him the most on his journey was express counseling due to its accessibility. However, he did mention that he did not have a comprehensive educational plan outlining all his coursework. He was only receiving support for one semester at a time. During the interview, Arthur shared that his girlfriend "was my counselor." They were figuring things out on their own. Fortunately, Arthur found individual

professors who connected him to resources inside and outside of the classroom; for example, these professors shared information about scholarships, which he continued to apply to every year. Arthur expressed that the courses were more structured once he entered the nursing program, and professors got to know students personally. He took advantage of supplemental instruction and obtained an on-campus job. He attributed these experiences to his success at ACC and beyond.

**Student Success 5: Sam**

Sam is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in general studies, achieved an AS degree, and transferred to a University of California campus. She was homeschooled, and she felt she was not ready for the university level. Therefore, she believed ACC would be a better fit. She also had familial capital she leaned on because her mother had attended ACC, and her sister was also a student when she started college. Sam did not feel applying to college and financial aid was "too complicated" because her mother and sister supported her through the process. However, she did share that she struggled with getting a counselor appointment and only saw a counselor once within her first two years at ACC. She eventually joined the Honors Transfer Program (HTP) and found it easier to access counselors and have a more clearly defined pathway to learn what courses to take. She learned about HTP from a professor who encouraged her to join because she was doing well academically. Sam also heard that she would become more competitive and increase her chances of getting a scholarship if she joined HTP. That was the extra incentive she needed to join.

Nevertheless, Sam struggled to form meaningful connections with professors during her first two years because, as she explained:

I would see professors above me as unapproachable, kind of like I am the student, and they are the professors, so I can't really connect on that level. They are an authority figure to me. So, I can't be chill, I can't come as I am. I had to change my approach.

This perception changed during Sam's last year at ACC when she applied for an on-campus work-study job that paired her with a professor. This experience humanized professors for her. Sam stated, "It was just kind of humanizing to talk to [the professor] . . . she would give me life advice. And then she would take me to different campus events, and it was helpful because I wouldn't have gone to those events otherwise." Her work-study job provided meaningful experiences that helped her stay connected and progress toward her educational goals. She acknowledged that she would not have attended campus events if it was not for the professor with whom she was paired as part of her work-study job.

As Sam reflected on the impact of her socioeconomic background on her experience as a student, she shared:

It was kind of alienating to be the only Black Muslim in the room. I feel like a majority of the classes it was mostly White and Latino students . . . I was doing more STEM-related classes. I guess there was less outreach to Black Americans on that subject.

She expressed that she now works at the African Diaspora Student Center at her transfer institution, so she has the opportunity to meet with more Black faculty, which has helped her with her connection to her studies and drive to succeed. Her experience demonstrates the importance of creating culturally engaging environments for students where their sense of belonging and community can be nurtured.

**Student Success 6: La Joy**

La Joy is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in real estate and earned an AA degree at ACC. She was 45 years old when she completed her associate degree. La Joy had attended another community college before enrolling at ACC. She initially enrolled at ACC in 2008. However, she dropped out because she was homeless and needed to find a job: Survival came before school. La Joy could not focus on school when her basic needs were not met. Ten years later, she decided to go back to pursue her career and learn more about real estate because she wanted a better life for herself and her children. By that time, she had children and was receiving public assistance. As part of her welfare-to-work program, she took an assessment and was given the option to become a school bus driver or go to school for real estate. La Joy felt she wanted more for herself and chose to return to school and study real estate. She expressed challenges with accessing financial aid at her first community college. She tried to submit an appeal to regain her financial aid after losing it due to her low GPA and completion rate. However, her appeal was not approved, which discouraged her from continuing. She shared, "They didn't accept it [SAP appeal], so I probably didn't do something right. I didn't have help. I didn't have anybody to help me or instruct me." At ACC, she received help from the Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) program to submit her appeal, and it was approved, which gave her access to federal and state financial aid. The CARE program is a supplemental program of EOPS designed to provide educational support services for single-parenting head-of-household students receiving CalWORKs/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to help them transition from welfare to self-sufficiency through education and training.

La Joy learned about the EOPS, CARE, and CalWORKs programs from her classmates. It was the social capital she gained from her peer networks that helped her get connected. She identified the CARE program as one of the most helpful supports at the college. She stated:

> The service I felt was most helpful was the CARE program. I used it to my full advantage for books, lunch, backpacks, and school supplies. I needed notebooks, calculators, and everything else. I felt so supported by that. I wish I had known about this earlier in my college years.

La Joy took full advantage of all the services the CARE program offered single parenting students, including participating in on-campus events with her children. She revealed that this level of engagement had her children talking about how they wanted to attend ACC as well. Investment in parenting students has a multigenerational impact.

**Student Success 7: Peter**

Peter is a Latino community college completer who majored in studio art and architecture and transferred to a local California State University. He was born in Mexico and was raised by a single mother. He knew he wanted to continue his education after high school but did not know where at first. He decided to enroll at ACC because one of his cousins was already attending the college. He shared:

> He was almost like a big brother [referring to his cousin]. He was raised by a single mother too, just like myself. It was just like, where do we go from here? Well, we're just kind of making it up for ourselves. We're doing our own research. He helped me. I don't know how he did it because even enrolling at [ACC], there were little loops and struggles.

It was through familial and social capital that Peter decided to attend ACC. Even though Peter leaned on his cousin for support, he described the enrollment process as "daunting" especially when he had to navigate it on his own. He stated, "I remember it was daunting. I was by myself. My mom wasn't there; my cousin wasn't there. So, it was a little scary . . . I put higher education on a pedestal . . . the slightest little thing can be this huge thing for me." It took Peter nine years to transfer to the university from the first time he enrolled at ACC. He stayed longer to improve his GPA and transfer to a university. He discussed going over credits for financial aid and his program of study: reaching the maximum timeframe. Peter attributed the loss of financial aid to not having consistent counseling. His professors encouraged him to see a counselor, but he disclosed that he did not know where they were located. At first, he navigated everything on his own; he used the college catalog, ACC website, and assist.org to build his class schedule every semester until he eventually found his way to a counselor.

Peter felt his professors, older cousin, and classmates were instrumental in him accomplishing his educational goal at ACC. His professors helped him make connections outside of the college. They told him how to find job opportunities in architecture, and he landed a drafter job, which he currently works in. His boss became a mentor to him; Peter asked him about his career trajectory and gained more practical knowledge in the field. He felt his professors cared about connecting him inside and outside the classroom. Peter used his employment connection to continue to finance his college education because he had exceeded the maximum timeframe allowed for a program of study to receive financial aid.

**Student Success 8: Alex**

Alex is a Latino community college completer who majored in paralegal studies, earned an AA degree, and transferred. During the interview, he informed me he was in law school,

something he once thought he could not achieve. He enrolled at ACC right after high school, not knowing exactly what he wanted to do. Alex got introduced to college through a capstone project he had to do in high school, where he developed a resume, applied for jobs, and applied to college. Once enrolled at ACC, he met with an express counselor, started taking general education courses, and began to work part time. Unfortunately, he did not receive financial aid. He found the financial aid process challenging, especially since he was estranged from his parents. Alex stated:

> So, it was kind of hard to get into the office [financial aid]. And then once you do get in, if your paperwork isn't filled correctly or you are missing information, they will send you away and say, "Come back with it" [referring to the paperwork]. . . . You don't really know that whole process [referring to financial aid]. From my experience, I was a first-generation college student. I didn't know what I was doing when it came to all that. And then I had never had a job before, so I don't know what all that stuff means. Gross and net pay and all of that stuff being correct or incorrect. It was just a lot for me to take in at once.

Alex felt the financial aid process was complex and confusing, especially as a first-generation student. He lived with his grandparents and did not have contact with his biological parents. Given his circumstances, Alex was unaware of his options to complete his financial aid application, such as a dependency override. It took him 15 years to complete his degree at ACC as he had to prioritize work because that was his "livelihood." He shared that there were a few classes he had to drop or fail because of last-minute changes to his work schedule.

Despite the financial challenges, he was proactive with his education. He got copies of various major sheets he found interesting. Those sheets outlined the degree requirements for each

of the majors and included information on general education requirements, major requirements, electives, and catalog rights. Alex mentioned that he did not meet with a counselor often. He took it upon himself to create his own schedule and enroll in classes based on the major sheets. When he did not pass a class, he retook it. Alex stated:

> Nobody likes to fail, but don't just quit because you're scared of failing to continue. If you fail, it's not the end of the world. If you fail a class, it's just that a class. Try to take it again with the new knowledge you learned throughout the semester.

There were times when he felt he did not belong, but his sociology professor made him feel engaged and connected. This professor stood out because he would talk about concepts in class and then relate them to his lived experiences. Alex felt this professor came from a similar background; he was a Latino who grew up in the inner city just like him. Being able to relate what he was learning to his lived experiences was reaffirming. Alex developed at least three meaningful connections with institutional agents at ACC. He would ask them about what it was like to transfer to a university and what their experience was like going to graduate school; in a way, they provided guidance and motivated him not to give up on his education. These connections provided him with navigational and resistance capital to continue his education despite the challenges he faced.

**Student Success 9: Ferrari**

Ferrari is a Latina community college completer who started at ACC through dual enrollment, and she also did concurrent enrollment at the community college while at her transfer university. As the oldest sibling and daughter, she had many responsibilities at home. She initially attended ACC due to its proximity to where she lived. Ferrari received support from the Career Center at her high school to apply to ACC and submit her financial aid application for

the first time. Her parents are immigrants and were hesitant about signing paperwork for the FAFSA. She stated:

> I had to make their passwords and their usernames. Everything. They didn't want
> anything to do with the computer. . . . They're immigrants, so they don't have much
> paperwork. . . . It was just really hard. It took me months to get them to sign something. It
> just took a lot of convincing for them to even pick up a pen.

Ferrari was proactive with her education and got involved in a STEM mentorship program that opened her eyes to new opportunities in the biological sciences. She was inspired by women in the STEM field who challenged traditional gender roles. This ignited her passion and interest in pursuing a career pathway in biology. Ferrari was also inspired by professors at ACC who cared deeply about the material they were teaching.

It was clear that Ferrari felt she had to figure things out on her own, so she did not shy away from asking questions that would help her navigate the college environment. Despite her proactive efforts, she found it challenging during the pandemic when instruction transitioned from in person to virtual. Not only did she find it more difficult to connect with her professors, but she also found it difficult to connect with her peers. She shared, "I like in-person more. Online, I don't feel a connection. In-person, you connect, you see the person, you see them breathe, and you feel their energy." Also, her parents did not understand how she was going to school if she spent all her time in front of the computer. According to Ferrari, for them, it was "like you're watching TV all day." Therefore, she had to advocate for herself at home and school.

**Student Success 10: Nicole**

Nicole is a Latina community college completer who majored in philosophy, earned an ADT, and transferred to a local University of California campus. She was valedictorian of her high school graduating class. However, she felt she still needed time to prepare for the university level and further explore her career interests. She was initially interested in law but wanted to learn more about the profession. Nicole felt very supported at ACC from the onset of her journey as a college student. She attributes her success to being part of the Puente program from the beginning. She felt that support was tailored to her and that her professors genuinely cared about her. When speaking about Puente, Nicole shared:

> Puente, this is the thing that I just love so much. This is why I loved [ACC] so much because Puente is a program made for first-generation Latino students, so everybody there understands what you're going through and what you're learning, and they know it's the same kind of culture. And my counselor for Puente was literally an angel. . . . She was kind, like a motherly figure. I really wanted to make her proud, and she would talk to us with terms of endearment, "mija" [my daughter], called us stuff like that . . . I felt really close to her, really connected, really supported, comforted. I saw a lot of my culture in her . . . I knew it was hard to find outside of Puente, so I didn't take it for granted.

She felt Puente provided tailored support through culturally affirming practices that made her feel seen, connected, and valued. The sense of belonging and community of care she found in Puente made a true difference. Nicole stated throughout the interview that she felt a sense of community, safety, and comfort. Despite experiencing personal challenges when her brother was incarcerated during her 2nd year, she maintained a high GPA due to the comprehensive support

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she received. Her professors and Puente counselor were very understanding and accommodating. She shared, "I felt that I wasn't alone in the process, and I wasn't stressed out."

Even though Nicole excelled academically at ACC, she knew not everyone had the same positive experience as her, especially if they were not part of a program. For example, she stated:

We had counselors assigned to us, so every time we had a question or wanted to make changes to our ed plan or educational career, we would know to reach out to our specific counselors because they knew how everything was tailored to us, so they would be able to guide us to help us make the right choices. I know for general counselors, it's kind of difficult to build relationships with their students. They just have to tackle so much and handle talking to so many students. And with our program counselors, it's a lot as well, but it feels more personal and intimate, and it's easier to build a relationship with your counselor when you're in one of those programs.

If Nicole had questions about her educational plan, financial aid, classes, or whatever, she contacted her Puente counselors. She quickly developed the relational trust and support network needed to navigate the college. Nicole articulated that attending ACC was the best decision she could have made for herself. She challenged the negative stigma that exists about community colleges. When she first informed her high school teachers and her family that she was planning to attend a community college, they perpetuated the stigma of attending community college. Nicole stated:

One of the things that I experienced personally, I was a valedictorian scholar, so I felt like I had a lot of pressure put on me to kind of go to that 4-year university. People would see my grades and be like, don't throw that away. You're doing so good in school. Keep doing good. Community college is not going to help you as much. . . . It's just not as

valued as much. I think there's a negative stigma. I know there is a negative stigma around community college.

She was glad she did not let the negative comments deter her from attending ACC because she felt it was the best decision for her. Puente's structured and comprehensive support made a positive difference in her trajectory. She transferred within two years and made a smooth transition to the university.

**Student Success 11: Lorena**

Lorena is a Latina community college completer who majored in business administration, earned an ADT, and transferred to a local California State University (CSU) campus. She was a stay-at-home mom with a high school diploma who had always dreamed of returning to school to earn a bachelor's degree in business. She earned her ADT at the age of 42 and is currently completing her remaining requirements for the bachelor's degree at a CSU. What she felt prevented her from pursuing her dream at an earlier age was that she was an undocumented student and did not have the money or resources to continue with college after high school. She did not know about AB 540, California nonresident tuition exemption, or financial resources available for students who attended and graduated from high school in California.

> You know what was stopping me from going to a community college was that I didn't have money or resources because I'm an undocumented student, and so I thought it was going to be expensive, and I didn't know there was financial aid available for us who graduated high school here in California.

Lorena went to the adult school asking for information, and they introduced her to an ACC representative who shared information about enrolling at ACC and accessing financial aid resources. She was also connected to the EOPS program. Lorena stated, "I couldn't afford the

books, and I was planning on dropping some classes, but she said if I was full-time, EOPS could help me pay for my books." Despite the challenges she initially experienced, once connected, Lorena felt the onboarding, enrolling in classes, making progress toward her educational goal, and accessing financial aid were seamless. She attributed her success to the individualized and tailored support she received from EOPS and her professors. She received reminders from the EOPS program on important deadlines, met with a counselor three times a semester to check progress and stay abreast of information, and had a comprehensive educational plan that she followed. Regarding her professors, she felt they truly cared about her education and success and taught her skills that she could use in her career and everyday life. For example, she shared:

> The teachers are very friendly, and they are very prepared . . . and I just didn't feel like my age was a problem in school. I got along with my teachers and the students . . . I really liked the classes because I learned a lot, especially in finance; that class not only helped me in my career but in my everyday life . . . the importance of investing, the importance of having a budget, and the importance of saving. We really took all of that advice in my house, and we put it into practice.

Lorena acknowledged that, as a mother of two children, it was difficult balancing her responsibilities as a parent and student. Nevertheless, she appreciated the flexibility of online classes and was intentional about arranging her schedule, so she only took classes when her children were at school. In addition, she took advantage of the after-school programs available in the community to help her with her children. The community cultural wealth she brought to the college and the institutional support she connected with helped her achieve her educational goal at ACC and transfer to the university. Every step of the way, she was learning to navigate spaces as a first-generation undocumented student.

**Student Success 12: Assaku**

Assaku is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in art and earned an AA degree. He was 21 when he completed his degree at ACC. He self-disclosed that he is on the spectrum and had an individualized education plan (IEP) in high school. He was overwhelmed by what he felt was the expectation that he was supposed to know exactly what he wanted to do with his life from the beginning of his college career. He was not interested in transferring and wanted to continue to explore his options. He shared:

I just didn't want to make the wrong decision because when you're neurodivergent, your mind will say one thing that may make sense to you, but realistically it may not . . . I feel like a lot of colleges are not considerate when it comes to dealing with a student who had an IEP. . . . This could be for anyone, whether they're neurodiverse or neurotypical, but I know a lot of students who were in special education like me, most of them dropped out because it was too much to handle.

Even though Assaku felt a sense of pressure to know exactly what he wanted to do, he continued exploring. He also expressed that he challenged the expectation that he should transfer to a university. He encountered professors he described as "dismissive," so he changed his major. Nevertheless, in art, he found professors he described as people who "not only love the job, but they care about students so much." These professors made him feel he belonged and was valued. In addition, he was able to find a community with other students with whom he could connect. Assaku shared great insight about what it was like to have a support network. He stated:

I don't mind being by myself at all, but I do feel like you do need people in your life. . . . A lot of people at [ACC] would be leaves because they'll come and go or they will change during the season, and then there will be some people that you may see regularly

who are branches. But if you find two or three people that are like the roots of your tree, you will be fine. And I can tell you that I found two people who are the roots of my tree.

For Assaku, the roots of his "tree" consisted of caring professors and peers. He felt part of a community when he could ask for support, and others did the same thing, making him feel like he was not on his own. Assaku emphasized the importance of recognizing each other's humanity. It was important for him to feel that someone cared about him as a person and student. Once he found that, he felt he was able to excel in his authentic self.

**Student Success 13: Jacky**

Jacky is a Latina community college completer who majored in psychology, earned an ADT, and transferred to a University of California campus. She earned her degree and transferred from ACC at the age of 33. It took her 16 years from the first time she enrolled at the college to complete. She initially enrolled at ACC after high school but left for personal reasons. She faced many challenges growing up; she was in the juvenile justice system and rehabilitation homes. During her 2nd semester in college, she got pregnant and lost her twins. This caused her to fall into depression. Ten years passed before she reconsidered going back to school. By that time, she had become a mother of two and had decided to leave an abusive relationship. She aspired to create a better life for herself and her children. She said, "My motivation is my children trying to do better for myself, so my kids don't experience the things I experienced growing up." Jacky faced and overcame personal and academic challenges and tribulations, yet her aspirational capital kept her going. At ACC, she was placed on academic probation, which created additional barriers for her, such as being unable to access financial resources to pay for her education, making it difficult for her to make progress. She stated:

It was just a rough childhood that I had. But coming back to [ACC], after those 10 years, I did experience a really hard hardship, which was being placed on academic probation because I dropped classes. So, I went through that, and that was difficult because, at first, I had to pay for some of my classes. I didn't have the financial aid assistance that I wish I would've had. But eventually, I earned my grades and ended up getting off academic probation.

Jacky was persistent and eventually got out of academic probation and could access financial aid again. She decided to pursue psychology as her major because it allowed her to understand her lived experiences growing up. She felt she was learning something that applied to her life. She stated:

I decided that I was going to pursue psychology because I was very intrigued by why, I always told myself, how come I wasn't a normal girl? I never felt I was normal. I got into a gang young. I was into drugs. I was doing things that a typical 12 year-old-girl doesn't do. So, psychology was something that caught my attention.

Jacky was determined to complete her community college education and transfer. She pursued a major that was meaningful to her and one that allowed her to make sense of her experiences growing up. She attributes her success to connecting with caring and engaging professors and taking a course that provided structured support to learn about the transfer process. The course was taught by a counseling faculty who made her think beyond her original goal of applying to the local CSU campus and consider applying to the UC system. She ended up getting accepted to every single UC that she applied to. As a low-income student, she received four application fee waivers to apply to CSUs and an additional four application fee waivers to apply to the UC system. As Jacky reflected on what it meant to graduate from ACC, she shared:

Knowing everything that I went through growing up. It was a really rough childhood, and I never thought that I would be able to progress in life. I thought I was stuck. I went through a lot and I think just that moment made me realize how much I'm able to accomplish, and it made me, everything that I went through made me really resilient. That day at graduation, I knew that wasn't going to be my last graduation. So, I think that was the most memorable and one of the happiest days for me. I felt proud as a Latina. I felt proud as a mother, as a daughter. I didn't feel like a failure anymore.

Jacky refused to fall victim to the challenges she experienced in her environment, including the institutional challenges in the college setting. Graduating from community college would be her first college graduation of many to come.

**Student Success 14: Chris**

Chris is a Latino community college completer who majored in engineering, earned an ADT, and transferred to a University of California campus. His cousins introduced him to ACC because they were already students at the college by the time he graduated from high school. They attended ACC first and then transferred to the University of California, Irvine, with a major in computer science. Chris originally applied to universities in the UC System as a high school senior but received rejection letters from all. Despite this original setback, he knew his cousins had successfully transferred from a community college; therefore, he relied on this familial and social capital to navigate ACC and achieve his transfer goal. When he faced challenges, his cousins helped him navigate the college processes, such as applying for financial aid. For example, he shared his experience completing the FAFSA:

Definitely complicated. And I was struggling with my parents. I was trying to look at tax forms for the first time. I didn't know what to put in. And then I was scared of making

errors, so me and my parents were going back and forth . . . my cousins kind of double checked some of the stuff I would submit. . . . I'd be like, "Hey, did I put this incorrect? Is this similar to what you put for your FAFSA?" They also have a single mother, so they kind of know how to navigate on their own and do those forms by themselves.

Although he was confused about how to complete the FAFSA, he had his cousins whom he could ask for support. They were the ones who shared tips on how to be a successful college student. They encouraged him to participate in programs to help him achieve his educational goals. Chris was a very involved student, participating in various programs on campus and outside with industry partners. Early on, Chris knew he wanted to pursue engineering; therefore, when he heard about the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program, a program designed to help underserved and underrepresented students majoring in calculus-based STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors achieve their transfer goals, he took advantage of the resources available. Chris shared:

I didn't have too much knowledge of what I was getting myself into. I wasn't too knowledgeable about my major, what was about, but once I got to [ACC] and talked to MESA and they kind of told me what to expect and about internships or research studies. I think they had a handbook, and they listed all their research opportunities there. So, it's really helpful that MESA was out there. And I guess from there, just taking my classes, I was getting a bigger idea of what to expect from my major.

Chris was also in student government and secured an on-campus job as a college ambassador, which connected him further. He felt more connected in these spaces with peers than in his courses. He described STEM majors as "everyone was being competitive. Some people saw each other as competition." Fortunately, Chris found a core group of students that

supported each other. When I asked him how he first became interested in engineering, he mentioned participating in a high school career day. Once he was at ACC, he proactively reached out to professors during office hours. He made sure to follow his cousin's advice. He shared:

> Once I went to my first few office hours with my physics professor, I realized that I shouldn't think I was in this by myself. Also, I sometimes would lean on my cousins for a little support, so that was kind of helpful. But I know some other students, they didn't have that connection or a family member to rely on. It was just them on their own. I would say once I talked to my professor and went to office hours and just put myself out there, and the professor would see me desperately trying and wanting to succeed in the class, they want to help you.

Chris recognized not all students with similar backgrounds to him had cousins who could help them navigate the college. He recognized they were on their own. This is one of the reasons he found it rewarding working as an ambassador at the college; he could share his knowledge with other students and support them as they pursue their dreams and aspirations. Chris did speak to a counselor early on in his educational career at ACC, but he acknowledged that it was not frequent. Once he had learned the information and was given the tools such as assist.org, the college catalog, and prerequisites, and understood the transfer requirements, he adjusted his educational plan independently. He shared, "I had an educational plan and then adjusted it and changed it a little bit, too. I guess to more of my liking and what I thought I would manage at the time." Most of the time, he was able to enroll in the classes he wanted. Whenever he was placed on a waitlist, he knew how to email his professors, a tip he learned from his cousins. In addition to his cousins, the support programs he joined, and his on-campus job, he developed connections

with professors who demonstrated care and concern for his success. He attributes all these experiences to his ability to transfer within three years to the University of California, Berkeley.

**Student Success 15: James**

James is a Black/African American community college completer who majored in real estate and earned an associate degree. He shared that he first enrolled at ACC in 1989, but "none of the kids looked like me." He felt ACC and the City of Torrance were not welcoming places for Black students at that time. When he returned in 2008, he saw more diversity. James emphasized how other students played an instrumental role in helping him navigate the college. He explained:

> The students helped me a lot, other students that were there a year before me. That's where I got most of my information from because they had already been through the wringer. And so, they already knew what to do, what not to do.

James emphasized that the most helpful support came from students because they had firsthand experience of what it was like to navigate the college processes. He took it upon himself to learn from his peers as he did not always trust the information provided by staff. James learned about the college catalog and used that to validate the information that he was provided. For example, he shared:

> Once I learned that catalog, I kind of learned it like the back of my hand. Regardless of what the staff said, I knew that catalog was my contract regardless of what happened as long as I didn't break enrollment. So, whenever they told me something, I'd go to the catalog if it didn't appear right . . . sometimes they would have you taking classes that you didn't even need, like man, that don't make any sense. So, I am the type of person, if

it don't seem right, I'm going to challenge you . . . sometimes you go somewhere, and people just tell you anything just to get rid of you.

James shared that he faced numerous challenges while attending ACC. He grew up in South Central Los Angeles, was involved in a gang at a young age, and had been part of the foster care system. These experiences impacted how he navigated the college environment. He shared:

> I was the first in my family to go to college, so it was really new to me. I didn't have a mama to tell me. I didn't have a daddy, no cousins, no brothers, nothing to tell me about college. . . . They never told me that I could go to school and be a real estate agent or a doctor, or a nurse. They didn't tell us, that wasn't talked about.

Although he shared that he had an unpleasant experience with a professor his first semester, he found an English professor he connected with later in his journey at the college, which made a difference in helping him achieve his educational goal. He emphasized that this professor allowed him to write about things that were relevant to his life. These culturally engaging practices in the classroom made a positive difference for James. He stated:

> When she told me to write about things that I was familiar with, I'm like, wow, I really enjoyed that . . . she allowed me to write about things that were relevant to me in my life, being in foster care, doing this, doing that. And so, I had a lot to say about those issues . . . the English teacher, I'll never forget her. I mean, she wasn't even my color. She was a Caucasian lady. What came from her heart reached my heart. And so that's how I knew it was genuine . . . I come from the streets and real recognizes real . . . I felt it from her heart that that teacher was really trying to help me.

Having a caring professor transformed James's college experience; even though she was not Black, he felt connected to his education through her culturally engaging pedagogy. He was very self-aware of what it meant to be a Black man and how others perceived him. He recognized that the college was more diverse when he returned the second time. James emphasized the importance of learning about students and their diverse cultures and experiences. He stated:

> I knew a 100% when I got there in '89 that my color, my skin, wasn't really accepted there. Now is more acceptable . . . I didn't have to hold myself up tight. Sometimes, as a Black man, you have to go out of your way to prove that you're trying to do the right thing. . . . They got to understand because it's very diverse now. Very, very diverse. You got Spanish, Black, Asian, Samoan, White, you got it all. And so, you got to almost know all the things that these kids are going through and listen to them. . . . When you listen, you learn . . . I advise every other race to try to adopt a friend of a different race and learn about it, learn their culture, food. Because I will tell you something. Blacks are very emotional. When we speak, we get very loud. Now I'm talking to one of my partners, we are talking about a football game, you might hear us hollering and screaming, oh man, this and that. Somebody on the outside may think we are about to fight, but we are just talking.

James returned to ACC at the age of 54. As a returning adult to school, he relied on his peer network support to navigate the college and learn about resources and opportunities. He wished ACC had provided this information to him; however, he expressed skepticism based on his experiences of feeling that some staff members were not knowledgeable and would give him incorrect information. In retrospect, he felt he would have finished sooner if he had known about

financial resources and book loans. His English professor made a lasting impression because she allowed him to draw upon his lived experiences to complete class assignments. This made his education relevant and made him feel connected and engaged.

## Summary of Student Success Profiles

As evident in the student experiences elevated in the previous section, the institutional support students received was inconsistent. The burden of responsibility fell on the student to braid resources together to create a roadmap to completion. There was an expectation for students to be college-ready as opposed to the college designing a student-centered system that considered the diversity of experience of community college students to provide tailored support when students needed it the most. Students were "lucky" to find knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents that connected them with resources. They relied heavily on community cultural wealth to compensate for the inconsistent design. Even though students had positive things to say about the college, it was apparent that the inconsistent support created opportunity gaps that placed additional responsibilities on students to figure out how to navigate the college system on their own. Aspirational capital led students to enroll at the community college as they had hopes and dreams for a better future, and this helped them keep going despite the challenges they encountered. From the moment they decided to attend ACC, and throughout their entire student journey, low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students relied on familial, social, and navigational capital to complete their educational goals at the community college. Once students connected to support, their experiences at the college significantly improved.

**Student Recommendations: Proactive Efforts to Connect and Support**

When first asked, low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American ACC completers emphasized their positive experiences attending the community college as they considered graduating from ACC an important milestone in their educational journeys. However, when asked about the challenges faced, they noted difficulties with college processes, such as accessing counselors and financial aid and having inconsistent information provided to them. The findings demonstrated systemic challenges resulting from the lack of an integrated, student-centered design. Those who completed the short survey and the 15 interview participants had many recommendations for improving ACC's support for students with similar backgrounds to them. Overall, students recommended proactive efforts to increase awareness about college processes and resources that make them feel connected and supported. The most frequently offered recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs, and financial aid. Other recommendations that came up were career development, flexible courses, childcare, and mental health. Of the survey participants, 83 provided responses to an open-ended question asking for recommendations. Table 4.15 provides a summary list of recommendations survey respondents made.

The next sections cover the most frequently offered recommendations for improving support for students with similar backgrounds as those who participated in this study.

**Table 4.15**

*Recommendations for Improving the College's "Support for Students With Similar Backgrounds to You"*

| Recommendation | *n* | % | Sample responses |
|---|---|---|---|
| Accessible & Knowledgeable Counselors | 35 | 42% | "Have counselors be more accessible to students. I always had a hard time booking an appointment to see a counselor." <br><br> "I also feel like the counselors at [ACC] should be on the same page with the requirements for the majors. One semester a student could be told to take specific classes to meet their academic goal and be on track, and then the next semester they get told that they didn't even need that class." |
| Support Programs | 15 | 18% | "I believe having more educational programs like EOPS and FYE would help. Those two programs helped me greatly." <br><br> "My experience was great because I joined the Puente program which helped me be prioritized and informed." |
| Intentional Messaging | 15 | 18% | "Make information that could be the most impactful for Latin and Black students easily available and displayed across campus." <br><br> "Based on my student experiences, I think that [ACC] should advertise their programs more for students." <br><br> "Maybe a text message sent automatically that has a list of common questions for financial aid, transfer, etc." |
| Financial Aid Guidance | 12 | 14% | "I'm a DACA student, so I felt that financial aid was difficult to navigate." <br><br> "I have no relationship with my father, and my mother passed away. I think that there should be better availability of knowledge and information that students without parental/guardian support are still able to receive aid." <br><br> "More guidance on how to get the financial help." |
| Career Development | 3 | 4% | "Partner with adult education providers to create and foster an apprenticeship program to get people working in their chosen field." <br><br> "I also believe providing more work-study/work opportunities was beneficial as it helped me connect more on campus to other students." |
| Flexible Courses | 2 | 2% | "ECC needs to provide more online courses for students who are nontypical of the general population. Not everyone can take a required course . . . at 9:30 a.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays." |
| Mental Health | 1 | 1% | "Provide more accessible mental health services." |

*Note. n* = 83.

**Counseling Support**

Challenges accessing counselors, especially for students not in support programs, came up during the interviews. In addition, increasing access to knowledgeable and caring counselors was the top recommendation made by survey respondents for improving the college's support for students. For example, a student recommended "having more access to counselors. It was very difficult to gain access and make appointments to see one." Another student suggested having "reliable counseling from people who care and don't just want to get you in and out of the office." These statements speak to the experience with scheduling appointments and the limited capacity students felt existed for academic counseling. Furthermore, students recommended training to ensure counselors were knowledgeable, as they expressed receiving inconsistent information. One student shared:

> I think counselors should reach out to students individually once or twice a semester to check in to see their progress and how they're following along with their academic goals. Even though I reached out to counselors from time to time . . . I took five years to complete my educational goals because I was not made aware of what classes I needed to complete my transfer degree until my last two years.

Students identified knowledgeable and caring institutional agents as one of the most significant supports in helping them achieve their educational goals at ACC. Therefore, an important recommendation was to build the capacity to offer academic counseling proactively to all students by trained and knowledgeable counselors.

**Intentional Messaging**

Intentional messaging and communication to increase awareness of resources was an overarching theme across all recommendations made by survey respondents and completers

interviewed. For example, during his interview, Alex recommended "reaching out to those low-income students and say, hey, look, this is just a personal message to you. It's tailored to you. These are the programs that we have available for this and that." Jacky felt students are not aware of the resources available at the community college, she stated:

I don't know if there's enough people realizing that there's so much help out there to go back to school, to have childcare. To me, that was eye opening. The fact that I don't have to pay a single dollar to be able to get an education, I try to tell everyone, even girls like, go back to school. It's free . . . for me, for instance, that I am a single mother, especially for mothers, single mothers, low-income students, I think that the help is there, and I think that not enough people are taking advantage of that in our communities.

Students recommended intentional and proactive messaging to promote the resources already available to students. They proposed the college take responsibility for developing auto-generated appointments and messages about valuable information for key milestones in a student's journey. For example, a survey respondent recommended "an auto-generated appointment at the beginning of the semester . . . auto-generated because it is cumbersome to get an appointment with the correct counselor." First-generation students shared navigating everything independently was especially challenging. A survey respondent shared:

I believe that there are many students who are misinformed about all the possible help and information that is out there, and I think being able to record informational videos, and sending them to students via email will help. There are other ways to get students with similar backgrounds and experiences the help and support they need. I went through so many obstacles while trying to get my two years at [ACC].

Furthermore, students who completed the survey and the interviews expressed difficulty finding information about their programs of study, financial aid, and how to schedule counseling appointments. Another survey respondent shared:

> I did most of my research on my degree program to find out what courses I needed. As well as the research on financial aid. I mainly did so because it was always so hard to get an appointment when needed. To even find the portal to schedule an appointment is not visible right away on the student portal. More visible or accessible links in the portal or a newsletter sent in the student email would be more helpful.

Besides email messaging, informational videos, and newsletters, students also recommended text messaging and creating a list of frequently asked questions on important topics such as financial aid, transfer, and career.

**Support Programs**

Interviewees and survey respondents highlighted the important role comprehensive support programs played in their educational journey at ACC. About 50% of all low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers from ACC in 2022 and 2023 participated in a support program with a counseling or advising component. In addition, 11 of the 15 completers, or 73%, who were interviewed participated in a support program. Many of the programs provide comprehensive support to meet students' academic and personal needs, such as counseling, educational planning, financial aid information, career transfer, personal development, tutoring, peer mentors, success coaches, and community building, just to name some of the services. The challenge identified by students was that they were not connected early on in their educational journey or connected at all. For example, a survey respondent shared, "I had no idea about EOPS/CARE until my friend took me to the office. I had no idea, and they were so beneficial to

my success." Students felt they had more access to counselors and information that kept them connected and on track to meet their educational goals when they were part of a support program. A student shared, "I found that meeting with a counselor twice a semester really kept me in check with my grades." Study participants recommended students "apply to all the programs to receive all the support they need to navigate college." Students who face tremendous socioeconomic challenges need to leverage augmented and integrated support from various programs to achieve their educational goals at the community college.

**Financial Aid**

Knowledge about financial aid resources and guidance on accessing those resources was critical for the success of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers at ACC. Jacky recommended students get "help to apply for financial aid and not get into academic probation," as she had experienced losing financial resources, which created challenges for her. Survey respondents reiterated providing "better help with the FAFSA process." This sentiment was echoed during the interviews. For example, Eddie shared some of the challenges he experienced when trying to get help: "I did have financial aid questions, I just remember . . . it would take them a while to return my emails or even calling, it was a long wait to talk to them."

Completers recommended mandatory orientations and workshops as part of the student onboarding. For example, a survey respondent shared, "I would recommend mandatory classroom workshops for all incoming students from high school and new students; this would include all of the available resources to students, including financial aid." Arthur shared that he submitted a FAFSA application, but "the process of financial aid it's either a hit or miss." He continued, "Some years, it went by smoothly and didn't require any documents, but other years, I'm like, I don't even know what they're asking . . . I feel like it was especially hard being a first-

95

gen and especially getting my parents' financial information." Furthermore, undocumented students and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients did not feel they had the information they needed to make informed decisions about their education. They often did not access the financial resources they were eligible for. For example, a survey respondent shared, "I'm a DACA student, so I felt that financial aid was difficult to navigate." Most low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who participated in the study accessed financial aid to pay for their college education. Completers who had trouble accessing financial aid and had to work to pay for their education often took longer to complete.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers from ACC. The findings were derived from an analysis of institutional data, a short survey, and 15 semistructured interviews. Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers found value in attending ACC. Positive experiences with knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents and peer networks helped students overcome the academic and personal challenges they faced. Table 4.16 provides a summary of the principal findings in relation to each research question.

**Table 4.16**

*Summary of Principal Findings*

| Research Questions | Principal Findings |
|---|---|
| 1. What challenges do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers report facing as they navigated the community college environment? | The college system lacks an integrated, student-centered design, resulting in inconsistent support for students. Therefore, the burden of responsibility fell on the student to figure out how to braid resources and support to create a roadmap to completion. |
| 2. What supports do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers identify as having been most helpful to achieving their educational goals at the community college? | The most helpful supports identified were knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents and peer networks that made students feel welcomed and connected to resources. |
| 3. What recommendations do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers provide for better supporting the success of students from similar backgrounds? | Students recommended proactive efforts to increase awareness about college processes and resources that make them feel supported. The most frequently offered recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs, and financial aid. |

The study findings provide insight to help colleges design a student-centered system that integrates necessary support at key points during a student's journey. Understanding the characteristics and experiences of the students served is the first step in designing a college experience that is welcoming, culturally engaging, and embraces the strengths that diverse students bring to the community college environment. Colleges can use a systems thinking framework with a community cultural wealth approach to identify and leverage the assets of low-income Latina/o/x and Black African American students to design more equitable and supportive systems and processes. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings and implications for practice.

# CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Community colleges are access points to higher education for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students. Nevertheless, most students who begin at a community college never complete their educational goals (Bailey et al., 2015). This study centers on the voices and experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers to inform transformative and systemic change grounded in a deep understanding of the marginalized community college student experience. The goal is to design a college system that systematically meets students' needs on their college journey, not by happenstance but by intentional design. Being low-income and a student of color should not result in disparate educational outcomes, but too often, it does. Deficit discourse repeatedly blames individual students for their lack of academic achievement while the systems of historical oppression within our educational institutions remain intact. Students are expected to be college-ready as opposed to colleges being student-ready.

Through this study, I engaged in a paradigm shift by reframing how we think about student outcomes to identify the opportunity gaps within our community college systems by first understanding the perspective and experiences of those students who completed an associate degree, certificate, and/or transferred from a community college. The study uncovered a college system that lacked integrated and coordinated student support. The research study was guided by a conceptual framework grounded in systems thinking (Senge, 2006) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). A systems thinking approach provided a framework to critically analyze the student journey within the existing college structure. This provided insight into the institutional barriers students face in their everyday interactions with policies, procedures, institutional agents, and services. Furthermore, adding a community cultural wealth perspective

allowed me to center the student experience through a strengths-based lens that highlights and honors the cultural assets and skills students from marginalized backgrounds bring to the college environment. These students managed to succeed despite the institutional barriers they faced. This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What challenges do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers report facing as they navigated the community college environment?

2. What supports do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers identify as having been most helpful to achieving their educational goals at the community college?

3. What recommendations do low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers provide for better supporting the success of students from similar backgrounds?

In this chapter, I discuss the study's findings, make connections to prior research, review the study's limitations, and provide recommendations for practice and future research. I end the chapter with a personal reflection and conclusion.

## Summary of Findings

The study findings suggest low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers faced multiple challenges navigating the community college environment due to the college's structures and processes. Opportunity gaps were identified due to the lack of integration of support for students within key milestones in the college journey. When asked how the college could improve support for students with similar backgrounds, students recommended proactive efforts to increase awareness about college processes and resources to make them feel

connected and supported. The most frequently offered recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs, and financial aid.

**Research Question 1: Challenges Faced**

The study examined the challenges low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers faced as they navigated the community college environment. A focus was placed on understanding the student experience around critical touchpoints in the student journey: onboarding, financial aid, educational planning, inside-classroom and outside-of-classroom experiences, and completion. The data collected and analyzed in this study revealed that the college system lacked an integrated, student-centered design, resulting in inconsistent student support. The burden of responsibility fell on the student to figure out how to braid resources to create a roadmap to completion.

Existing research has focused on the academic and personal challenges low-income students of color face in higher education, often placing responsibility on individual students for their lack of success (Strayhorn, 2022). Furthermore, the literature has indicated community college students are more likely to be low-income, racialized/ethnic minorities, first-generation, part-time, nontraditional, have dependents, and be academically underprepared (Deil-Amen, 2015; Kimbark et al., 2017; Strumbos et al., 2015; Weiss et al., 2019). To be college ready, the dominant narrative has expected low-income students of color to break ties with their communities and assimilate to the expectations of what a traditional college student should be to succeed. Unfortunately, the traditional college student is an elusive idea that does not align with the reality of diversity in experience, socioeconomic backgrounds, age, competing

responsibilities, intersecting identities, and reasons for attending community college of those who attend these institutions.

The most frequently noted challenges students reported were related to complicated college processes and procedures, such as scheduling appointments with counselors, completing financial aid applications, and receiving conflicting information from institutional agents. Existing literature has identified barriers to academic success for low-income students as a lack of academic preparation for college-level courses, underutilization of student support services, financial concerns, and competing demands between work, family, and school (Weiss et al., 2019). Davidson (2015) also noted community college students are less likely to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For those who apply for financial aid, the loss of financial aid due to academic probation policies has been identified as a challenge (Huerta & Martinez, 2022). Students who lose financial aid are less likely to complete a college degree. Previous literature tends to focus on what the student lacks, what they do not do, or the personal challenges they face. There is a focus on the information, skills, and resources students are missing without critically analyzing the structural barriers they face and the cultural assets they draw upon to succeed despite the challenges. The first step to designing a student-centered college experience is to understand the student journey and the key milestones a student must meet to achieve their educational goals at the community college.

Therefore, the study provides an alternative lens by offering a more nuanced understanding of the systemic challenges students face, thereby placing responsibility on the college to design a system that provides students with the necessary support to complete their educational goals. Eighty percent of interview participants expressed having faced a challenge

with a college process, and 73% mentioned having to navigate the community college on their own because information about resources was not easily accessible.

This study adds to the existing literature by using a community cultural wealth strengths-based approach to counteract the deficit discourse that exists about the low completion rates of low-income students of color at community colleges. It acknowledges the strengths low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers bring to community colleges as they pursue and achieve their educational goals in the face of systemic barriers. Students braided resources and relied on their aspirational, familial, navigational, social, and resistant capital to create a roadmap to completion. Knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents and peer networks played a vital role in helping students connect to resources during critical touchpoints on their journey.

## Research Question 2: Most Helpful Supports

The study findings uncovered that the most helpful supports identified by low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students were knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents and peer networks that made students feel welcomed and connected to resources. These culturally engaging and caring connections helped enhance the social and navigational capital students drew upon to overcome challenges as they navigated the community college environment and made progress toward meeting their educational goals.

### *Institutional Agents*

Ninety-three percent of all interview participants expressed having at least one meaningful connection with a knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agent. Most survey respondents shared that they found out about financial aid to help pay for college from counselors/advisors and teachers/professors, followed by family or friends. This same

response trend was evident when asked about who provided them with the most information about what it took to be a successful community college student. In their research on faculty institutional agents in community colleges, Carrasco-Nungaray and Peña (2012) highlighted the important role that faculty play in helping Chicana/o students transfer, which included connecting students to resources, developing strong relationships with students, and taking responsibility for student success. All interview participants identified at least one institutional agent, faculty, or staff who made them feel welcome and connected to resources such as academic support, employment opportunities, information on how to access counselors, financial aid, and mentorship. When students' backgrounds, experiences, and cultures were acknowledged in the interaction, this increased the student's sense of belonging and connection.

Furthermore, the study findings align with the Research and Planning (RP) group for California Community College's study of community college students (Booth et al., 2013), where students from 13 California Community Colleges were asked what they thought were the crucial factors to their success. The RP group identified six success factors that led to increased completion:

> (1) *directed* – students understand what it takes to achieve their goals, (2) *focused* – students stay on track, (3) *nurtured* – students feel somebody cares about their success, (4) *engaged* – students actively participate in class and are involved in extracurricular activities, (5) *connected* – students feel that they are part of the college community, and (6) *valued* – students feel like their experiences are validated. (Booth et al., 2013, p. 3)

All six success factors relate to the environment institutional agents create for students. A structured experience with knowledgeable and caring institutional agents who took responsibility for student success was a theme in all interviews. These institutional agents often adopted

culturally engaging practices that made students feel validated and welcomed into the college environment. Practices included allowing students to incorporate their lived experiences in school assignments, seeking to connect students to resources based on their backgrounds and needs, and humanizing the student experience by understanding that being a student was only one of the multiple roles students had. The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (2014) published a resource for educational practitioners on 10 ways everyone can help support student success. The resource shows how community college practitioners view the college system compared to how students experience it in their everyday interactions with institutional agents and peers. Students focus on their interactions with caring individuals as they engage in the classroom and connect with offices, departments, and services across campus to support their educational and personal goals.

In this study, low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers felt the college offered a wealth of resources to low-income students; however, information about how to access these resources was not easily accessible. Knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents helped fill the gaps by serving as bridges to information, connecting students to the resources they needed when they needed them to make progress toward completion while affirming them as students in the college setting (Bensimon et al., 2019; Xiong et al., 2016). It was evident that institutional agents must know the available resources to disseminate them in their everyday interactions with students. Classroom faculty play a critical role in connecting students with resources inside and outside the classroom due to the frequency of interaction with students.

In addition to institutional agents in the classroom, 11 of 15 interview participants shared that counselors and staff in support programs played a vital role in their success by providing

wraparound and comprehensive services to meet their academic and personal needs. The structured support created by programs increased the frequency of student interactions, thereby establishing opportunities for students to build stronger relationships with institutional agents and peers. This study demonstrated students learn about resources and support from knowledgeable and caring institutional agents. Currently, the college system is not designed to connect students proactively and systematically based on their background, characteristics, and needs. Students find knowledgeable, caring, and culturally engaging institutional agents by happenstance but not by design.

*Peer Networks*

The study revealed peer networks were essential for the success of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers. Peer networks helped transmit critical information on course requirements, financial aid, academic support, and overall navigational capital. Completers articulated a commitment to collectively uplifting their communities by sharing information and resources with peers. They helped create an informal community of care bound by shared experiences and identities. Students participating in support programs passed down knowledge by discussing information with friends and peers. There was a shared awareness among completers that not every student was connected to the available resources to help them achieve their educational goals. Therefore, they wished the college was proactive in supporting students with their unique needs.

**Research Question 3: Student Recommendations**

Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers who participated in the study shared recommendations on how the college could improve support for students with similar backgrounds. The overarching theme was that completers recommended proactive efforts

to increase awareness about college processes and resources that make them feel connected and supported. The most frequently offered recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs, and financial aid. In their research on student engagement and structured Student Success Courses, Duggan and Williams (2011) suggested the diverse student populations that attend community colleges require specialized orientation courses that customize information based on participants' student characteristics and needs. Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American completers emphasized the importance of proactively contacting students to schedule counseling appointments, providing information on financial aid and support programs, and reminding students of important deadlines. The literature showed structured Student Success Courses help connect new students to various campus services and resources, provide students with the tools to navigate the college setting successfully, and assist students in making connections by integrating support services within the classroom (Kimbark et al., 2017). However, students not in the structured courses or support programs did not have the same level of connection to resources to support them in making progress toward their educational goals.

### *Accessible and Knowledgeable Counselors*

Community college completers expressed challenges accessing counselors, especially when not involved in a support program. They found the scheduling information was not easily accessible, and the process was confusing. Multiple completers noted they had taken the incorrect classes due to not having access to a counselor or meeting with a counselor who was not knowledgeable. The literature shows community college counselors have large caseloads. Educational planning is a critical component of the student journey, which provides students with a roadmap of what classes to take for their major of study and career interests. Not having

access to counselors increases the time to completion and the number of units students earn without achieving a certificate, degree, and/or transfer. Professional development is critical to ensure counselors are knowledgeable about academic, transfer, financial aid, and career opportunities. In addition to educational planning, counselors play a critical role in creating a welcoming environment, validating the student's experience, and connecting students to various resources that meet their individual needs.

### *Intentional Messaging*

Community college completers emphasized the importance of targeted and customized messaging to students. They recommended frequently asked questions be developed so students could learn about the most critical aspects of the student journey and what they should expect. Information about financial aid, transfer, career, educational planning, and academic support were noted as essential to share with students. Students recommended various modalities to deliver information, such as newsletters, emails, and text messages. They acknowledged there is diversity in student backgrounds and experiences; therefore, they recommended the college constantly adapt strategies to meet the diverse needs of students. Completers felt there was a wealth of resources available for students. However, this information was not something they were introduced to at the onset of their college experience.

### *Connections to Support Programs*

Specialized programs and services have been developed to address the needs of disproportionately impacted student populations in California Community Colleges; such programs include Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education, Puente, Umoja, CalWORKs, Veterans, Disabled Student Programs & Services, Dream Resource Centers, and Basic Needs Centers, to name a few. Interestingly, many

study participants shared they were connected to a support program by peers. Study participants found value in connections with support programs as they provided comprehensive services that met their academic and personal needs. Students recommended more programs and wraparound services, such as counseling, academic support, reminders about important deadlines, connections to financial aid, transfer, career resources, and mental health. They also felt the programs increased their sense of belonging and helped build community. Students in support programs felt they were prioritized and connected compared to their peers who were not part of these programs.

### *Financial Aid*

Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers relied on financial aid to pay for their college education. Therefore, they recommended students receive information and guidance on completing the financial aid application to access resources. Many study participants identified as first-generation students and shared that the terminology used for financial aid and the processes to access resources were often confusing. They were not always aware of all the financial resources they could access. Furthermore, special populations such as undocumented students expressed fears and challenges navigating the process, given their undocumented status. For example, a study participant shared she was not aware of the state aid available to undocumented students who had graduated from a California high school. In addition, study participants discussed challenges with satisfactory academic progress standards and the appeal process to regain financial aid once they had lost it. Messaging and support for financial aid were essential recommendations made by completers who felt the college could improve in this area.

**Implications of the Study Findings**

Developing a college system grounded in a student-centered design can positively impact the student journey and improve educational outcomes at community colleges, especially for disproportionately impacted students who tend to be low-income students of color. Race and income are strongly correlated predictors of educational outcomes. This study focused on a single institution. However, the process followed to understand the student experience of those who achieve their educational goals can be used as a guide for others to engage in equitable practices that focus on continuous improvement through ongoing learning, appreciative inquiry, disaggregation of data based on race and income, and analysis that informs a student-centered design. Results of this study are relevant to various statewide efforts at the California Community Colleges System, including Guided Pathways, Vision for Success and Vision 2030, Student Equity and Achievement, Student Centered Funding Formula (SCFF), equitable placement, credit-for-prior learning, to name a few. In Vision 2030, the California Community Colleges reasserted their commitment to engage in transformational work that addresses systemic barriers. For example, the CCCCO (2023) shared:

> Vision 2030 continues California Community Colleges' commitment to set bold goals for the system to pursue transformational change to ensure institutions truly work for all students across race, ethnicity, religion, class, and gender with a focus on students who are harmed by persistent systemic barriers linked to their racial and ethnic identities (p. 6).

This study sought to engage in transformative work by elevating the voices and experiences of marginalized students to gain a deeper understanding of the student journey and their interactions with the college system. The goal was to understand the student experience to

help inform systemwide policy reform implementation that advances equitable practices for the success of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students.

## Recommendations

Community colleges must understand the backgrounds and experiences of the students they serve by engaging in equitable efforts that are data informed, culturally engaging, and target support where it is needed most to help students meet critical milestones as they progress in their educational journey. Current California Community College initiatives and policy efforts seek to meet students' academic and personal needs by understanding the student journey and developing structured pathways.

In the following section, I provide recommendations for community college practitioners and policymakers, informed by a thorough review and analysis of institutional data on low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers at one community college site, survey responses, and 15 semistructured interviews.

### Recommendation 1: Academic Affairs and Student Services Map the Student Journey

The first step in understanding the student experience is mapping the student journey. It is recommended that college leaders convene a cross-functional team across student services and academic affairs that includes faculty, staff, administrators, and students to identify the critical touchpoints in the student journey and the key milestones that must be achieved for students to complete their educational goals. Engaging students who face inequities in educational outcomes in this process is critical. This study offers a starting point by looking at the student experience related to onboarding, financial aid, educational planning, classroom and out-of-classroom experiences, and completion. The CCCCO has called for systemic change that transforms the student experience. Therefore, colleges must engage in equitable practices incorporating data-

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informed decision making, appreciative inquiry, and disaggregation of student data by income and race/ethnicity. Mapping out the student journey by understanding key touchpoints and milestones is crucial in developing a student-centered design. Colleges must become student ready to address inequities in educational outcomes instead of expecting students to be college-ready. Engaging in a student-centered design can transform the student experience by proactively introducing information and resources to students throughout their college journey instead of waiting for students to seek those resources. Intentional design introduces targeted information based on a student's background, characteristics, and educational goals at critical touchpoints, helping students make connections when they matter most. This also helps build culturally engaging services and spaces to increase a sense of belonging and connection with students.

**Recommendation 2: Institutional Agents Take Responsibility for Student Success**

It is imperative to build capacity for transformational change where all members of the college campus take personal and institutional responsibility for student success in their respective roles. It takes individual and collective commitments to establish a culture of care and connection for students. Practitioners must reimagine the college structure to ensure students have integrated and coordinated support at different touchpoints in their journey. This type of support requires institutional agents to have foundational knowledge about academic and support services, such as how students access counselors, educational planning, financial aid, tutoring, career resources, mental health resources, programs for special student populations, and critical college dates and deadlines. Ongoing professional development is necessary for this type of campus-wide institutional change.

To build capacity, colleges cannot work in silos. Community college practitioners must engage in strategic planning where information on critical student support is shared across areas

and divisions. For example, the financial aid office can provide language for faculty to include in their syllabi or to post in their Canvas shells as part of regular updates to students. In addition, this information can be shared with classified professionals and other stakeholders who interact with students. All study participants discussed at least one positive experience with a classroom faculty. Classroom faculty interact with students the most, making them pivotal agents for making meaningful connections with students and disseminating critical information.

Updates from academic counseling can also be disseminated across academic affairs and student services by using quick resource guides to maintain consistency and accuracy in the information shared with students across campus. Study participants recommended proactive efforts to increase awareness about college processes and resources to feel supported. Their recommendations included having accessible and knowledgeable counselors, intentional messaging, connections to support programs, and financial aid. Awareness and connections to accurate information and resources that students need can be accomplished by building a knowledge base of critical resources that various stakeholders can use. These resources can be updated annually and shared systematically, with each department taking responsibility for their area of assignment. Critical areas can include financial aid, counseling, admissions and records, career, transfer, student health, mental health services, specialized support for student populations (e.g., low-income, first-generation, parenting students, veterans, students with disabilities), academic programs and support, tutoring, basic needs, and culturally engaging practices.

**Recommendation 3: Institutional Agents Engage in Continuous Improvement**

California community college practitioners (faculty, classified professionals, and administrators) should commit to continuous improvement. Transformative change requires

innovation, appreciative inquiry, and data-informed decision making, with a focus on addressing problems of practice, such as inequities in completion rates for low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college students. The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle can be used as a framework for practitioners to engage in continuous improvement. Rohanna (2022) shared:

> One of the key components of improvement science is the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle of inquiry. The PDSA cycle is a fundamental process by which new knowledge is generated to improve problems. These evaluative cycles of inquiry provide a format for rapidly experimenting with new practices, known as "change ideas." During each cycle, the individual or team plans a change that they believe will lead to improvement (Plan), implements the idea and gathers data (Do), analyzes and reflects upon the results and determines next steps (Study), and moves forward with that action (Act). The initial cycles should occur on a small scale within a short time frame to test changes quickly. (pp. 48–49)

To engage in innovative work, we must continuously assess our institutional efforts and practices and their impact on student success through an equity lens that centers on the student experience.

## Recommendation 4: College Leaders Invest in Scaling Up Proven Equity Efforts

*Vision 2030* calls for California community colleges to lead with equity, and it outlines three major goals: (a) Equity in Success, (b) Equity in Access, and (c) Equity in Support (CCCCO, 2023). Outcomes outlined in the Vision 2030 report that are relevant to this study include completion, student participation with an emphasis on underserved Californians, maximizing financial aid, and reducing units to completion. College practitioners and

policymakers should invest in identifying proven strategies that improve completion. Students in support programs achieve greater success and have improved completion rates. Therefore, we can learn from well-established programs that have developed targeted support for historically underserved and marginalized student populations, such as EOPS, Puente, Umoja, and MESA. Where appropriate, these efforts should be scaled up.

## Study Limitations

The qualitative study was conducted in a single-college district. Low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers who earned a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred in 2022 and 2023 were invited to participate in the study. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning at the school site identified 3,562 completers who met the criteria. A challenge that emerged was connecting with students who had already left the college as their college email was deactivated. Personal emails the college had on record were used to invite community college completers who met the research criteria; however, hundreds of emails bounced back. There was a 5.5% survey completion rate. Despite this original setback, 197 individuals accessed the survey, and 136 completed the entire survey. One hundred twenty survey participants expressed an interest in being interviewed, and a purposely sample of 15 completers was invited to the interview. The scope of the research and time limitations did not make it possible for more completers to be interviewed.

Generalizability was not the study's intent, given the scope and purpose of understanding the student experience. Nonetheless, this study provides strategies for other community colleges to engage in an appreciative inquiry cycle that incorporates student voices and perspectives to inform practice. The study was primarily qualitative in nature; however, descriptive statistics

were used to analyze quantitative institutional data. A more thorough statistical analysis could be the focus of future research.

## Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should analyze how California Community Colleges incorporate the student experience in implementing statewide initiatives to improve completion rates for students facing inequities. A comparative study across multiple colleges could help identify best practices. Future research should also explore how colleges integrate the implementation of various initiatives focused on improving educational outcomes to engage in transformational change. During the interviews, I asked participants how they felt their socioeconomic and racial/ethnic background impacted their experience at ACC, and it was striking that many students shared that the college was diverse, so they did not feel their background impacted their experience. Therefore, researching how students make sense of their racialized identities and socioeconomic backgrounds in majority–minority institutions can also be a topic for future research. During the interviews, culturally engaging experiences facilitated by institutional agents and peers emerged as some of the most memorable experiences for students because they felt welcomed, validated, and connected to the college.

## Reflection

I have dedicated my professional career to advancing college access, retention, and success for low-income and historically underserved communities. Having worked at all public higher education systems in California, I see the critical role California Community Colleges play in creating opportunities for marginalized communities. Nevertheless, access is only the first step. We are responsible for ensuring all students can achieve their full potential by being student centered in our design. Transformational change requires a cultural shift that challenges

the status quo. I am committed to taking personal and institutional responsibility for student success. One of my priorities has been to bring the voices and lived experiences of the students we serve to spaces where policy is developed, implemented, and evaluated. In the last eight years, I have been honored to oversee programs supporting low-income, first-generation, parenting, foster youth, English language learners, and undocumented students with intersecting identities. The cultural capital these students bring to our college spaces and their resilience inspire me to continue this work. I know the vital role our investment in one student has in their family unit, the community they are part of, and their careers. Therefore, we must reframe how we think about our college to support student success.

My life was transformed through education. As a first-generation low-income college student, I relied on programs and caring professors who connected me to the support that helped me reach my potential. I am now paying it forward with my work as the next generation of students deserves the opportunity and investment to reach their full potential. I believe in the transformative power of education to create life-changing opportunities for historically marginalized communities if we are intentional with our work. As educational leaders, we are constantly reviewing and analyzing data, and we must remember that each data element is a human experience we need to understand and honor. We must develop a genuine understanding of the communities we serve while nurturing relationships with students and colleagues grounded in a human-centered approach that promotes a culture of care, understanding, and connection as a foundation for systemic change.

## Conclusion

This study elevated the voices and experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American community college completers by using a systems thinking (Senge,

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2006) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) approach to understand the challenges students experienced as they navigated the community college, identify the supports students found to be most beneficial in helping them achieve their educational goals, and gather recommendations from completers for improving support for students with similar backgrounds. Looking at the college system through the student experience allowed me to identify opportunity gaps, which created systemic barriers to student success. Developing a student-centered design grounded in understanding the student experience helps practitioners advance equitable practices that intentionally direct resources to the areas with the greatest need. The goal is to use the findings of this study to identify, develop, and institutionalize equitable practices that increase low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American student retention and completion. California community colleges are currently at a crossroads as they are undergoing massive systemwide policy reform with the goal of transformational change that advances equity and student success. The time is now to act; this is our opportunity to design equitable practices that are responsive to the needs of students, especially those marginalized or underserved in our existing community college systems.

## APPENDIX A: INTEREST SURVEY

This questionnaire should take approximately 5–10 minutes to complete. I am conducting a research study to learn about the experiences of low-income Latina/o/x and Black/African American students who completed a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from [Adelante Community College] within the last 2 years (2022 or 2023).

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Participation is completely voluntary, and there are no consequences for declining to participate. There are no right or wrong answers in this questionnaire. Please take your time reading each section and respond carefully and honestly based on your own experience.

You will be contacted regarding your selection to participate in the study. Please note that completing the questionnaire does not guarantee selection. If selected, you will be invited to participate in a one-hour interview scheduled via Zoom at a time that is convenient for you. After the conclusion of the interview, participants will receive a $20 Amazon e-card.

For information about the questionnaire and this research study, please contact the primary investigator, Edith Gutierrez, via email (xxxxx@g.ucla.edu) or phone (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

Should you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, concerns, or suggestions and would like to speak with someone other than the primary investigator, then please contact:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRRP)
Box 951406
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406
Telephone: 310-206-2040
Email: participants@research.ucla.edu

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!

Q1 Did you complete a certificate, associate degree, and/or transferred from a California Community College in the year 2022 or 2023?
- o   Yes (1)
- o   No (2)

Q2 What was your major or area of study?
_____

Q3 What educational goal did you achieve? (Select all that apply)
- ☐ Certificate (1)
- ☐ Associate Degree (2)
- ☐ Associate Degree for Transfer (3)
- ☐ Transfer (4)

Q4 What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
- o African-American/Black (1)
- o American Indian/Alaskan Native (2)
- o Asian (3)
- o Hispanic/Latinx (4)
- o Pacific Islander (5)
- o White (6)
- o Other (7) _____

Q5 What is your gender identification?
- o Male (1)
- o Female (2)
- o Non-binary (3)
- o Prefer not to say (4)

Q6 Please select your age group from the options below;
- o 18-24 (1)
- o 25-29 (2)
- o 30-39 (3)
- o 40-49 (4)
- o 50-64 (5)
- o 65 and higher (6)

Q7 How many units did you take each semester while in community college?
- o 12 units of more (full-time) (1)
- o Less than 12 units (part-time) (2)
- o Units varied by semester (3)

Q8 How frequently did you meet with an academic counselor while attending community college?
- o Very Often (1)
- o Often (2)
- o Sometimes (3)
- o Rarely (4)
- o Never (5)

Q9 How would you describe your experience when trying to access counseling appointments?
- o Very positive (1)
- o Positive (2)
- o Neutral (3)
- o Negative (4)
- o Very Negative (5)
- o I did not try to access counseling appointments (6)

Q10 Did you have an educational plan or roadmap for your academic journey while attending college?
- o Yes, I had an educational plan (1)
- o No, I did not have an educational plan (2)

Q11 Were you able to enroll in classes when you needed them?
- o Always (1)
- o Most of the time (2)
- o Sometimes (3)
- o Rarely (4)
- o Never (5)

Q12 How did you pay for your community college education? (Select all that apply)
- ☐ Scholarships and Grants (1)
- ☐ Work-Study/Employment (2)
- ☐ Student Loans (3)
- ☐ Personal/Family Contributions (4)
- ☐ Other: (5) _____

Q13 Did you apply for financial aid?
- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Q14 How did you find out about financial aid to help pay for college?
- ☐ Counselor/Advisor (1)
- ☐ Teacher/Professor (2)
- ☐ Family or Friends (3)
- ☐ Financial Aid Workshop (4)
- ☐ College Website (5)
- ☐ Direct mail/email from the college (6)
- ☐ Other: (7) _____

Q15 How would you rate your experience with the process of applying for financial aid?
- o Very easy (1)
- o Somewhat easy (2)
- o Neutral (Neither easy nor Difficult) (3)
- o Somewhat difficult (4)
- o Very difficult (5)

Q16 How long did it take you to achieve your educational goal at the community college?
- o   Less than 1 year (1)
- o   1 year (2)
- o   2 years (3)
- o   3 years (4)
- o   4 years (5)
- o   5 years (6)
- o   6 years (7)
- o   More than 6 years (8)

Q17 Who provided you with the most information about what it took to be a successful community college student? (Select all that apply)
- ☐   Counselor/Advisor (1)
- ☐   Teacher/Professor (2)
- ☐   Family or Friends (3)
- ☐   Other (4) _____

Q18 Based on your student experiences, what recommendations do you have for improving [Adelante Community College]'s support for students with similar backgrounds to you? (Optional Response)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Q19 Are you willing to be contacted by the researcher for a potential interview? (Those selected for an interview will receive a $20 Amazon e-card)
- o   Yes (1)
- o   No (2)

Q20 Last Name, First Name (logic question, only appeared if selected yes in previous question)

_____

Q21 Select your preferred method of communication (select all that apply)
- ☐   Email (1)
- ☐   Text (2)
- ☐   Phone Call (3)

Q22 Email Address: _____

Q23 Phone Number (Format: XXX-XXX-XXXX): _____

Q24 Best time to contact (please list days of week and times): _____

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date:
Time:

**Introduction:**
Thank you for participating in this interview. My name is Edith Gutierrez, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at the School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA. I am also an administrator at [Adelante Community College]. I am conducting approximately 12 interviews with former community college students like you who completed an associate degree, certificate, and/or transferred in the last 2 years (Class of 2022 and Class of 2023). The purpose of the study is to gain insights into your experiences navigating the community college and the supports that you found to be the most helpful to the achievement of your educational goals at [Adelante Community College]. I also want to learn about any challenges that you may have experienced. The findings can help inform the college of ways to improve services and support for students with similar backgrounds to yours. I have a script to ensure my interviews with all participating students will be conducted in the most similar manner possible. I also want to mention that there are no right answers to the interview questions.

**<u>Informed Consent</u>**
I would like to remind you that any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. All data will be reported without reference to any individual(s). No data collected during this study will be shared for future research. We have scheduled one hour for the interview. At any point during the interview, you may ask that I skip a particular question. To accurately capture our conversation, I plan to record this meeting. I will keep your responses confidential, using a pseudonym for you and anyone else you name. Do I have your permission to record? Before we start, do you have any questions or need any clarification?

Preferred Pseudonym:

| Background & Rapport Building Questions | 1. Tell me a little about yourself and the reasons why you enrolled at [Adelante Community College]? <br> 2. What was your original goal when you enrolled? Did that goal change throughout your journey at the college? <br>     a. *Probe: In what ways? What were some of the reasons why your goal changed?* |
|---|---|
| Research Question 1: <br><br> Potential Challenges Navigating the Community College System | Tell me more about your experiences navigating the community college… <br> 3. Tell me about your experience applying to and getting into [ACC]? <br> 4. How did you pay for college? <br> 5. How did you know what classes to take? <br>     a. *What was it like choosing and enrolling in your classes?* <br> 6. Describe your student experience taking classes. *(Probe— relationships with instructors, interest in and connection with the class content, assignment completion, understanding the content, getting help)* |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 7. What messages did you receive about what it took to be a successful college student? |
| | 8. Who were the key people at the college who made an impact on you in a positive or negative way? |
| | 9. How do you feel that your socioeconomic and your racial/ethnic background impact your experience as a student at [Adelante Community College]? |
| |     a. *Feel free to discuss any specific instances that stand out to you.* |
| | 10. What challenges or obstacles, if any, did you face while attending community college? |
| |     a) *How did you overcome those challenges?* |
| | *What could the college have done to better support you?* |
| Research Question 2<br><br>Support | Think of a specific time when you felt the most supported at the community college. Tell me about this time.<br>11. Which services and support did you find to be the most helpful as a student?<br>    a) *In what ways were these services and support helpful to you?*<br>    b) *How and when did you get information about these services and support?*<br>    c) *Who provided the services? What were their roles?*<br>    d) *Describe an example of your best day at [ACC].*<br>12. Were there people outside of the college that supported you? |
| Research Question 3<br><br>Recommendations<br>Conclusion | 13. As you reflect on your entire journey at [ACC], how would you describe your student experience overall?<br>14. What do you think [ACC] could do to better support students with similar backgrounds to you?<br>15. Is there anything else you can tell me about your experience as a student at [ACC] that you haven't had a chance to share? |
| *Additional Probing Questions* | *Could you please tell me a little more about that?*<br>*I want to make sure I understood correctly, could you please tell me what you meant by…*<br>*Can you give me an example?*<br>*You mentioned … Tell me more about that?* |

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