



Exploring Student Attitudes, Aspirations & Barriers to Success

Six focus groups among higher-risk first- and second-year community college and technical college students, and four-year university students

For the American Federation of Teachers: Higher Education

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Preface

The *American Academic* series, published by the American Federation of Teachers, examines key issues affecting the workforce of our colleges and universities. The series has focused on the working conditions of full-time and contingent faculty, professional staff and graduate employees and on how those conditions affect the ability of higher education workers to meet the needs of students, conduct research, and fulfill the many diverse and important missions of our higher education system.

Volume One of the series examined the state of the academic workforce over the 10-year period from 1997 to 2007 and documented the continuing reliance on underpaid and undersupported contingent faculty and graduate employees, as well as the growth of professional staff. Volume Two presented the results of a national survey of part-time/adjunct faculty exploring the demographics of the contingent instructional force as well as their working conditions and their views and attitudes toward their work. In this report, the third in the series, we shift our focus from the educators themselves to those they educate: the students.

Much of the attention in policy discussions about higher education today is focused on how to help more students gain access to higher education and then succeed by attaining a degree or certificate. Over the years, most of the work focused on the access side of the equation, particularly on ensuring an adequate level of federal student aid as well as state institutional support. Today, the policy debate has increasingly shifted to what happens to students *after* they enter college—issues such as retention and evidence of learning outcomes. The emphasis has generally been centered on holding institutions accountable for achieving measurable outputs—such as graduation rates and standardized tests—and on the development of curricular frameworks of various sorts.

One problem with these discussions is that they have rarely included the views and experience of frontline faculty. Another problem is that the discussions often have not drawn enough on the views and experiences of students themselves. The research presented in this report is a set of direct questions about what students say they want and need to complete their studies effectively. To obtain this information, the AFT asked Lake Research Partners to conduct a series of focus groups with students, particularly first- and second-year students who met certain demographic criteria that might make them less likely to persist than the “traditional” student. What we heard was important—not because it is so surprising, but because it provides more evidence that our policy discussions must be centered on supporting students both financially and educationally.

As you will read, even though students have varying experiences, they face two overarching challenges in trying to succeed at a college or university. First, they report that paying for college is a continual—sometimes overwhelming—concern, especially for those who have numerous other financial obligations. This is interconnected with the issue of time; many students are working significant hours and may not have the time they know is necessary to fully benefit from their classes. Third, students routinely identified a need for more academic counseling and advice to help them identify a clear and sensible path through their higher education. This desire for more personal attention from advisors and faculty alike undoubtedly has been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn in which student enrollment has increased;

meanwhile, the colleges and universities have fewer resources to staff advising and counseling offices and the number of faculty working full time at a single college continues to decline.

The focus groups described in this report tell us that if we are serious about improving higher education and increasing student success, then we will necessarily have to make sure that students have the financial support they need, and access to and time with the frontline educators—both staff and faculty—who are most responsible for their success. There seems to be no magic bullet that would diminish the need for a greater investment in college affordability and professional support.

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Summary

The American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) commissioned Lake Research Partners (LRP) to conduct focus group research among at-risk community college, technical college, and four-year college students to learn more about their higher education experiences and to inform the AFT's work to support success among this student population. As policymakers and elites across the country debate how to boost community, technical and four-year college success and completion, this focus group research had the objective of gathering information directly from students, to give voice to their experiences and needs in this area.

The first- and second-year college students in our focus group discussions are those that are higher-risk than other students for not finishing their studies or earning a degree. These students generally report their higher education experiences to be positive, challenging, and at many times difficult. They look to their respective colleges to help them succeed, and they view faculty and staff at their schools as integral to this process.

For the most part, these at-risk students feel their schools can help them succeed, but that often the school's systems, offices, and protocols can be difficult to navigate and self-reliance and self-efficacy are often critical in getting what they need. Many say help is available from their schools for any range of student-related problems, but often only when they ask for it more than once or go out of their way to seek it.

For the faculty's part, most students say their professors or instructors are a positive force on their behalf, helping them toward success. Students say most of their faculty members are engaged in their students' learning and care about helping their students succeed—but that they do so with varying levels of enthusiasm and engagement. Students say getting what they truly need and want from a course and a professor can often mean they have to go the extra mile to seek out help.

Defining success: These students describe two primary goals for attending college that play strong roles in how they define what success as a student will look like.

- **Getting a good job:** Their first goal is to be able to get a job that pays reasonably well and will be something that they find satisfying. Whether they had always planned on going to college, or have a current low-paying job, or children they want to better provide for, most in our discussions say they came to college because they feel they have to in order to have the kind of career, and security, they aspire to. They feel they have little choice otherwise.
- **Self-improvement:** The second primary goal students describe for being in school is to better themselves by becoming more academically well-rounded and to have opportunities for self-exploration and growth. This is more holistic and self-improvement-oriented than the goal of a good career. For the four-year university students in our discussions, many of whom are younger than the community or technical college students, this is a more pronounced and academically-oriented goal that also includes the desire to mature and “have fun.” For the technical college and community college students, however, self-improvement is also a very strong goal.

Students see merit in both of these goals. They say both goals are important to them personally, and should be for their colleges, because too much focus on preparation for a specific career can limit one's intellectual development and ability to switch career paths. In the reverse, focusing only on academic development without the goal of career preparation can leave one with limited options after graduation as well. Even in the current economy, students place high importance on the self-improvement aspects of college.

Obstacles to success: Students report the biggest things they struggle with, and that can be sizeable stumbling blocks on their paths toward success, include:

- **Having enough money and financial aid to attend school**, which proves to be a more immediate concern for the community college and technical college students in our discussions than the four-year university students;
- **Lacking adequate academic guidance and advising**, which students say they need to help them understand the academic requirements, develop their goals, and plan and execute their coursework to meet those goals and requirements;
- **Lacking highly-developed “soft-skills,”** including strong study skills and time management skills, which play a large role in helping them maintain their self-discipline and motivation to study; and
- **The challenge of finding time and “balance,”** which can be multi-faceted for many students. Time comes through as one of the most valuable and scarcest resources in our exploration of student success. Because students’ time is finite, and being a student is one among many of their roles and responsibilities—these students report that not having enough time constantly works against them. The time they have to spend being a student is time they are not spending at work and earning money, or tending to their familial or other personal responsibilities. Across the groups, students say they struggle constantly with how to balance their responsibilities and “get it all done.”

The length of time that it takes to complete college can also be a barrier for the students in our discussions. The longer it takes to graduate, many say, the more chances there are for requirements for graduation to change, and for other things in life to come up and prevent one from finishing. The length of time it may take to finish, with potential pay-offs so far in the future, can also dampen one’s motivation. This appears more common among the community college students than the four-year university students in our discussions.

Other obstacles discussed by students, but to a somewhat lesser extent, include:

- **General education requirements**, some of which can dampen many students’ overall motivation and excitement about college because they often seem irrelevant to their major or area of interest. At the same time, students also acknowledge that having some general education requirements can help them become well-rounded and help them better pick a major.
- **Large class sizes, over-enrollment:** Some students, especially those enrolled in four-year universities in our discussions, list large class sizes as problematic. Some students also complain about over-enrollment at their schools, which, they say, can lead to larger classes, less financial aid to go around, and more strain on their support structures, including advisors and tutors.
- **Limited course offerings**, which prevent some students from taking the courses they need (or want), when they need to take them, can set students behind in their course of study, and some say limits their ability to take courses that could be truly beneficial. They also complain that this can lead to being in school for longer periods and accruing even more debt. Lack of guidance in how to navigate limited course offerings, some students say, worsens this problem.
- **The need for more tutoring that** is less crowded or with a tutor that is well-versed in what they need help with.
- **The need for more face-time with professors:** Some students cite as an obstacle their not being able to access their professors adequately or their professors being too stretched for time.

- **Fast-pace:** Some technical college students say that the fast pace of the teaching and large amount of material they have to cover in every class can be a barrier. This is reported particularly by those studying information technology or computer-related fields.

These students also say time plays a large role in the availability of part-time/adjunct faculty at their schools. From a student perspective, we do not see a strong awareness of whether their professors are employed on a part-time or adjunct basis and most students perceive little difference in the quality of the professor's teaching based on whether they are employed full-time or part-time by the school. Yet, students in our discussions do tend to feel that many part-time/adjunct faculty are less available for students because they are not on campus all the time or have other jobs that make them less available for office hours.

Online courses: Many of the students in our discussions say that they prefer courses taught largely in-person, although many have had positive experiences with "hybrid" courses which include online components. In contrast, many students see courses that are conducted solely or almost entirely online as more of a negative because they feel more "self-taught" and many find it difficult to get their questions answered. Feeling like they have to teach themselves the material is especially frustrating, they say, for a course they pay to take. There is also the sense that they would not want to take core courses, such as math, strictly online because of the lack of assistance and faculty availability.

Some students describe successful experiences with online coursework, especially for courses that were not a part of their major or that seemed less personally important. Many students also say online coursework offers them flexibility and convenience, which allow them to take courses that otherwise would not fit into their work, family, and school schedules. Yet, even many of the students who acknowledge these positives say they would often rather take in-person classes if given the choice.

Remedies: This focus group research reveals many potential opportunities for schools and policymakers to better help students who are at-risk of dropping out to succeed and finish their schooling. Two of the strongest opportunities, as conveyed by the students in our discussions, are:

- **Getting more help to pay for their education**—either through grants or scholarships, or other forms of aid. Students also say they could greatly benefit from more accessible and user-friendly financial aid offices and resources.
- **More informative and accessible guidance and advising** is called for by all types of students, including four-year university, community college, and technical college students. These students strongly support this help coming in the form of more full-time academic advisors, and they are also open to getting this from their professors and instructors. Students also see room for this in the form of career counseling and career development offices that are more integrated into their academic advising and major program of study.

On a second tier are remedies that many students across the groups say would be helpful, including:

- **Refining general education requirements** to give students more flexibility and options in choosing general education requirement courses that are applicable to their major fields of study and in-line with their interests. Students also desire more guidance in finding and registering for courses that fit these criteria.
- **Having more course offerings** to help students finish in the appropriate number of years for the degree, and to help them fit the classes they need into their tight schedules, which usually involves juggling work and family commitments.
- **Having faculty more accessible** for student questions and assistance. There is some recognition that employing more full-time faculty and lowering class sizes could improve accessibility.

- **Normalizing and encouraging students to seek help**, including going to tutoring, attending professor office hours, and asking for more in-depth feedback from professors. The students in our discussions know this is available and, in fact, were sometimes critical of themselves for not being more proactive. At the same time, they say it would be helpful for the college culture to promote more professor-student interactions, assistance, and feedback as the norm, rather than something students only do when they need extra help.
- **Offering pre-orientation programs to more students, or strengthening orientation programs:** Students who attended a summer pre-orientation program report that these were especially helpful in teaching them study skills and time management skills, setting their expectations for coursework, developing supportive peer and mentor relationships, and getting acquainted with the college campus and workings.
- **Providing more and improved career-specific equipment or opportunities:** Four-year university students in specific trade-oriented majors—like computer science or sports therapy—as well as technical college students, say they would benefit from having more trade-specific equipment and career experiences available.

Methodology | Objectives

In 2010, the American Federation of Teachers asked LRP to conduct focus group research among at-risk community college, technical college, and four-year college students to learn about their higher education experiences, how they view student success and aspects that make succeeding difficult, as well as easier. In the focus groups we explored factors that can help or hinder student success, either from the school or from other outside sources, and we also explored possible solutions to help ease students' path to success.

LRP conducted six focus groups in November and December 2010 in three locations—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Seattle, Washington, and Millersville, Pennsylvania. The groups were conducted among a segment of students whose demographic, family, and socio-economic backgrounds make them more at-risk for not finishing their schooling. In all groups except for the working, independent students group, all participants met two of the three following criteria, placing them at higher risk for not finishing school: 1) were working at a non-academically-related job for 20 hours a week or more; 2) reported that neither of their parents attended college; or 3) were receiving need-based financial grants to help pay for their schooling (such as Pell grants).

All participants were first- and second-year students at public community colleges, technical colleges, and four-year universities. Students were between the ages of 18 and 40, from a mix of academic backgrounds and major areas of study, and were a mix of genders, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and parents and non-parents. (See Focus Group Composition in Table 1; Table 2 at the end of this report outlines further characteristics of focus group participants).

Statement of Limitations

In opinion research the focus group seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

Focus groups cannot be considered reliable or valid in the statistical sense. This type of research is intended to provide knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and opinions about issues and concerns.

You may find that some of the information seems inconsistent in character on your first reading of this report. These inconsistencies should be considered as valid data from the participant's point of view. That is, the participant may be misinformed or simply wrong in their knowledge or judgment and we should interpret this as useful information about their level of understanding.

The following biases are inherent in focus group research and are stated here to remind each reader that the data from focus groups cannot be projected to any universe of individuals.

- Bias 1. Participants who respond to the invitation of a stranger to participate in this research show themselves to be risk takers and may be somewhat more assertive than non-participants.
- Bias 2. Participants who speak most often and forcefully in focus group sessions may be more articulate and willing to express opinions in a group than non-participants or quieter group members.
- Bias 3. Participants "self-select" themselves, i.e., they are those people who are available on the day a particular group was scheduled.

Bias 4. Participants were not selected randomly so that each person in the pool of possible participants did not have an equal chance to be selected.

Bias 5. People in groups may respond differently to a question than if asked that same question individually. They may follow the lead of a strong speaker or someone they perceive as “expert.”

Table 1: Focus Group Composition		
Philadelphia	Group 1: Latino & African-American students at an urban Philadelphia community college	Group 2: Students at a four-year urban university, mix of races
Seattle	Group 3: Students attending an urban Seattle community college, and who are currently enrolled or in past year enrolled in a developmental education course, mix of races Group 5: Working students who are not claimed as dependents on parents’ taxes (thus, “independent”) and who attend community college in urban and outer-urban Seattle, mix of races	Group 4: Students attending a technical college in suburban Seattle, mix of races
Millersville, PA	Group 6: Students at a four-year regional university, mix of races	

Context

The college students in our discussions generally seem content about being enrolled in college and the direction of their studies, but they also report some negative emotions regarding their college careers, ranging from boredom, to anxiety, frustration, to feeling overwhelmed. While some feel directionless or frustrated with the time, costs, and effort required, many are also motivated and feel their investment will be worth it.

“I think definitely just knowing that when I am at work and I am hating it, I am like, ‘okay, I am not going to be doing this for the rest of my life.’ I am working on my education so that I can have something that I want.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“You know you are educating yourself. You know you are preparing yourself for the world out there. And [gaining] security.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Just the idea that you are going toward something, that you are on your way to pursue your goals.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“It was hard. I just really did it because I just felt, ‘Well, I have to do it now because [otherwise] I will never do it.’” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

There is a muted optimism across the students in our discussions that they can and will finish the degree they are working toward, or for some community college students transfer to a four-year university. Many in our discussions feel strapped for time, money, and sleep, and face other challenges that serve to dampen their mood and energy, but do not completely darken their outlooks. Their largest concerns are a mixture of things directly and indirectly related to their learning and academics. The top concerns students report across the groups are having enough money to pay for school (and everything else), doing well in their courses—which means passing for some and excelling for others, getting what they need out of college to get the job and career they want, and trying to “get it all done,” including balancing their school work and their responsibilities, often including work and family.

“I have so much work that I can’t go out. It’s like I am not living the college experience because I can’t go out because I have to do work or else I fall behind.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“It’s a lot to deal with. Like making sure you work and have a job and do well in your classes.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“It’s really hard to balance work and school.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Knowing that it is an open door, but to get to that open door, it’s just like you are running track. You get a half a mile and then just knowing in the future it will haunt you [if you give up].” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

The students express a mixture of perspectives on whether they were sufficiently prepared for college when they arrived. Some students say they felt reasonably well-prepared for the experience either by their high schools or through their work experiences before college, while others complain that their high school education did a poor job of preparing them. Regardless, all of the students say adjustments were necessary when

they entered college. Many mention that encountering their first research paper and figuring out how to tackle the large amount of reading or other assignments were new challenges for them, but they felt much more capable after getting through the first round of these tasks.

“When I first started, it was just a real adjustment because I had been out of school for ten years. Like I couldn’t handle it, but now I am adjusting and you know now I know what I have to do and what is expected of me and so I can juggle things better. Because I know at first it was just like a real adjustment because it was like a shock for my system.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I went to a pretty good high school... they focused on getting you into college, but I still could not write a college-level essay. And no one told me. I was still getting A’s [in high school], but once I got a professor who didn’t...she grabbed one of my papers and said that’s not right. That forced me to go back and learn to teach myself.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I think academically I was prepared; I think that the freshman year of college is really just a logical progression from senior year of high school, but kind of mentally, I don’t think I was prepared. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do with my life.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

Student Goals

The two primary reasons the students in our discussions say they are in college are: one, to be able to get a good career, and two, for self-growth and improvement.

- **Career:** Across the groups students say one of their main goals for going to school and graduating is to be able to get a job that pays reasonably well, and in a line of work that they can enjoy doing. These students say they are going to school because they believe they have to go to college to get the good job, regardless of the type of school or academic program in which they are enrolled – and they feel they have little choice otherwise. For some students this is just part of the course they had always imagined for their lives or that their parents’ had planned for them. Others, especially the community college students, report a specific catalyst for enrolling, including being unemployed, wanting to get their education completed before having children, or wanting to better support and improve the lives of the children they already have. Many of these students say they want their college education to help them get a job so they can have more financial security for themselves and their families, and have a better lifestyle overall.

“Nowadays, you can’t do anything without...without going to school. Not even with your high school diploma you can’t get a good job.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“Security in the job, security in money, and security in benefits that comes from the job.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“It seems like a lot of jobs require a college degree, so that’s part of the reason I went to college.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“To be able to make enough money to live the way you want to and love the job that you do.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“I don’t think I could have gotten anywhere with just my high school education.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“It was like a given to me, it wasn’t anything to think about. It was just something that was supposed to happen. It wasn’t like, ‘Should I go to college or shouldn’t I?’ It was, ‘You are going to college.’”

– *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I just feel you have to go to college if you want a high-paying job or you want to succeed... college is getting into another stage of your life that you need to be successful.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I thought to myself that I will do it now so that my children will always want to do it and for debt and things like that. Maybe I can help them go through it so they won’t be in as much debt as I was or am in now.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“I wanted to be better than my dad... You don’t want to come home every day and be tired. Use your mind, go to school.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“A good job. Because there is a job that you do just to pay the bills and there is the other job that you just do out of happiness and I guess just getting a good job that you like to do, whatever you like to do.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

- **Self-improvement and growth:** The second primary goal students report is to become more well-rounded by the learning and growing experiences that college offers. Many say they are going to college to better themselves in a more holistic way that goes beyond the type of job for which they will be qualified. For many, this encompasses an academic growth that includes knowing more about the world and society. For some, this also includes social experiences and interactions that help them grow and mature. This is an especially strong goal for the four-year university students in our discussions, who say they want their college experience to provide them with opportunities for self-exploration, fun, and to learn more about the world, and to be agents of good and change in society.

“I think just going to school kind of brings a different perspective in what is possible and how much your life can change if you continue to study and get a Master’s Degree and get a Ph.D. or get a whatever.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I want to get knowledge. I want a career, but I want to know about things...so when my kids ask me about stuff, I know and I can help them and just know about all the things that the society has to offer and the world has to offer.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I think that it should prepare people to be human beings.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“Learn something that you will enjoy for the rest of your life to move forward later...” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“A better understanding of what I want to do with my life. I kind of hope that I will get a better idea as college goes and hopefully before it ends.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“To apply yourself to achieve the highest level of understanding of your subject matter so you can go out and better yourself.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Being open to new experiences. Always being a scholar and also always teaching yourself.”
– *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“Just to better yourself and master it...” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“And I think college changes people, too. It makes you find what you want to do. It makes you explore.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“Taking time to mature.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“Meeting different types of people, learning more than one thing.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

When students shift their perspective from the personal to a broader discussion of what the overall goals of higher education in general should be, they independently list goals similar to their own personal reasons for attending college—to give students the knowledge and tools they need to be prepared for a line of work that they can find satisfying and to help students learn about the world more broadly and expand their horizons. When they consider which of these two goals should be more important for higher education, the students see merit in both because, they say, too much focus on preparation for a specific career can limit one’s intellectual development and ability to switch career paths, but focusing only on academic development without the goal of career preparation can leave one with limited options after graduation as well. Cost also plays into goals of higher education, as some note that a goal should be to keep the cost low and affordable so that students do not come out with high debt. Others feel a goal should be to make sure students graduate in the stated time-frame of two to four years.

“It’s like you should learn a little bit about something else because the whole world doesn’t revolve around just the career that you want to do.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“You never know what life is going to hand you. You never know, you might have to change. I didn’t think I would have this much trouble, but I think you should have the skills to say, ‘Oh this isn’t working and so I am going to do something else. I think you should be a more rounded person.’”
– *Technical college student, Seattle*

“A college or educational institution should have a goal to challenge the mind to think, to make people think in a broader way...At least if I finish, I will know that I have the tools to think more and so I can apply what I am learning to any field that I go into. I think that should be a goal.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I think the broader base would be better because then you would have more options as a person.”
– *Community college student, Seattle*

The students in the Seattle groups also agree, when prompted, that the broader goal of higher education in helping to “level the playing field” in society is a generally good goal, but this is not a goal that all of the students strongly espouse. They say the opportunity to attend college should be open to all, but some push back and say handing out a free opportunity to attend college seems unfair and there is a likelihood many would waste this opportunity. Going to college, they say, is a mixture of being provided opportunities, but also taking responsibility, ownership, and putting in some of one’s own resources and hard work.

“My personal opinion is that everyone should have an opportunity at higher education and that it should be used to create independent thinking and just helping society in general.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Yeah, I think it should level the playing field for everyone, not just for the wealthy percentile that gets to go to college.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“If you just mean handing it to people, no, I don’t think that should happen at all because I had to work really hard. I am 30 you know. I haven’t been in school since I graduated high school and I made it so that I could go. I didn’t just sit back and have somebody hand it to me and I worked hard. Why should you just have it handed to you though so you can throw it away?” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

When these students consider whether creating an educated citizenry should be a goal for higher education, the students agree that our country needs an educated citizenry, but most believe this is more the role of K-12 schools, than for colleges or universities. As one four-year student in Philadelphia stated, “I think maybe through high school you had History and English and I think you already have a decent educational base and I think college should be more of a specialized path of what you want to do with your life.”

Helping Students Meet Their Goals

These students are somewhat mixed on whether their respective colleges are giving them what they want and need to help them achieve success, but students’ overall assessments are more positive than negative. They generally feel that their schools offer them what they need, however, there is also strong acknowledgement that getting help from their school is not always provided up-front and it is often something they have to ask for or make a specific effort to obtain.

“I believe it does. Ultimately, they are giving you the tools and you have to do something with it.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I guess I get the help I need. And if I don’t, then I have to go get it.” — *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“There is plenty of assistance and stuff; you just have to go look for it.” — *Independent adult, community college, Seattle*

“You just have to motivate yourself.. You don’t really rely on anyone else to like help you unless you like try to seek out that help then it is there, but you just have to be motivated yourself.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“Everything is here; you just have to apply yourself.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Some students report feeling mild uncertainty about whether they are getting what they need—including the education they need — from their college to reach their goals, as this is something they feel they will have a better sense of once they graduate, try to get a job, and start working. This feeling is especially strong among the four-year university students in our Philadelphia and Millersville discussions.

“Well, I won’t really know until the end. My reward is getting a good job and accepted into the next program that I want to get to. So that’s the only way I will know I am getting a good education as far as being able to apply it.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I don’t think you will be able to tell until you are actually doing the job you are preparing for. I mean I understand you have debits and credits and whatnot, but I have never applied anything in an accounting job. I don’t know what is important and used every day, and what is theory.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“By the end of your college experience, if you have learned and you have grown and you feel like you are prepared to go into whatever field it is you want to do.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

The technical college students in our Seattle discussion stand apart from the other students on this topic. Many feel fairly confident that their school is providing them the education they need to achieve success as a student and in their chosen career field.

“I went to a different [community] college before. I feel like this is more hands-on, it’s face to face, and it’s in your face. It’s fast paced and they are just training you for the real world.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“I am kind of in my ideal college experience. Everything goes back to my instructors and how willing they are to put forth a lending hand. You know they have a lot of experience; they want you to succeed; they push you to succeed.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

Obstacles to Student Success

Top obstacles

The top obstacles to success cited by students include tangible barriers of inadequate advising and guidance from the college and insufficient funding, as well as obstacles that are more intangible, including lack of time, balancing school, work, and family responsibilities, and lacking time management skills, study skills, and general self-discipline and motivation.

Advising and Guidance: Across the groups, students voice a strong desire for more well-informed and accessible guidance and advising to help them with their course selection, understanding requirements for graduation, choosing a major, and planning out the best overall academic and professional course.

The students report a diverse range of experiences with the current advising infrastructures at their schools. Some say they have no assigned advisors and are left to figure things out using a student handbook and websites – which can be outdated. This, they say, can leave them with many questions and has led to them taking courses they did not need or for which they were unprepared. Other students describe a system where they are required to visit an advisor and obtain sign-off to register for their courses. For some students, this has worked well enough on the first try, but more say that their assigned advisors are often overwhelmed with students, inaccessible, not terribly helpful, or are wholly uninformed. Many say they have yet to find an advisor that works for them, while those who have found something that works say they had to go to several different people or offices before they got what they needed. Across the groups, students feel advising offices are not accessible enough and attribute this, in part, to the high numbers of students or low numbers of staff.

“When I was not sure which was going to be my major and I was trying to get some counselor to help me in health care and what were my choices so that I would be able to find a job or not -- it was almost impossible to get any feedback at all.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I would like more people to talk to if you have questions. Because I know getting in touch with my counselor is virtually impossible. So even if I wanted to change my major, it would be so hard because she is basically unreachable. And she is so busy all the time with everybody else and they need more people to help with how many students we have at the university. There are so many kids there. You can set up a ten-minute meeting or a 30-minute meeting. And then you are done... it doesn't matter if you have more to ask, you will have to come back another time.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“Those counselors don't do anything. You are taking classes that you don't even need to be taking. They definitely need better counselors.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I went last semester... to the counselor to do my classes and she said, ‘Oh, you have a certain amount of credits, you can go yourself online.’ But I am like, ‘Okay, but I come here so you can help me.’ ‘Oh, well here is the handbook; you can look up the classes you need. Look at your transcripts and see what you need.’ And I took a class that I didn't need just because it was on there.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“The advisors aren’t really available much. Their office hours are they are in there like two hours. I have been like chasing my advisor down for the past week because I am in class or I get to his office and he is not in his office yet and I have a class in 15 minutes and so I can’t wait. We need advisors who are going to be in their offices for a long period during the day instead of just two hours because it is hard to plan our schedules around their schedules when we need help.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I think that it would be really beneficial if there was a counselor... And then you could kind of tell me, ‘Well, I want this job or else you would say this is what I like doing.’ It could go either way. So you can tell them what you like doing and they can help you choose the job or else you can say, ‘I want this job, what should I take?’” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“When I was registered for the fall, I had a person and she was just like rushing with it and trying to just register me for whatever and she was doing what she thought was good and I am only taking 14 credits and then I went back to her again and she did the same thing and wouldn’t have enough credits to be considered a sophomore even though I would be a sophomore. And so then I went to like a different group of counselors and I have a really good counselor now and she helped me out a lot and I am happy I went to her.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

While students see much room for strengthening the guidance and advising at their schools, there is also a sentiment across the groups that one can get the guidance and advising help needed, but that this often requires one to put in the time and effort to get it. Many students say quality guidance and a rich advisor-advisee relationship will not fall into one’s lap. Instead, one may have to see several different people and try several approaches before they get the help they need and want.

“I think they are available; they are just limited. And you kind of have to know how to navigate in and around and through them.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“That’s the type of thing that you have to look for yourself. Like it doesn’t just pop out, you really have to ask for it.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I was able to do that at a four-year college that I went to, but if you don’t know the ins or outs or have somebody walking you through the community college or online college, it’s kind of like you are just a student and you just kind of have to fend for yourself.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Even though this attitude of expected self-reliance in the area of guidance may dampen students’ initial calls for improvement in this area, once students delve into what they need from their school, there is a strong belief that improvement in this area would be very helpful in improving student success – whether it is more full-time academic advisors or from their current professors and instructors. Specifically, students say they need and want more help to understand the academic requirements and expectations they face, and more help plotting and executing their plan to meet their goals—which generally includes either graduation or transfer to a four-year college.

“If he is taking accounting, he might find an accounting teacher that he will click with and becomes his mentor.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“You should have the counselors and advisors know what they are talking about. You should go to advisors that are in the same field that you want to go into so they can tell you, ‘Oh this is not important, but this is,’ and help you set goals.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“The advisors, in my perception, don’t necessarily know...like the registration questions and all the paperwork and stuff, I got that. It’s like the actual work in the classrooms...the advisors are not knowledgeable enough about that so I can say, ‘I have noticed in this class that I am really good at this and maybe I could do this.’ But my instructors on the other hand, they would point out something that I am good at and they are like, ‘Okay well you can actually utilize this in this career field when you have graduated.’” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Costs: Getting more monetary assistance to help cover the costs of going to school is another primary item students say they need to help them achieve success in college. Concerns about paying for tuition and covering other costs for attending school are especially strong and more immediate among the community and technical college students in Philadelphia and Seattle, and less of a concern among the four-year university students – although some mention concern around having to pay back loans once they graduate. Many of the community college and technical college students report facing semi-constant uncertainty over how they will put enough money together from one semester to the next and still have enough to personally make ends meet. They worry about whether they will get enough aid from the school or the government, and some full-time students worry if they will be able to borrow enough money for tuition and living expenses. Many report their personal finances are stressed to the max.

“I think the books are even getting more expensive. Every semester. And then when you go to get your money back for the books, they cost what \$5 or \$12.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“Just money, because you have to have the money coming in, but you also need time because you are spending money to learn. You have to worry about that.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“For me, it’s definitely financial. You know me and my fiancée are both in school and you know working and having kids, I just didn’t realize how hard it would be...I mean the school part is actually easier than I thought it would be, but the financial part is just...” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“What I don’t understand about this country is that they want us to be better citizens and do better, but how come the tuition is so expensive? And it gets more expensive every year.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

Many students—across types of schools—also feel that the financial aid departments at their schools need to be more accessible and helpful. Many students report having to leave numerous messages and making multiple visits to their financial aid office before they have the information or assistance they need.

“I feel like at [my college] that certain areas are easy to get assistance in, but other areas are not, like financial aid and enrollment...Like financial aid has phone numbers that I think is only on for like two hours a day, so if you work or have a life outside of school, you can’t go in or call them.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“I think you get the runaround from this place to that place and talk to this one and that one and that one. Try and call a financial aid officer; it’s terrible.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I would go and ask a question and felt like...they would look at me like I am supposed to know. They are like real choppy. I will call for a question and then they will be sarcastic, like I am supposed to know.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

When asked specifically about their current tuition levels, most students say their college costs seem to be increasing, as well as student fees and textbook prices. Most students say they would love to see tuition decrease, but that this seems unrealistic because they perceive that demand is high and enrollments at their schools are increasing. Some students also say that lowering costs would no doubt be balanced by cuts at the school that could lower the quality of their own education. They reason that in many ways you get what you pay for, and in a time of rising prices, lower tuition or fees could mean fewer computer labs or lower pay for professors – all of which could result in lower-quality opportunities for them as students.

“You get what you pay for sometimes.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“I don’t think it [tuition] could necessarily be lower, but just provide more assistance so that you can afford it whatever the cost is.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“You have to do more work, like look into scholarships because sometimes you can’t pay for your books because the fee went up and so you have to get extra work and going to the career center and find out what kind of scholarships are available for you and then you have to write more essays to get those scholarships.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

There is some diversity of opinion across the focus groups regarding student loans and debt. Some students, particularly four-year university students, say they have some low-level anxiety about the student loans they have taken out, but this is not top-of-mind for them because they do not currently have to make payments. They do acknowledge that when they have to start re-paying their loans further down the road, this will become a much larger concern.

“The balance of debt. It will kind of come to bite after college.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“When we are looking to pay it back. As of right now, you are applying for financial aid and everything is just being out there and paid for and it’s not like it is coming out of our pockets to apply something to education, but when it’s time to pay it back, then we are going to wish it wasn’t.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“Yes, it will help you during college, because you don’t have to work and stuff, but later on, it’s just going to bring you down more.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

At the same time, some of the community college students report feeling pressure from those around them to not go to school and take on debt, in large part because of the current economy and high unemployment rates. Many of these students reason, however, that going to school is their best path to achieve financial security and in the long-run is the right course of action.

“Now, most of the high school kids that I know, they just go from high school to get a new job. They see that as more secure. You know I could have money now; I don’t like getting into a bunch of debt.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“Is it really worth it? Going through all this school and everything you know? You get out of school... And then we are stuck with that debt already.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“Even my mom, she doesn’t encourage it. She feels like you work and you are more secure than if you go to college and then you don’t get a job and then you have just wasted all that time and all that money.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“When you get done with your program, are there going to be openings? Are you going to be able to utilize what you learned and not just have to pay back all these wonderful loans...?”
– *Community college student, Seattle*

Time and Balance: Time—another precious and finite resource for the students in our discussions—plays a key role in the success of most of the students and feeds into the funding obstacle as well. There is strong acknowledgment that being a student takes time, and many say it takes more time than they had originally imagined. Students explain that the time they have to spend in class and studying, as well as time dealing with the other logistics of going to school (financial aid, registration, etc.) is time they are not spending at work and earning money, or tending to their familial responsibilities, or dealing with any of their other responsibilities in life.

Across the groups, students say they constantly struggle with how to balance all of these responsibilities within an equation that restricts each day to only 24 hours. The load and types of responsibilities the students have to balance varies across the groups. For some of the four-year university students and those who are not parents, balance is more an issue of managing their social life, working, and being a student. For other students who are parents or also working full-time, balance includes juggling a 40-hour work week, tending to children, and trying to dedicate enough time to their school work to make the money they are spending on school worthwhile.

“Sometimes they mention a paper, a 20-page paper, when you work over 20 hours, time management is key and that causes stress and that causes overwhelming(ness).” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“There is a lot coming at you. And you have a lot of stuff going on at home and so it’s always trying to find balance.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Sometimes I feel I am not trying as hard as maybe I could be. Maybe if I had more time, maybe I could...I do well, but I could do a lot better. I could probably do really well. So that’s kind of just like annoying because I know like I could be doing so much better if I really had the time to sit and study and really try instead of just last minute and looking at stuff.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“Also being a parent. You feel like you are not doing...you should be making them to their best and not you to your best anymore. So that’s a struggle.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“It’s tough sometimes. It’s hard work. It’s a lot of work in a short amount of time. You have lots of deadlines to meet. On any given day, there are tests or a quiz or a new paper you have due and getting that all in on time is a lot.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I am balancing a baby and work and school. It wasn’t hard before I had the baby; but now I have the baby and so I have to do everything around him.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“The balance, balancing your classes and not being like a hermit and having a social life.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

The length of time that it takes to complete schooling can be a practical and psychological stumbling block for students. Some part-time students, and even full-time students, describe that key, required classes may only be offered once a year, and if they cannot take the course because of their part-time status or other conflicts, they may be stuck waiting another year to take the required course. They also say that the longer it takes to finish, the more chances there are for requirements for graduation to change, and for other things in life to come up and prevent them from finishing. The long road to finishing, with potential pay-offs far in the future, can also dampen one's motivation. This is much more common among the community college students than the four-year university students in our discussions.

Soft Skills: Across the groups, students say another large obstacle to success can be lacking a strong set of intangible skills, including time management, study skills, and general self-discipline. Maintaining one's study-discipline and motivation can be a constant challenge, students say, especially when facing other time-related barriers. Many say they had to learn how to manage their time and learn study habits upon starting their college coursework and most seem to have developed these skills on their own, through trial and error. A few say their College 101, orientation, or pre-orientation courses gave them useful tips for developing these skills, but this is not common among the students in our discussions.

"You've got to have that self-discipline because nobody is going to tell you, you have to do that on your own." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"That's what it takes to graduate: you need a good instructor to explain information, the material, and you need self-motivation to drive yourself when you don't want to do your work, or are you going to be lazy." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Good time management and study habits and being able to get outside help and have the motivation to focus." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"You have to be a little bit more self-sufficient... and have to be responsible for yourself. I mean nobody is looking at you if you don't do what you need to, it's on you; you are not going to pass the class." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I look at the syllabus, what is the textbook, what is the workload, what are the days, when is mid-terms and when is final, how can I cumulate this, how can I balance this out." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Making sure that you are following the syllabus and stuff on time, like as soon as you get it. Just being focused and being on top of or ahead of what you are expected to do." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"When the first semester started, I was thinking that I was going to fail everything. And so when I got into it, it really wasn't that hard. It gradually took you into the college stuff." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Other Obstacles

These students also discuss other stumbling blocks that are not as strong or as widespread as the top tier obstacles. These include overly stringent or complex general education requirements, large class sizes and over-enrollment, limited course offerings, the need for more high-quality and accessible tutoring, the need for more face-time with professors (which can also be tied to the top obstacle of poor guidance and advising), and the fast pace of teaching among technical college students.

General Education Requirements: For some students, especially four-year university students, the general education requirement courses they must fulfill can dampen their overall motivation and excitement, and can seem not worth their time or effort. Many students point to one or two courses they had to take to fulfill a general education requirement that were uninteresting, did not seem applicable to their major or area of interest, or were unnecessarily difficult. Some complain they have to spend a lot of time and energy on such courses, and many say they feel they have to get through too many of the general education courses before they can begin studying things they really want to study.

“I don’t think the electives are necessary. I would rather have all service classes, all the classes I need, and not waste my time with electives. Last semester I took Art and I failed it and that’s on my transcripts.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I was a nursing major and they made us take an economics class and I was like, ‘What does this have to do with nursing?’ I mean, now I understand the market much better, but I mean for my career path, I don’t really understand like why I needed to take that, but I have to.”
– *Community college student, Seattle*

“I feel like it takes a long time to get to the end. A lot of prerequisites, a lot of classes I don’t feel are necessary to what I want to go to school for. It’s just a lot of jumping through hoops to get there.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“I would probably just get rid of the electives [general education requirements] all together because I feel like I am there to learn what I want to be able to do and it’s not really giving me anything new.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“I only feel unsure about it sometimes because of some of my less liked and important classes, because what’s the purpose of having a class I am never going to apply my life to it?” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“None of them really appeal to me as much as...like I found one that kind of relates to my major and that would appeal to me more than just like taking some random class.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“I would cut out some of the Gen Eds because a lot of them are annoying, like music. I am a social work major and I really don’t think I need music because it’s kind of wasting my time when I can take something that is going to help me for what I need. Cut out some of the extra stuff that are not really important and have everything so we can get our classes when we need our classes.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

At the same time, however, some students acknowledge that having some general education requirements can help them become more well-rounded and that it is sometimes through these required courses that one can explore a whole new, exciting topic that they never would have studied, which can help them pick a major. Ultimately, these students call for having more latitude to select general education requirements that relate to their major or other areas of interest.

“Some of them are pointless, but I think they are a good idea because they help you expand on your knowledge and know what else is out there as a major because I think pretty much people change their majors because of the Gen Eds because they become interested in something else.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“Maybe you will find that you are actually interested in that.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I think we do need them all in some way because to some people each requirement can go hand-in-hand with their major. Like for the Atmosphere [course], like someone could go in like that field and they might actually enjoy that class.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Large Class Sizes: Some of the students, especially those enrolled in four-year universities, also list large class sizes as problematic. They say the large class sizes they face can make it harder to ask questions and generally mean they will have a less interactive professor and learning environment. This is less of a concern for the community college and technical college students in our discussions.

“Sometimes when you are in a big class, you feel kind of lost in a sea of faces, and if everybody else seems to be getting what’s going on and you are not, you are less likely to ask for that help because everybody else is getting it.” -- *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Basically you wouldn’t even need tutoring if you have the one-on-one interaction with the professor.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

In a related vein, some students also complain about over-enrollment at their schools. This was more common in our Millersville group and students in community colleges. Some of these students perceive that the number of students attending their school is increasing, and as this happens the current students get stuck with larger classes, less financial aid, and more strain on the support structures, including advisors, tutors, computer labs and other equipment.

“Then you have larger classes. And then you still have the same amount of instructors.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“They are trying to attract more people to the campus when I don’t think the campus can really take anymore people because it is already a problem getting housing on campus and the class sizes and everything. So I think attracting more people is really going to harm the learning. If they want to build things, they need to build more classrooms so we have more professors instead of building bigger student memorial centers and all that stuff.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Limited Course Offerings: Limited course offerings are another item that students raise as standing in their way and that they would like to see addressed. Many say not being able to enroll in the courses they need (or want) when they need to take them can set them behind in their course of study and limits their ability to take courses that could be truly beneficial. Some students who see increasing enrollments at their schools say they also recognize this means more limited course offerings, as course sizes are often capped. Additionally, lack of guidance in how to navigate course offerings, some say, can make this an even bigger obstacle.

More Face-Time with Professors: Some students cite not being able to access their professors adequately or their professors being too stretched for time as a barrier. Students attribute this to a combination of different things, including: professors having too much material to cover; professors not having enough control over the way their courses are structured, the syllabus, or the selection of the textbooks; and class sizes that are too large. We also hear a desire for teachers to employ different kinds of teaching techniques in the classroom, rather than sticking with just one way of teaching.

“Ideally, everyone would have their own personal professor.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“[I want] one-on-one academic help, and not necessarily in the classroom. I mean some teachers offer it, but then a lot of them will be like ‘go get a tutor’ when you don’t want to work with a tutor; you want to work with that teacher because what they are teaching is what is going to be on their test and the tutors can’t really accomplish that.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“[I need] teachers who are accessible, meaning like available when you need them and will actually respond to you.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I think if you go see them during office times, then they will help you more, but if you try to ask them in class, they are on a schedule and so they are just trying push through everything.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I feel also that there is a combination. When you are working full-time and you need to take extra time to go and talk with the teacher when his hours doesn’t match with your hours and then it’s like what do I do now. And when you try to speak in the break during the class, usually my experience is teachers are not that open.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“The way they teach you, just to teach it a certain way. I don’t know; I feel like sometimes teachers teach the way that they understand instead of how others understand it.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Tutoring: We also hear some students say that higher-quality and more accessible tutoring would be important in helping them achieve success. Many students say tutoring is available at their school, but that they find the tutoring sessions to be over-crowded or that the person is not well-versed in what they need help with. Providing more one-on-one tutoring and more times where tutoring would be available can be helpful for students.

“Everybody is trying to get tutoring and you have to find that one tutor that really works with you.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I would like a personal tutor for each person.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I had a problem with one of my teachers, and he was like, ‘Well you should have never took this class. You should be in a lower one.’ I am well like, ‘This is the one I need to be in.’ ‘Well I can’t help you; go to a tutor.’ And because I go to different campuses too, and in that campus, they don’t have that tutor. I have to travel to another campus to have a tutor. And I was trying to explain that and he didn’t understand. ‘Withdraw the class, get another class.’ ‘I can’t; it’s too late into the semester.’” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“Sometimes English is their second language [the tutors’] and you just trying to understand them. When you go to tutoring, you want to...You want to understand them. I mean you are already confused as it is.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Fast Pace: Some technical college students say that the fast pace of the teaching and large amount of material they have to cover in every class can be a barrier. This is reported particularly by those studying information technology or computer-related fields. These students say keeping up with the fast pace is a constant struggle

and they worry or have heard that if you fall behind in grasping the concepts or completing the assignments, you cannot easily catch-up. One student relayed, “In one quarter, we had to learn three different languages in a quarter and a lot of people couldn’t deal with that. And like this quarter we are doing C Sharp and SQL, so people are just...I don’t know. I think it intimidates them, especially females, and they just leave.”

Classroom Experiences

The Role of Faculty

Across the groups, students of all types recognize that their faculty—professors and instructors—are a central component of their learning and play an important role in their success in college.

Most students report positive interactions and relationships with their professors and instructors. They tend to say they are dedicated and well-qualified. Some community college students in our discussions even say their professors have said that they could teach at “higher-caliber” schools, but they chose their current school because they are dedicated to helping community college or technical college students.

“The teachers and just the way they interact with their students. They want you to learn. You know they want you to.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I am sure that this teacher has a degree where they could teach at any college they want to. But why are they here teaching us? And I always ask myself that. I have teachers that graduated from Columbia, from University of Pennsylvania. And I asked them why are you here at CCP and they say those kids have everything at those bigger colleges.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I had this one teacher that...went to school at like Harvard and she taught somewhere else and she said she hated it there and she wanted to be like in a community college. She was the smartest lady I have ever known.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Most of the students in our discussions feel their professors are a positive force, working on their behalf under the broadly shared goal of student success. It is a mixed bag, however, when it comes to how much different professors contribute to student success. The students say some professors and instructors go out of their way to make sure students are engaged and understand the material, while others say some professors do not go out of their way to help but can be helpful when asked. Few students report completely negative relationships with their professors or having professors who were barriers to their success.

“I am kind of in my ideal college experience. Like I said, everything goes back to my instructors and how willing they are to put forth a lending hand. You know they have a lot of experience; they want you to succeed; they push you to succeed.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“It’s a mix. Like some of my professors really help and they are really supportive and they are good at teaching what they are supposed to teach.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“You have to ask for help when you get help...I feel like it’s kind of like meeting them halfway. Personally, my professors they tell me that they are there and their office hours and if you need help, come get it. But eventually, you are the one who wants to go to them.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I think my professors are engaged in my learning.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“Sometimes it depends on the class size, but if there is a professor there that just runs through the material as fast as they can, then it just gets done and that’s it. [They say] ‘if you want help, come see me in my office.’ But then there are other professors that take the extra step and make sure every person understands it.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“There is one teacher that...really passionate and willing to help you and trying to make sure you understand individually, even going around the class and the personality and optimistic, and you have another teacher who is just like...he is not a happy type and he doesn’t try to sit down and make you understand even when you have a bad test. It just shows you that it is bad, but he doesn’t want to sit down and correct and help you or even just give you the paper to take with you and look at what you did wrong.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

When students consider what makes a “good” professor or instructor who contributes to their success as a student, they list a mixture of tangible and intangible characteristics, including:

- Exhibiting enthusiasm and passion in teaching and helping students,
- Practicing an interactive teaching style,
- Being schooled in pedagogy, as well as being an expert on the subject matter; this is seen as especially helpful because it can help professors modify their teaching for students with different learning styles,
- Including lectures, class discussions, and assignments that emphasize the relevance of the course material and coursework, including weaving in other related topics that bring the subject matter to life and make the material directly applicable to their course of study,
- Building in extra time in class periods to answer questions and not rushing through material,
- Being prepared for the day’s teaching and the course overall,
- Setting and communicating clear expectations to students from the beginning of the course, and
- Being accessible to students, including responding to phone calls and emails in a timely manner, and having sufficient office hours.

“They will encourage you to take part in the projects and stuff like that. This instructor that I have, he brings real world examples to teach the book and so that shows that he has personal interest in seeing us succeed.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“I like teachers that act like they are excited and they enjoy teaching.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“Just energetic and has everybody talking, and like I can’t wait to go to my classes; it’s just fun.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“I love thorough teachers; they explain everything and so I don’t have to ask many questions if I don’t need to because everything is in the syllabus. I like a teacher who is thorough and tells you exactly what they expect.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“When they are willing to actually go a distance to teach you and meet with you after class and sit there one-on-one and work it out with you.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“All of my professors, they try to reach out to you, especially my math teacher. She is always trying to get everybody extra help. She is always emailing everybody.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I would like to see more instructors with experience in the industry, you know firsthand knowledge, access to firsthand knowledge.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

In a related vein, when students consider what characteristics make a course particularly useful in contributing to their college success, they name a mixture of characteristics that are interwoven with the characteristics of a good professor. Students say a class is particularly useful when:

- The course material and assignments are applicable to their goals and interests,
- The course is rigorous and gives them a thorough understanding of the topic,
- The course teaches them needed skills and skills that will be used on a weekly basis,
- It easily relates to other classes or builds on what they have learned in earlier courses,
- It helps direct their interests, or takes them down an academic path they may not have gone down otherwise, and
- It is taught in an interactive style.

“I think the most useful course I took was the most useful because I was able to relate it to my other classes and use the skills I learned in that course for other classes and other aspects of my life.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“I took English 201 and I kind of feel like I skated, but I think for a lot of people in the classroom, it did a good job of addressing a lot of needs that people have for grammatical awareness and the ability to break down a certain text.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“The subjects that I am taking for what I am doing, meds is like a basic education. It’s the foundation.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“Just the hands-on. Instead of just sitting there reading the book and looking at it and off you go, we were interactive with the teacher.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

Part-Time/Adjunct Faculty

Very few students in our discussions independently bring up the issue of whether their faculty members are employed on a full-time or part-time/adjunct basis. Even when the issue is brought up for discussion in the focus groups, many students say they are unaware of the employment status of their professors. Those who think they know the status, say they are aware either because that professor explicitly told them, he or she teaches only evening classes, or because the professor is less accessible during traditional hours. There is little to no awareness that part-time/adjunct faculty members may make the rest of their living by also teaching part-time

at other institutions, which leads to the perception of “part-time” faculty members often as holding non-teaching jobs during the day-time.

Most students generally say they do not see much difference in the quality of the professor’s teaching based on whether they are employed full-time or part-time by the school, especially since they are unaware of which professors fall into which category.

“I know because I ask. I can’t tell; there was not a difference to me.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“They share at the beginning of class, or at the beginning of the quarter, that, ‘I am available these days and these times.’ Or they let you know that they have other commitments or other jobs.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Some students recognize and bring up that they enjoy some of their part-time/adjunct faculty members because of their ability to bring in a more work-oriented perspective to their studies. This is especially strong among technical college students, those studying specific fields such as information technology, business, health sciences, sports therapy, or art, because, students say, teachers who work in the field can help them learn the most-up-to date techniques and approaches.

“In that aspect it helps because in their jobs, they are learning new things every day and so it helps in the classroom.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“A lot of our teachers are either athletic trainers like at Temple or like other schools and so it’s like easier for us to like learn because they are already doing this and like they are in the field and they bring their experiences to us...” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“Let’s say that if you teach at night an accounting course and you are working in that field during the day, you can bring like that professional experience into the classroom.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

At the same time, the primary difference students perceive between full-time and part-time/adjunct faculty is in the part-time professor’s level of availability and accessibility. Many students tend to find some of their part-time/adjunct faculty to be less accessible mostly because they have another job, are not immediately reachable via phone call or e-mail, and are not on campus and holding office hours as much as other faculty.

This has varying degrees of seriousness for the students in our discussions. For some students, the more limited availability of some part-time/adjunct faculty simply means that their professor is slower to respond to the emails or voicemails or that their professors seem more rushed in their arrival to class and can take longer to set up and begin the class.

For others, the implications are slightly deeper. They imagine some of their part-time/adjunct professors may not have as much time to plan the course, prepare for daily teaching, review student assignments, and respond in-depth to student questions. A few students point out that, compared to a full-time professor who may teach the same course over and over again, part-time/adjunct professors may not have mastered how to most effectively teach the subject matter to students. A few students also perceive that part-time/adjunct professors, compared to full-time professors, may not be as much a part of the academic department and this may make them less familiar with the courses of the department or the course sequences or requirements within a major of study. This, a few say, could mean that the professor is less able to plan and teach their course in a way that

fits into the rest of the academic program and means they are less able to advise students about which courses to take next. As mentioned previously, these are not top-of-mind issues for most students, but when the topic is explored they can see the problems discussed above.

“If you write an email, it’s going to take them a little bit longer because maybe they are not there that day; maybe they are somewhere else, like at their job. So you kind of get a sense at the beginning of the quarter. Like this is a person who will probably be able to get a hold of whenever you need to or you know during normal business hours they will email you back.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I feel like all my teachers have different jobs because one of my teachers is a writer for a magazine... So I feel like the classes I take are kind of their part-time job and so it’s not like they get into it and stuff like that.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“A part-time [professor] is dealing with two different things – teaching at school and working a job. You know they are juggling two things at one time. A full-time teacher focuses on school you know, focuses on instructing a class.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“The part-time, it’s like they are always in a rush to go somewhere else.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“Full-time teachers generally teach the same class multiple quarters in a row and so they have a better set-up, a system, and they already know the timeframe that works and they learn from their previous quarters about what works and what doesn’t and so they have generally a better layout for the class.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“I think full-time professors know more about the college where a part-time professor doesn’t... like my full-time professors, they are like okay they have or know math labs or tutoring or whatever it is, I don’t know what it is, and they will hand you out a little flyer about where to go, where maybe a part-time wouldn’t know that.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I would rather have full-time professors because I feel like they are more focused on what we are doing. Because I hate handing in a paper and then not getting it back until the end of the semester. I want to know what my grade is.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

In many of the groups, we also presented students with statistics about the increasing number of part-time/adjunct faculty: that 70 percent of faculty at community colleges are part-time; and that two out of every three new hires in a community college is either part-time or on a contract, meaning they are not permanent or tenured. For most in our discussions, this is new information of which the students were not previously aware. Reactions to this information are mixed across the groups. Some of the students shrug, and say that they do not see any problems with having a high proportion, or an increasing proportion of part-time/adjunct faculty. Other students, particularly some of the students in Seattle, have more a negative reaction to the statistics. These students say this is a problematic trend because they could see this eventually inhibiting the quality of the educational programs offered. They recognize that if more and more faculty become part-time or adjuncts, faculty could be even less available to students. Also, some students independently offer that part-time/adjunct faculty may not get benefits and or be paid less, which may make high-quality professors more likely to leave or look for work elsewhere. All of these things, the students acknowledge, can weaken the quality of the educational experience for students. This is also frustrating, some say, given the high price they pay for their education.

“I would have thought that it would be almost the opposite -- the 70% would be the full-time and that they just hire part-timers like to fill in the gaps.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“The more part-time jobs, the closer this school gets to like a community college level. So that would take away from having a university and this type of experience.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“There would be more problems with office hours and availability if you need extra help with something in class. I mean you have it now with full-time professors, so part-time is just going to be worse.

And then it could be competitive to try to get into office hours because if they were there for like that hour or two once a week, then everybody is going to be coming, so they are not going to have really a lot of time to like talk to you about what’s going on or whatever questions you need to ask.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“I think it’s very sad. Because they don’t have that...they are not going to have that commitment to the school if they don’t feel like they are going to be there in ten years you know. If they feel like they are going to be there in ten years, they are going to care more and they are going to have more comfort.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“You’ve got to pay them well and I guess you have to treat them well. They have to be happy in the environment that they are in.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“If you pay the teachers an adequate, livable wage, they would probably be more full-time ones there. They would actually be more passionate about their work and that would translate into more achieving, successful students and stuff. But with this right here, it’s kind of scary; I mean it saddens me to know that 70% of faculty is part-time. That pisses me off to be honest.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

Assessment & Feedback from Professors

Nearly all of the students in the focus groups report that they are assessed in their courses—through exams or more subjective assignments such as papers or essays—and that these are the mechanisms from which they obtain feedback from their professors. Some students report they are receiving sufficient feedback from these assessments, but most say that they would welcome more feedback, especially more in-depth feedback. It appears that feedback is more common on written essays, rather than on actual tests.

Similar to the students’ attitudes about guidance and advising help, many students acknowledge that they can obtain more in-depth feedback if they seek it out, such as meeting with a professor or going to their office hours. Some say they try to do this, but that it is also a matter of how many hours one has in a day.

“Because a teacher will tell you what they expect if you ask them, but a lot of times you are afraid to.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“That’s your responsibility. If you have a question from your test or a question on your essay, then that’s your responsibility to take that and go to your professor or your teacher. They shouldn’t have to say, ‘Oh you did really bad on this essay and you should try to work on this or that.’ You should want to take the initiative.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“Not unless you go to them during their office hours or whatever. But they are not just going to give it [assessment/feedback] to you.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“For my English papers we have conferences with the teacher after we have the paper and we sit down and we talk to him. And he tells us what he thinks about the paper and what we could do better and how he sees the things we have done similarly in other papers and how we have progressed and how we fixed our other problems. That helps to see like consciously how you are writing.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

Online Classes

Many of the students in our discussions see college courses that are solely or almost entirely taught online to be more of a negative than a positive. The biggest drawbacks to online classes, students say, is the lack of interaction with the professor or other students and the lack of opportunities to get the help they need and get their questions answered in order to master a subject, or complete an assignment. Some students describe online courses where they had great difficulty getting their questions answered, or ones where the professor was actually in another country the whole time and seemingly inaccessible. It is also easier, students complain, to fall behind in online courses because much of them are self-directed. Many express they feel like they have to teach themselves the material and that is especially frustrating for a course they have to pay for. All in all, many students feel they do not get their full money’s worth out of an online course.

“When you are in class and you talk to an instructor or she is instructing the class or giving you information if you have a question or you need more information, you can ask. Online, you have to email or you know ask questions and maybe get an answer a week later or a few days later or hours later when you need the answer right then.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“You are basically teaching yourself. They tell you which chapters to read and then they give you notes, like a paragraph of notes, but you have to basically teach yourself.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“I am taking mostly online classes and I find that even though our online school is set up a certain way for the teachers to do it, sometimes they have their own way of doing things and you can’t really go like ‘okay how are you doing this because I don’t understand?’ Unless you go to the school and find them, which obviously the whole point of taking online is so you don’t have to go to the school, so that’s a little difficult.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“You get no personal time, like face to face with the professor. And you feel like if you are paying for classes, you should go to class and learn what they have to teach you there.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

“Also, it’s like the communication thing. If you want to ask your instructor something, you are there and you can ask if you have an issue, they are right there, whereas online, it’s convenient for you time wise when you need to, but when you need something, it’s not as convenient.” – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

“It is, but it takes a lot away from...I mean I have taken a lot of online classes and in-person classes, and it’s a lot harder to grasp subjects when you are struggling by yourself.” – *Technical college student, Seattle*

“I didn’t learn as much. I studied what I had to study; I took the test when I had to take the test; I turned in what I needed to turn in. And if I had questions, I could email, but it wasn’t a quick response. I am more face-to-face, so I feel like I just did what had to be done and checked the box and got the grade.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“It was not a class that I would ever take again or recommend for anybody to take. Because if you don’t manage your time right or you are not like pushed to get things done, you are just going to push that off. You might even forget about it.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“If you need the help, you know there is someone there, but if you are online, who do you ask? And there is a relationship with your professor that you wouldn’t get online.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“That’s the thing about it, like you can go anywhere and do an online course, but you are not really getting your moneys worth. You are getting your tuition paid for nothing.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville* “It was not a class that I would ever take again or recommend for anybody to take. Because if you don’t manage your time right or you are not like pushed to get things done, you are just going to push that off. You might even forget about it.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

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Some students describe successful experiences with online coursework. These are usually courses that were not a core subject, or part of their major, but courses students describe as less-important courses for them, or ones they had to take to fulfill a general education requirement. Some students also report that online courses that give plenty of feedback and constant assessment feel more worthwhile and are easier to complete, as compared to those with fewer assessments built in or ones where professor feedback was limited. These students are not anti-online courses, as some mention success with courses that have a mixed approach – some online, some in-person; the hesitancy is with completely online courses. Courses that are a true mix of in-person learning and interaction and online learning, can be useful and interesting.

Many students also acknowledge other positive aspects of online courses, including that the self-directed format of online classes and not having to physically show up at an actual classroom lend a level of flexibility and convenience that allows them to take courses that otherwise would not fit into their work, family, and school schedules. Some students say they have to take many of their classes online because of their work schedules and that they could not make progress on their degrees if they were not able to take online courses. Yet, even for many of students who acknowledge these positives, online courses are seen as a necessary evil. Instead, they often would rather take in-person classes.

“I have another online class where it is great. I can email her anytime and always get a response back. So it kind of depends on the teacher. But the online experience overall is very convenient because I work over 30 hours a week, so most of the time it is convenient.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“Even online courses that you can take, I feel like they are easier because, like you said, you work at your own pace.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“It is more convenient when you take it online. I don’t have to take my son out the house each time I have a class to somebody different to watch him.” – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

“If you know how to manage your time, then I guess it’s good for you because then you can choose when you want to do your assignments and stuff.” – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

“If it’s one of those courses that some people have stated that you know you just want to knock it out.” – *Community college student, Seattle*

“I feel like it depends on the class. Like the class I took, I think it was better online because I know a lot of people who tried taking it in person and the teacher actually being there kind of worked against the class.” – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

Looking Forward: Remediating Student Obstacles

As these college students consider what could be done, either by their college or by others, to help them better deal with the obstacles to their success or at least make their paths easier, the two most common themes are:

- **Getting more help to pay for their education**, either through grants or scholarships, or other forms of aid. In a related vein, students say that their interactions with the financial aid offices need to be made easier and accessibility should be improved.
- **More informative and accessible guidance and advising.** This is something called for by all types of students, including four-year, community, and technical college students.

On a second tier are the following remedies that many students across the groups say would be helpful.

- **Refining general education requirements** to give students more flexibility to choose general education courses that are in-line with their interests and applicable to their major fields of study. This can also include more guidance to help find and select courses that fit these criteria.
- **Having faculty more accessible** for student questions and assistance. There is some recognition that employing more full-time faculty could improve accessibility.
- **Smaller class sizes**, which is called for more strongly among students at four-year universities. There is recognition that smaller class sizes will improve faculty accessibility.
- **Having more course offerings** to help students finish in the appropriate number of years for the degree, and to help them fit the classes they need into their schedules.
- **Normalizing and encouraging students seeking help**, including going to tutoring, attending professor office hours, and asking for more in-depth feedback from professors. The students in our discussions know this is available, but they also feel it can be helpful for the college culture to promote more professor-student interactions, assistance, and feedback as the norm, rather than something students only do when they need extra help.
- **More integrated career counseling:** Most students say that their school has a career center, and many have yet to visit it. Students express that better integrating career counseling and the career development office into their academic advising and major program of study would be highly beneficial and welcomed to help them better plan their coursework and help them form and meet their career goals.
- **Offering pre-orientation programs to more students, or strengthening orientation programs:** Students who attended a summer pre-orientation program, or a program specifically targeted for a certain group of students such as for Latino students, report that these were helpful in teaching them study skills, time management skills, setting their expectations for coursework, developing supportive peer and mentor relationships, and getting acquainted with the college campus and workings.
- **Improved career-specific equipment or opportunities:** Four-year university students in specific trade-oriented majors—like art or sports therapy—as well as technical college students, say they would benefit from more trade-specific equipment and career experiences available.

Table 2: Detailed Composition of Focus Group Participants

	<u>Philadelphia</u>			<u>Seattle</u>		<u>Millersville</u>	
	Latino/AA Urban CC students	Urban 4-year university students	Urban CC students, Dev. Ed	Suburban Tech. clg. students	Indpt, working CC students	4-year regional university students	
Total	10	10	10	10	8	10	
Gender							
Male	4	4	5	5	4	3	
Female	6	6	5	5	4	7	
Age							
18-21	1	8	1	--	3	10	
22-25	2	1	5	4	2	--	
26-29	5	1	3	2	1	--	
30+	2	--	1	4	2	--	
Race							
White	--	7	4	2	4	3	
Afr. Am.	5	1	2	2	1	4	
Latino	5	1	--	2	--	2	
Asian	--	1	2	1	2	--	
Other	--	--	2	1	1	1	
Have children at home	7	1	1	5	2	--	

