

Listen to Me

Community College Students
Tell Us What Helps Them Persist



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CCCSE is a service and research initiative in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. By delivering “aha” moments about the student experience based on insights that matter, CCCSE assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING TO STUDENTS

“ COLLEGE IS LIKE A DREAM. YOU COME IN AND YOU MAKE DREAMS COME TRUE. ”

For many community college students, college *is* a dream—a dream of a better life for them and for their families. Too often, that dream is cut short. Roughly 40% of community college students do not persist from their first fall enrollment to the following fall.¹

To help students realize their goals, community colleges across the country are working toward redesigning the student experience utilizing the guided pathways framework. Guided pathways is an institution-wide approach to student success that is based on giving students clear, coherent, and structured educational experiences that build in a variety of academic and nonacademic supports. The pathways framework includes implementation pillars focused on clarifying the paths (through program mapping), helping students get on a path, helping students stay on their path, and ensuring students are learning. As the student experience is most clearly aligned with the second, third, and fourth implementation pillars, this report reflects on those parts of the pathways model.

In many states, such as Texas, there are statewide guided pathways efforts in place. As national thought leaders and colleges continue to refine the implementation of guided pathways, it's essential to understand more fully the triggers that might lead to student attrition as well as the leverage points that can change those outcomes.

To this end, CCCSE conducted longitudinal focus groups with students during the fall of 2021 and spring of 2022. While almost all the interviewed students returned for their second semester, their stories make it clear that for many of them, staying enrolled in college is akin to walking a tightrope on a daily basis. Their voices need to be heard so that we can understand what will make their journeys less fraught—and what we can do to widen the safety net to catch them if they start to fall.

GETTING ON A PATH

To help students get on a path, the guided pathways framework advises colleges to require supports to help students get the best start, including academic planning based on career/transfer exploration and integrated academic support for passing program gateway courses.

In addition to the guided pathways recommendations around helping students get on the right path, it's essential to remember that almost one in three community college students are the first in their families to attend college.² And even if students have family members with college experience, stepping onto a college campus for the first time can be a daunting undertaking.

THE FIRST DAY

Two students describe how they felt stepping onto campus for the first time:

"The first time I stepped on campus, I was terrified. ... There was a single map, and it just looked like a maze. I didn't know where to go, where I was going, or who anybody was."

"The first time I came to this college, what went through my head was, one, it's really big for me. It's a lot bigger than what I'm used to. Two, I'm a pretty shy person, so it was very overwhelming for me because I was like, 'I have to talk to new people. Who do I talk to? What building do I go to?'"

One student describes preemptive actions they took to feel less overwhelmed on the first day of class:

"I took the whole day just going back and forth, of just getting familiar with where to go on the first day. ... I felt pretty prepared of just going there. Whenever I arrived on the first day, everyone was just going everywhere, so it was all crowded, but I knew where to go, and I got to my class on time compared to others."

Another student offers a suggestion to their college to help students navigate their new surroundings:

"I think they should get all the second-year students to help with the first-years, show them where the buildings are at, all the classes and everything."



THE FRONT DOOR

Previous CCCSE research has shown that the high-impact practices of *orientation* and *registration before classes begin* can influence student success, including persistence.³

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, orientation was online for many students the semester the first focus groups took place, and students described varying degrees of helpfulness with it and with registration.

ORIENTATION

"I had no experience with any orientation. I didn't even know we had one. If we did, I wasn't there. I just knew where I needed to go for class, and there I was."

"We did have orientation, but it was just a website link. They didn't have face-to-face or a Zoom meeting. It was just a regular YouTube link just to watch. ... It was mainly about where the classes were, the buildings, and where to go to when you needed financial aid."

"The online orientation my college had was pretty self-explanatory. It was supposed to be around four hours, but honestly, I think we got out within two hours, and they just kind of went over general stuff, how to use Canvas, which our college uses. It was very informative for someone who's a first-year student."

"The day before my orientation, I had called ... the student help resource center, and they were very not helpful. ... They were saying, 'You haven't even registered for classes to begin with.' They weren't the friendliest. ... I kinda just brushed it off, but ... that could automatically make [someone] not even wanna go to that school or college in general just because of the first ... impression."

REGISTRATION

"I found it pretty easy to register myself, especially with the help of advisors. They made it pretty simple as in if I had to register myself online, I think I would've messed up and given myself another class or something."

"I actually did not register for my own classes. I had my STEM Club advisor help me out completely to where all I had to do was click register. She helped me all along the way. She got my classes settled out. I know in the future, if I needed help doing that, I would definitely go to them because I have no idea what to do."

"Nobody really went above and beyond to really help me with college and like, signing up."



ACADEMIC PLANNING

Academic advising and career exploration guided by the institution play three critical roles for students. These discussions ensure that students understand their options for programs of study; they raise students' aspirations by encouraging them to pursue opportunities they may not have considered; and they ensure that students have realistic academic plans. While starting with the end in mind is a goal of guided pathways, CCCSE's conversations with students make it clear that they are not all receiving the same level of academic planning and guidance.

"I know exactly what classes I should take at what times and so I can graduate on time. ... Makes me feel good. Makes me feel like it's doable and I can see exactly what I need to do in order to achieve my goals."

"The one person that helped me really when it came to my classes and everything was one advisor in particular, and she was the biggest help in my opinion when it comes to me barely starting out here. She helped me pick my classes. She helped me pick my major. We talked about more or less where I wanna go with this college, what I wanna do, ... what I wanna complete by the time I get out of here, so that really helped me out more or less narrow it down what I was looking for in particular."

"When I first went in my advising, there was this advisor that was trying to get me to go for a certificate instead of my associate's. I think that's why it discouraged me a little bit 'cause she was saying that it would be easier, that I could get in a job faster, and that ... it was smarter than to go for my associate's and then go for my bachelor's in a university. That just discouraged me a little bit. ... It was so bad 'cause she ended up enrolling me in the certificate program, and I had to go and get it changed again so I could have my classes for my associate's. It was a bad process. It took forever."

"I didn't have anyone to help me through this first year so far, but I also didn't look for help. ... I do wish that I had someone to help me, just because, right now, my major's undecided, so I think having help would be nice."

"I would not say I have an academic plan I'm following. ... My advisor did not tell me how long it would take to complete my degree. ... I do not really know what I wanna take next semester, or what I need to take."

"I'm not aware of when I should graduate. I'm just still kind of in the mindset that I am gonna graduate in four years, so I'm hoping that's what happens."

The majority of students who responded to a question about what advice they would offer their college talked about wanting to receive not only more information, but more easily decipherable information.

Students' Advice to Their Colleges

"One thing that I feel that would be very helpful to starting students who are having some trouble trying to figure out where to go, if they have maybe like an FAQ ... page or even just a page where a lot of people have had issues on the same thing and if they could explain how to solve the problems that they're having, and what you can do to get in touch with people who can help you because that's one thing that I was a little confused about first starting out."

"Prior to registering for classes I wish I would have known that deadlines are very real and they hit you very fast."

"I feel like a checklist would be very helpful for like new students who haven't registered. ... On the checklist I feel like there should be steps about where to go, who to turn your materials into, know what to turn in."

"I wish my college would've told me about orientation. I didn't receive any notification about that through my college email, my personal email, through mail, through phone contact. They have all of that and more. I wish they would've told me about how if payment wasn't made the first day I registered for classes that I would get dropped out because that happened to me twice, and I also wish they would've told me about paperwork and documents that I needed, [and] not just the day before class."

INTEGRATED ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Gateway courses, like college-level English and math, not only provide students with skills that are the building blocks for their future academic success, but passing them is necessary for students to be able to move into program-level coursework. That many students struggle in these courses is an understatement, yet when they do pass them in their first college year, they are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.⁴

"We have like an algebra exam coming up. I'm not good at algebra. So scared I'm going to fail that class. But that's literally the only thing that's on my brain right now."

SUPPORT SERVICES AND STUDY GROUPS

Some focus group participants were aware of academic support services because someone had come to a class to describe available supports or they had been put in study groups, but other students felt this type of help had not been offered to them.

"During our class, we had a presentation from a woman who works in the student success center. She told us all about the clubs or the writing center, the tutoring, how to do it from the website. She went into detail through her presentation, and we learned a lot from it."

"I have not received any news or any announcements about any student support services, no tutors, nothing of that sort from almost anybody. I know that when I began, my STEM coach told me about the fact that the college offers it, but beyond that point, nothing's ever been offered to me."

"I feel like it has improved my grade using the study group because I get to have peer-to-peer versus a peer-to-instructor point of view 'cause whenever you do work with an instructor, there is a little bit of hesitancy to be wrong."

STUDENT SUCCESS COURSES

Courses specifically designed to teach students skills and strategies to help them succeed in college (e.g., time management, study skills, and test-taking skills) are very powerful. Past CCCSE research on high-impact practices found that students who participated in student success courses in their first academic term were more likely to pass developmental courses and gateway courses than their peers who did not take student success courses in their first term.⁵

The interviewed students who participated in student success courses seemed to understand their value.

"I didn't know that I needed this [student success] course, but I know that once I signed up [and] enrolled, I knew that it was the best decision."

"[The college success skills course] is very . . . very hands on. That's what I like about it. We actually have an assignment today, it's for you sending a message . . . to a tutor and getting a response back to showing you, 'Oh, you have to do this, this, and this.' . . . But it's really to help you learn the process of how to . . . communicate with your tutor and set up meetings with them."

"[The student success course] was a required class I needed for my freshman year here and it wouldn't go through and then the [academic advisor] was like, 'Don't worry about it.' And so now I'm not taking that."

STAYING ON THE PATH

The guided pathways framework recommendations for helping students stay on their paths include ongoing, intrusive advising and systems for students to track progress.

ONGOING, INTRUSIVE ADVISING

Advising continues to be important throughout a student's academic experience. Regular student-advisor connections present opportunities to build relationships and check in on a range of academic and life issues.

The students CCCSE interviewed had different experiences with ongoing advising. Some had already had multiple advising sessions. Others, though, indicated that they weren't sure what the next semester would bring.

"I've met with my advisor about four to five times. . . . Whenever I look at what she writes down . . . it makes me feel encouraged. I feel encouraged that . . . these are the classes that I take and I just have to push myself forward."

"I made sure to choose the exact same counselor I spoke to before school even started just so we have that kind of familiarity with each other. It's such that she remembers like, 'Okay you want to do this, this, and that.' It's just a lot easier talking to somebody you know, rather than just like a new counselor every time."

"No, I do not know what to take next semester. I have heard that the advisors will help me. I'm not even sure when to do all that process all over again."

"I'm really busy, and I feel like I don't have time to meet with an advisor and talk about next semester. Also, I feel like I don't have a plan that much for next semester, which is why I'm kind of anxious about it, but I'm just gonna try to go through this semester, and then I assume it's maybe November or December, worry about it for next semester."

"I wish I knew the way the college works, like the amount of credits and hours you have to do for each class 'cause I really didn't understand that."

SYSTEMS TO TRACK PROGRESS

While it is essential for students to have an academic plan, it is just as important for them to be able to know how they are moving along their pathway. Advisors can support students throughout their academic journeys by tracking their progress through their academic plans and helping them adapt their plans if their goals change.

"My advisor actually gave me the tools that I needed to help me track my progress on my own. . . . They have a website where you can like look at which classes that you need in order for you to transfer, so I go on that website and also go on my four-year college's website in order to track my progress, see what classes that I needed and to make sure I'm not wasting my credits as well. I go on the website at least once a month."

"I feel like that's really important if you plan on transferring to make sure the classes you're taking will transfer to the school you plan on to attend and the major you're going for. . . . A lot of friends . . . last semester told me that the classes they had won't transfer to the university they planned on attending. . . . [My advisor] had . . . a transfer guide to help make sure the classes that you take will transfer over [and that] gave me the reassurance to know what I'm taking now is on the path that I need to be on."

LEARNING ON THE PATH

The guided pathways framework recommends several practices for enriching student learning: program-relevant, applied learning experiences; intentional student engagement; high-impact teaching practices; and a commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching improvement. The interviewed students were consistent in their desire for supportive instructors who made the classroom an engaging space.

“I would say the thing that my math teacher did was allow everyone to know their own pace basically. If someone was falling behind, it wasn’t like, ‘Oh, you don’t know this. Well, sorry.’ It was more akin to, ‘Okay, let’s explain and go over it once again because if you’re having trouble, how many other people are having trouble that are just not speaking up?’”

“One professor that I feel like I’ll forever remember in, in just the way that she—she has this way of making everyone, not just me, feel really accommodated and welcomed into the community.”

“She does group discussions where we get into a group and talk about what she just talked about just for us to further learn the information from our peers instead of just from one person.”

“An instructor that really stands out for me is my microbiology instructor. Now that we’re taking class in person, it’s way more fun ‘cause we actually get to do things in the lab like looking at cells under a microscope.”

“In the class, I would like to have groups. It’s just quiet in there. It’s literally just the teacher talking. I would like to hear more from my peers and what their views on the topics would be.”

“I feel like in some classes, I really don’t know any of the names of any of the other students.”

“All he does, he puts on PowerPoints or video. How am I gonna learn from that?”



Students were in agreement that they want their instructors to engage with them more—both in and out of the classroom.

Students’ Advice to Their Instructors

“I feel like it would really help ease my anxiety about exams, specifically, or big assignments if a professor would reach out to their students more often because a majority of my professors don’t really reach out at all. If they could send out a mass email saying, ‘If you guys are anxious about the test or you need extra help, don’t be shy and come to my office during my office hours.’ I do have one professor who does do that, which makes me feel comfortable enough to do that.”

“I would want my professor to engage the students more by asking more questions ... and for the students to actually talk to each other and communicate with each other rather than just sitting next to each other and looking at the screen and listening to the professor talk through the whole time.”

CARLOS'S STORY

The following are excerpts from three interviews with Carlos, a first-generation student who worked over 40 hours per week and was registered for four classes when he started college.

“ I never really thought that college was ever on my plate in the first place.

So I figured, ‘Oh, I’m probably going to struggle a lot.’ Then once I got here, I had a lot of people that were here to help me and I just started doing more in order to pursue like, college and finishing.

...

Working while attending college is sometimes a struggle, but luckily I have a good relationship with my boss. And my boss understands that college is definitely a priority and it comes first to anything else.

...

I decided, I told myself that I would put college first and I made that commitment to myself. So I do plan on sticking it through just because of those reasons.

SEPTEMBER 2021

OCTOBER 2021

“ My semester to start off is pretty good, but some things happened. ... And I decided to put my family first ... and that kind of caused me to get behind and me getting behind kinda made me feel like I was gonna drown, basically, in all the work that was just going to be impossible to get back to where I was. But I mean like the school offers help and then I have a lot of outside resources and friends to help me out. So ... I know I’m gonna pull through.

...

No, I don’t have a written academic plan. I don’t think so at least. No, I don’t think I have one.

...

My boss is always like, ‘Yeah, I’ll support you 100% because I know college is important.’ But then I mean, like when businesses get short staff like they need you to come in or they need you to be there and there’s really no like excuse or something.

...

I did think about stopping only just because that brief time period where I got so behind. I felt that it was impossible for me to get back up there. But I also didn’t want to give up on something, on college because it was something that I wanted to do.”

Carlos drops out.

FEBRUARY 2022



And then I just decided that college was always going to be there.

...

What led to me getting behind with my classes, I feel like was a mixture of everything ... like my job, my classes being a little bit more difficult than I anticipated, and my family, ... and then like me, me not being the greatest student.

...

I wanted to ask for help, but I just wasn't able to. Because I felt like the expectation's like, 'Oh, you're a college student, you should already know how to do this and we shouldn't have to help you because you're a college student. Why are you here if you're not going to know what you're doing?'

...

As a first-time student when you're coming in, especially if you're first generation, your advisor ... should ask you, 'Are you sure that you can handle all of this?'

...

I felt like ... the college could have just worked on better communication. Just more like reaching out to the students and just checking up on them like, 'Hello, like how are you doing? Like, is there anything that you need? You need help with anything?'

...

After I left, nobody said anything. Nobody emailed me or messaged me. I wanted to actually go and talk to my teachers ... and I wanted to like apologize and thank them for being patient with me and like working with me, ... but I never got the courage to. I just felt like there was no need for that because in a way I felt like I wasted their time.

...

If I go back, the things that I would do differently would definitely be to talk to my advisor, let them know that I'm not able to take on as much classes just because of the fact that I get stressed sometimes and it's not as easy for me to navigate the college experience when I have nobody else to help me with it.



MOTIVATION AND CONFIDENCE TO SUCCEED

When asked in later rounds of interviews whether their motivations for attending college had changed since they had started, students had differing answers. But all students clearly recognized what completing college could mean for their futures.

“My motivations are still basically the same. I really just want to follow my dreams and do what I love to do. That has stayed the same.”

“My motivation for completing college would be the fact that I really want a better paying job.”

“So my greatest motivation used to be my parents, but I think it shifted more to myself because at the end of the day, it’s me that’s going to college and not them.”

“My motivation last time was . . . my family, and it’s kind of changed now. I think it’s more so about my future. Every class I take I’m closer to getting in reaching my goals and it makes me really excited.”

“I’d like to help my mother. One day I want to have kids and a family. I want my own home.”

My greatest motivation would be my siblings. As I am the oldest . . . they need somebody they have to look up to . . . and I’m that person and it’s my job to basically lead them to the right direction.

Although students seemed well aware of what persisting and succeeding in college could grant them, some expressed decreased confidence levels since they had begun their college journeys—clearly illustrating the precarious balancing act attending college is for many first-time students.

“As for my confidence level, it stayed the same. It’s 100%.”

“Well, [my confidence for staying enrolled] is a 50/50. . . I’m confident but at the same time I have . . . classes that make me not so confident. But I’m hoping I can stay in school.”

“My confidence level has gone up really high ever since I started this course ‘cause I actually even got offered a job already. I got an offer to work . . . to do ride-alongs for my EMT program.”

“My confidence level from August has, you know, went up and down; it varies because I’m confident about school. But at the same time the math is difficult. . . . But I’d say my confidence level right now is at least—I want to give myself a good 75.”

“I think last time I mentioned that I was 100% confident and now I would definitely say closer to 80, maybe a little bit less. Not because the work is hard but due to like financial reasons and other things outside of school itself. I may put a hiatus on going to school.”

“And my confidence level I feel like has decreased just a little bit. It was at a 10, and now I think it’s now at like a seven, maybe eight. But I think I’m okay with that.”

“I’d say I’m about . . . 75% confident I’ll stay in college.”

WIDENING THE SAFETY NET

Many of the students CCCSE interviewed said they had thought about dropping out. They cited various reasons such as feeling underprepared and being overwhelmed with competing priorities. Many faulted themselves for procrastinating and not understanding the level of rigor that would come with college-level work. They shared stories of financial struggles, mental health struggles, illnesses, and challenges making connections with others.

But they also talked about the things that helped them the most: someone explaining the front door processes so that they didn't feel so lost and confused, advisors who spent time with them and listened to them, having a clear academic plan, their student success courses, engaging and caring instructors, tutoring services and study groups, getting to know their peers, and feeling a sense of belonging.

As the work of guided pathways evolves, it will be important to continue to listen to what students have to say about the things that help them stay enrolled. Many things happen in students' lives that colleges have no control over, but if we can widen the safety net by focusing on and bolstering what students tell us works, we're certainly increasing their chances for success.

Students' Advice to Other Students

It doesn't take students long to realize that college is different than high school—that they are likely going to have to work harder, manage their own schedules, and be willing to ask questions.

"My greatest lesson learned this semester has definitely been ... asking questions, speaking out like, 'Hey, when is this due? Hey, I don't understand this.' Because at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what the person next to you thinks when you're asking a question because ... if it satisfies your needs as a student, then that's the only thing that really matters, honestly."

"The one thing I've found the most helpful is just always ask if you're confused about something."

"I would say the number one lesson learned would be to not procrastinate as much."



QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

There is no one person at any college who can take on the task of ensuring student retention. It is an institution-wide job. The following questions can be used to spark conversations among the entire college community about how well the needs of students are being met—and what might be done differently so that more of them can make their dreams a reality.

- ▶ What can we do to make students feel more welcome?
- ▶ What can we do to build relationships with new students quickly?
- ▶ Do we assign someone to serve as a primary contact for each new student each term (e.g., another student, advisor, success coach, mentor, etc.)?
- ▶ How might entry processes be redesigned to address student concerns about confusing information and impersonal contact?
- ▶ Which students absolutely must participate in orientation? Are those students participating? If not, what is standing in the way?
- ▶ Is there information we should be including in our orientation program that is not currently included?
- ▶ How can we help students better understand the registration process?
- ▶ Do our intake processes include a system for identifying the types and level of academic and nonacademic supports each student will need to successfully complete college-level gateway courses within the first year?
- ▶ What is standing between students and the advising they need (to ensure they have a goal and a complete program plan, are enrolled in appropriate classes, etc.)? What can we do to remove these barriers?
- ▶ How are advisors monitoring student progress? How often do they talk with students about their progress?
- ▶ In what ways is our college designed to serve students who work full time or more?
- ▶ Do our students know where to turn if they need mental health services, either at our college or through partners in the community?
- ▶ How do we encourage and train advisors and other staff members to talk with students about balancing work and school?
- ▶ Does every student who enrolls in our college attend a student success course? Should they?
- ▶ Are we requiring practices that help students build key skills and develop strong academic habits (e.g., study groups and collaborating with other students)?
- ▶ Are we requiring students who could benefit from tutoring and other supports to use those supports?
- ▶ Do we share information with students about available supports throughout the academic year or just at the beginning of the academic year?
- ▶ How do we talk to students about success and failure? How do we teach them to process failure and move toward success?
- ▶ What can we do to better engage students when they are in class—and how can we use the classroom to inspire or require engagement elsewhere (e.g., the use of support services)?
- ▶ Are we encouraging faculty to use asset-based teaching approaches that leverage students' strengths?
- ▶ Are we helping faculty integrate active and applied learning experiences into their courses?

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Listen to Me Focus Groups

The three Texas community colleges at which the student focus groups were conducted are diverse in terms of location, size, and student population characteristics. Students were interviewed three times in the fall 2021 semester and once in the early weeks of the spring 2022 semester. Thirty-nine students participated in the first round of interviews, 37 in the second, 33 in the third, and 35 in the fourth.

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