



PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Maximizing Opportunities
for Youth in Poverty

PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success is a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

What Matters for Community College Success? focuses on the experiences of low-income women in community colleges to highlight the institutional conditions and supports that help students persist to degree or transfer.

POLICY REPORT

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What Matters for Community College Success? Assumptions and Realities Concerning Student Supports for Low-Income Women

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As open-access schools, community colleges are vital institutions that provide learning opportunities and experiences for students of wide-ranging interests and backgrounds. Compared to four-year institutions, they serve greater numbers of low-income people and students of color (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). California, which has the largest community college system in the United States, enrolls nearly one-fourth of the nation's community college students (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). The state has developed an expansive, low-cost system of community colleges to serve its especially large and diverse population (Sengupta & Jepson, 2006).

In line with national efforts, California has undertaken a series of reform initiatives to improve student success in the state's community colleges, especially with respect to completion rates, which have not been up to par (California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force, 2012). For example, only 31% of the 2003–2004 cohort of California community college students seeking a degree either obtained a certificate or degree or transferred to a university within six years of enrolling (Moore & Shulock, 2010). In response to these types of statistics, and in order to improve retention and completion rates, Governor Brown recently signed into law the California Student Success Act of 2012. This legislation is designed to improve completion rates by requiring community colleges to develop student success and support programs with, among other things, expanded orientation, assessment, and educational planning services for students. These types of broad efforts have placed a spotlight on how support services can facilitate student success, and what institutional conditions must exist in order for them to do so.

To better understand the barriers to and supports for student success, this report focuses on the experiences of one large segment of community college students—low-income women. In general, women have made significant gains in college enrollment and completion, often outpacing men in both categories (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Wang & Parker, 2011). Women currently make up 53% of students enrolled in California's community college system (Community College League of California, 2012). However, despite gains for women overall, low-income women, women of color, and student parents continue to experience lower rates of college completion (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel 2008; Choy, 2002). And while women continue to cluster in female-dominated fields of study (Charles & Bradley, 2009), low-income women in particular appear to be making very few in-roads to better

paid, male-dominated occupations (England, 2010). Additionally, female college students in general are more likely to be living in poverty because they are more often single parents (Peter & Horn, 2005).

It is especially useful to examine the experiences of low-income women with student support services on community college campuses. Women are more likely than men to enroll at two-year rather than four-year institutions (Horn & Nevill, 2006). And although female community college students experience stressors similar to their male peers—including demanding coursework, juggling school with work, and financial pressures—they are also more likely to be in the lowest income bracket and to care for dependents (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Peter & Horn, 2005). Indeed, low-income women represent a significant portion of non-traditional community college students (Horn & Nevill, 2006), and so their experiences shed valuable light on the critical institutional conditions and supports that can bolster student success more broadly.

Research on policy and reform implementation underscores the importance of knowing how students and front-line change agents (e.g., faculty, staff, and program providers) actually understand improvement efforts, because their interpretations shape engagement with and responses to such reforms (Coburn, 2001; Datnow & Park, 2009; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Thus, as student support policies and programs are developed, the voices and experiences of students and practitioners—those who are the focus and implementers of such improvements—must be heard (Bensimon, 2007; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). These individuals offer critical insight into the direct impact of the programs they are involved with, including the successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

Research Methods

To explore these issues, we undertook a qualitative case study that investigated how low-income women make decisions about and interpret their educational pathways, and the types of supports and barriers they encounter along the way. We selected Landmark Community College (LCC),² a large and diverse institution in California, as our research site. LCC is located in an urban area hit hard by poverty and a high unemployment rate during the Great Recession. The college has a student body that reflects the diversity of the state. A majority of the roughly 20,000 students are female (56%); at or under the age of 24

(69%); students of color (44% Latina/o, 10% African American/Black, and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander); and low-income (approximately 70% receive financial aid). Only 27% of students attend school full-time (i.e., are enrolled in more than 11 units).

We initially made contact with potential study participants through support programs at LCC that are designed to serve low-income women, single parents, and low-income students more generally.³ We primarily recruited from California Work Opportunities and Responsibilities to Kids (CalWORKs); Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS); Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), a sub-component of EOPS that focuses on single parents; and the Academic Learning Community (ALC). Between April of 2010 and February of 2012, we conducted two waves of semi-structured interviews with 72 low-income women about their personal and academic histories, their postsecondary educational experiences, and their interactions with college staff and faculty.⁴ Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. We also asked participants to complete demographic and educational background surveys.

Roughly half the women in our sample (53%) were single mothers (Figure 1), and 80% were women of color (Figure 2). More than half (62%) were between the ages of 18 and 24 (Figure 3). All of the women attended LCC at some point during the study but were not necessarily enrolled continuously. At Wave 2, a majority of students (79%) were still enrolled in school (Figure 4).

During this same time period, we also interviewed 18 faculty and program staff members at LCC, conducted observations of program orientations and classes, and reviewed relevant program and college documents. Together, these various sources of information inform our understanding of what does and does not work in student support. And while our findings may focus on low-income women, the implications are much broader and can inform the creation and improvement of programs designed to support community college students from a wide range of backgrounds.

Assumptions and Realities About Student Support

By listening carefully to the voices of students and the practitioners who work with them, we were able to call

Figure 1

Family Status of Participants

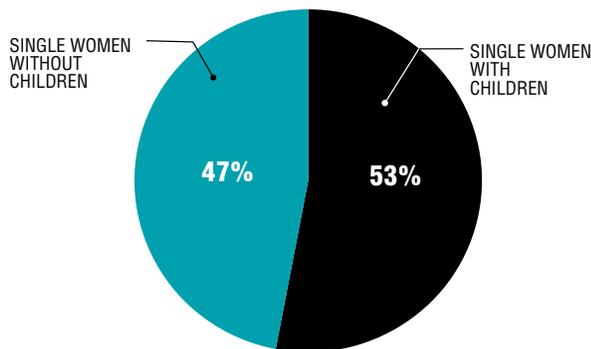


Figure 2

Race/Ethnicity of Participants

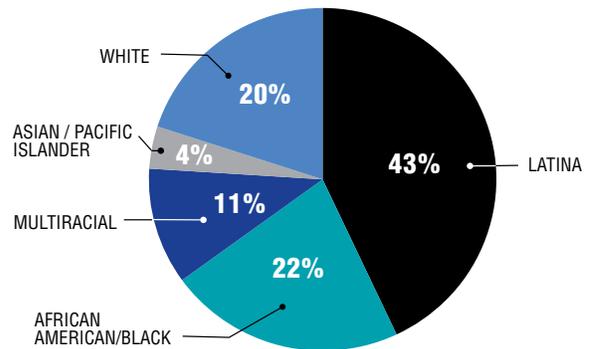


Figure 3

Age of Participants

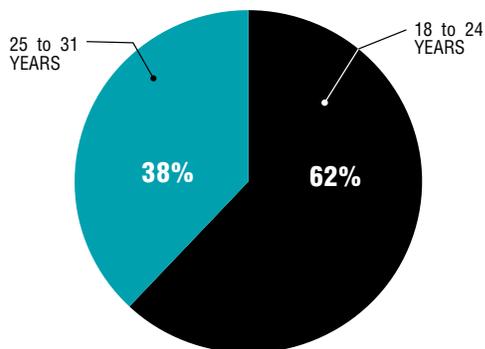
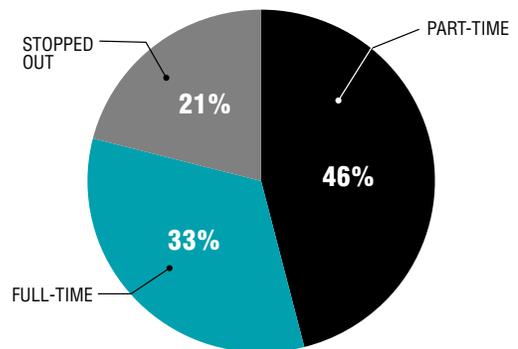


Figure 4

Enrollment Status of Participants (at Wave 2)



into question taken-for-granted notions about student services and outreach. Left unchallenged, these assumptions are likely to impede the success of student support initiatives:

Assumption #1: The availability of programs equals students' ability to access them.

Assumption #2: Students will seek support if they need it.

Assumption #3: Providing general information and advice is sufficient to aid students.

We have organized our findings around these assumptions, offering feedback from our study participants and concrete solutions to the problems they have encountered.

ASSUMPTION #1:
The availability of programs equals students' ability to access them.

REALITY:
Most students are not consistently informed about what support programs are available or what services they can receive.

Community colleges provide a broad range of academic and social services, including programs to support low-income students, such as learning communities, tutoring services, and student organizations. Because we primarily recruited

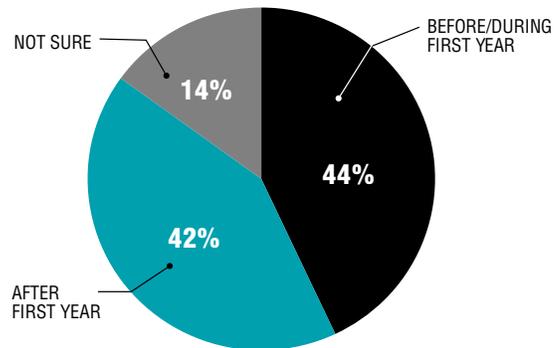
participants through these types of initiatives, it is not surprising that 57 out of the 72 women in our study (79%) had participated in at least one community college support program, whether at LCC or on another campus (Figure 5).⁵ Half of our participants had experiences with multiple programs throughout their college careers.

It is telling, however, that a large number of these women knew little—if anything—about the availability of supports when they first began college. Fewer than half (44%) recalled receiving information or guidance before or during their first year of school (Figure 6). The remaining women reported that they either learned about support programs after their first year of college (42%) or did not recall when they did so (14%).

Participants who recalled how they found out about support services mentioned gaining information from the school as well as from external sources. Various services are advertised during LCC’s orientation and listed in either the course catalog or on the school’s website. However, students’ responses suggest that these static modes of outreach are not effective at helping them learn about and properly access services. More than one-third of the women (39%) learned about campus programs from LCC staff, classes, or publications; only three women (4% of the sample) mentioned that they learned about support services from the school’s website or orientation sessions. A Workforce Preparation program counselor described the limitations of such outreach efforts:

Figure 6

Participants’ Initial Awareness of Support Programs

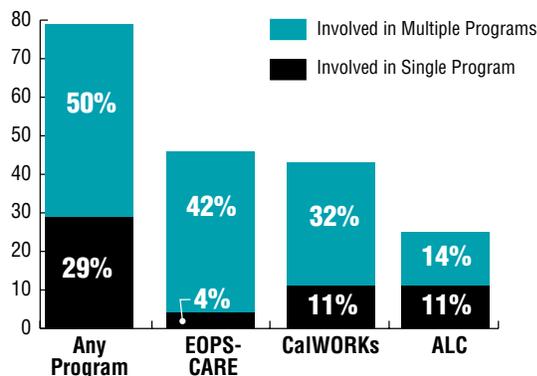


To be honest with you, I think we serve maybe a third of the population. Some people are walking around looking for a job and they don’t even know we exist. Some people are walking around with no resume and don’t even know we exist. I want to envision, when the student comes in and applies for school, they know all the programs because somebody’s telling them, not a computer. The bad thing about a computer is they still have to look it up.

In general, the women in the study, as well as faculty and staff, suggested that information provided through social relationships (for example, from faculty, staff, or family members) made a greater impact than formal outreach. Close to half (46%) learned about support services from individuals or agencies not officially connected to LCC, including from CalWORKs county caseworkers, by word-of-mouth from family members who had received help from these programs, or from classmates.

Figure 5

Participation in Support Programs



Lessons Learned and Promising Practices: Making Services Accessible to Students

Think like a student.

College faculty and staff recognized that outreach is critical. To this end, they were trying to develop a more consistent way of connecting with students who most need support, and they stressed the importance of understanding student perspectives and circumstances so that communication and outreach could be as meaningful as possible. Lisa, a faculty member in the Academic Learning Community (ALC) who serves on the Student Success Committee, spoke specifically of the need to “think like a student”:

continued on p. 6

SPOTLIGHT PROGRAM: CalWORKs

CalWORKs is administered at LCC through the Workforce Preparation program, whose mission is to provide access and support to underserved and nontraditional students facing social and economic barriers to higher education.

CalWORKs has five components: work-study, job development and placement, childcare, curriculum development, and instruction. The CalWORKs counselor generally meets with program participants toward the end of each semester to ensure

they have priority registration and approved courses for the following semester. The CalWORKs program has one part-time counselor so, by default, program participants always interact with the same advisor.

In the fall of 2009, roughly 400 LCC students were participating in CalWORKs. They were mostly women (93%) and typically headed single-parent households (79%) with an average of two children.

Anna's Story

"You Don't Know Until Somebody Tells You"

Anna is a 24-year-old single woman studying psychology and early childhood education in hopes of transferring to a four-year college to earn her bachelor's degree. Neither of her parents went to college, and she is the only one of her siblings who continues to persist to a postsecondary degree. Her father passed away when she was in the 6th grade and, since the age of 16, Anna has juggled work and school to make ends meet. Like many low-income students, she is caught between figuring out how to pay her bills and pursuing school in hopes of a better life and career. As a part-time student she is enrolled in six units while working full days, Friday through Monday. On weekdays she goes home and babysits her nephew from 9 p.m. until 2 a.m. while his parents work night shifts. Like many other community college students, she rarely spends time on campus except to go to class or to use the library's computer to do her homework.

When she first arrived at LCC, she had little advice or support from family, friends, or the school itself on how to succeed. Instead of creating a formal education plan, she looked up courses in the college catalog and enrolled in whatever sounded interesting. Despite the fact that she has attended the same college for six years, Anna has never formally participated in a structured support program. She felt lucky to have an encounter during a job fair event with a staff member in the Early Childhood Education Program who spent a couple of hours giving her concrete details and advice about pursuing different careers in education:

She was basically giving me a breakdown of what I could do with these degrees [psychology and childcare development]....She was telling me about a really interesting Child Life Specialist [career] and I was like, "Wow, that's interesting. I never even knew that career existed."...It felt so good to talk to somebody who understood me because I have nobody to talk to about my struggles in college.

This staff member encouraged Anna to return and contact her whenever she needed support.

Anna's story is one of ad-hoc support and chance encounters with institutional agents, rather than of systematic and sustained outreach. She believes that there needs to be more outreach to students about various programs and disagrees with the expectation that students will access these resources without direction. Anna believes that every teacher should know about all programs in order to share that information with students because, as she put it, **"You don't know until somebody tells you."**

Think like a student. What are they not getting? What seems obvious to us that clearly is not obvious to them? So we had banners up for a while, I think they're down now, but just saying things like, "Do you need help with math?" Then it gave one particular phone number or a building to go to.

To a significant degree, student success hinges on the ability of the institution to support and build the capacity of practitioners; they are the front-line actors providing access to programs and services. In order to serve students effectively, staff have to understand student needs. Indeed, the majority of the staff we spoke with had volunteered or chosen to work in these specialized student support programs because of their own histories as low-income or first-generation college students, or because they had developed relationships with colleagues or students who came from diverse backgrounds. These types of experiences and knowledge are essential, and point to the fact that the call to "think like a student" also has implications for staff hiring and professional development.

Because community colleges serve such a diverse range of students, administrators and staff cannot assume that they all have the same needs and goals. Professional development that challenges staff assumptions and builds on existing knowledge about students may be useful. Likewise, surveys of students that reveal their perspectives and levels of engagement could lead to more effective program development. This type of information can inform not only marketing efforts, but program content and focus as well.

Use the classroom for outreach.

Outreach and program advertisement efforts need to take into account the realities of students' lives. In general, nontraditional community college students spend less time on campus than do traditional students without jobs or family obligations (Choy, 2002). This is especially true for the majority of women in our study, who were juggling work, school, and childcare responsibilities. During the first week of each semester, for example, we saw various booths and tables advertising programs and clubs for students in the main quad. While this is an important element of outreach that can grab many students' attention, the women in our study who attended classes on other parts of campus or who arrived at school after 5:00 p.m. often did not have an opportunity to even see, let alone visit, the booths.

Lauren's Story

A Day in the Life of a Single Mother Pursuing College

Lauren, who is studying sociology, is a 28-year-old single mother of an 8-year-old boy. She notes that, because she is not a traditional college student, "the whole picture [of schooling is] a little bit different." She has to balance her studies with her full-time night job, as well as provide for her son on her own. Here is what her typical day looks like:

5:00 a.m.

Lauren wakes up and gets herself and her son ready for school.

8:00 a.m.

She arrives on campus and goes to the reading and writing lab to study and work on her assignments before class.

10:00 a.m.

Lauren attends classes for two hours.

12:00 p.m.

She returns home and does homework.

2:30 p.m.

She picks her son up from school, drives to an adjacent town to drop him off with his grandparents, and then drives back for work.

4:00 p.m.

Lauren works a full shift at a fast food restaurant.

12:00 a.m.

She picks up her son, returns home, and goes to bed.

Because of the tightly scheduled nature of her day, Lauren explains that she only comes to campus, "[to go] to classes, to study, and do my lab work... and that's it. I'm not really involved in anything besides that."

The school's Student Success Committee (SSC) members and the Academic Learning Community (ALC) program staff understand the need for information disbursed in alternative locations and formats. The SSC, for example, has put together a list of services with short descriptions and referral sheets that instructors can hand out to students during class. Like the ALC, they have made a concerted effort to reach more students by making announcements about the program during scheduled classroom visits. The ALC has also followed up with letters and emails informing students of their eligibility to participate in the program. The experiences of the women in our study suggest that more effective outreach can make programs more accessible. In fact, given many students' limited time on campus, the classroom itself may need to be the main hub of program and services outreach.

ASSUMPTION #2:
Students will seek support if they need it.

REALITY:
Some students are reluctant to seek help, even when they know they need it.

Even when students are aware of available supports, they may not seek them out. In fact, a recent national survey by The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) found that 46% of students do not use advising and planning services. There are many possible reasons for this pattern, including lack of time and motivation, though our data tell a different story. The women in our study consistently mentioned choosing not to seek help after negative experiences, including an inability to schedule appointments, incorrect advice or information, negative encounters with faculty and staff, or fear of negative judgment.

Roughly one-fourth of study participants (24%) said they had not sought help because they were afraid of being judged negatively. Leslie and Carol's comments shed light on how the fear of being labeled as dumb or slow stopped them from even considering asking for help:

They offer the math tutoring here but, like I said, I'm not social so I don't really like to come [to school] and ask for help. And people I don't know may think I'm an idiot because I don't know math. But that's

how I feel, so I avoid it and I just go along and hope that my effort gets me by.
(Leslie, 23 years old)

I don't think I feel comfortable. Like for me, I feel like I shouldn't be asking. I don't know, I guess it's something that I need to work on too. But I feel like if I have to ask for help from a teacher, I kind of feel like, "Duh, I didn't learn it the first time or when I was supposed to." So I guess I'm kind of insecure.
(Carol, 19 years old)

Some of these students said they wanted to be self-reliant and did not feel like they deserved help or were entitled to ask for it. For example, Katie explained:

I kind of keep things to myself, like if I'm going to miss class or whatever, I won't tell the instructor. I don't like to bug them or disturb them. You know, I'm an adult and I know what I have to do and I think a lot of instructors don't like you bugging them or asking them [for help].
(Katie, 22 years old)

In addition to students' feelings of insecurity and individual responsibility, institutional obstacles can discourage and even prevent future help-seeking. Nearly a third of the participants (32%) cited some aspect of the community college as a hindrance; often, whether intentionally or not, they pointed to the effects of budget cuts on programs and services. For example:

And then, what's hard is, like, tutoring is so booked up. I tried...to get tutoring. They said they can't help me until like the middle of next month. I'm like, "I need the help now."
(Helen, 21 years old)

Similarly, Carla, a 20-year-old student, was dissuaded from visiting the Transfer and Career Center because she perceived the hurdles she would have to clear in order to make and keep an appointment as too daunting:

I know they have the Transfer and the Career Center, and stuff like that, but I don't know, they just don't speak to me...It doesn't make me want to go ...and especially since the lines are always long and there are always people, and you have to make an appointment and this and that, and it's just— it's not easy.

Given these perceived obstacles, students may instead seek help outside of formal channels. In our study, close to half of the women (42%)

acknowledged that they sought help from peers, while more than one-fourth (28%) said they turned to family members and significant others. These supports can and should be part of any web of support, but classmates, friends, and family may lack sufficient information to effectively guide students.

In sum, few students eschew help entirely, but not all who need formalized, institutional support are willing to seek it. Whether through formal programs or otherwise, community college staff may need to initiate support and more effectively structure opportunities for students so that they receive the help they need. For low-income women, many of whom are first-generation college students, having someone explain the programs and their purpose may also make the difference in their willingness to participate.

Lessons Learned and Promising Practices: Facilitating Student Help-Seeking

Create communities of support for students, including peers, faculty, and educational counselors.

When students have meaningful connections with members of the college community, they have a web of social and academic support that helps them persist. As a program counselor from EOPS-CARE noted:

I used to think when students dropped out of college it was because they weren't doing well. I read a report: the number one reason students drop out of college is not because of financial, not because they're not doing well in college, it's because they don't feel connected to anybody at the college, whether it's another student, whether it's a staff member, an instructor, a counselor, somebody. They want to feel connection. Like family, they want to feel like they belong to something.

Learning communities are a promising response to this problem because they meld academic development with social support. For example, the Academic Learning Community (ALC) at LCC links courses so that students move through as a cohort, providing a built-in peer network. They are explicitly expected to depend on one another and collaborate on school work. The women in our study described how they had developed study groups, contacted one another to get help on their homework, and socialized beyond school. Patty, a 21-year-old student, noted, "Before the ALC, I didn't really socialize with any of

my classmates. It would be like 'hi, bye,' and that's it after the semester ended." Now, because she is always with the same students, she has established and maintained relationships. "It's to the point," she explained, "where we go out after school, on the weekends, or just stuff like that. We're all friends on Facebook."

Because the ALC courses are linked, instructors are also part of the learning community, and they collaborate to monitor students' progress and facilitate interdisciplinary lessons and skill development. Mary, a 28-year-old woman, described how her instructors keep an eye on students:

All the professors, they work together so it makes it easier. They know what's going on in your reading class and your English class, and those professors, they communicate with each other. It gives the students that confidence... kind of like a little guardian angel thing so you will succeed and you won't drop out because you have that confidence. If you're doing not so good in one class, the other two teachers know, so they'll come and get on you to push you.

Other campus programs at LCC provide similar levels of support, albeit in different formulations.

SPOTLIGHT PROGRAM: Supplemental Instruction

Based on the University of Missouri-Kansas City model for supplemental instruction (SI), the SI program at LCC provides academic assistance through regularly scheduled, peer-facilitated study sessions. SI leaders are students who have completed and done well in particular courses; they facilitate and act as peer role models for other students who are now enrolled in those courses. At LCC, the SI program focuses on courses with high drop and failure rates. The program serves anywhere from 500 to 1,000 students per semester, depending on funding and student enrollment. In spring 2010, close to 900 students participated in the program.

SPOTLIGHT PROGRAM: Academic Learning Community

LCC's Academic Learning Community (ALC) program was established in 2006 to help students become part of a community of self-reliant, active, and engaged learners; connect learning to the classroom and beyond; and develop relationships with other students and the institution to increase student success.

The ALC enrolls students in grouped courses with common themes, activities, and assignments. The program provides an orientation, priority

registration for ALC courses, assigned counselors, access to technology, supplemental instructors, and university visits.

ALC employs a part-time educational advisor who helps students make sense of the program and their educational planning. A student will be referred to a counselor on campus if she does not yet have a formal educational plan. From fall 2010 to spring 2011, ALC served about 450 students.

Rather than one-shot services or information sessions, a web of support comprised of faculty, peers, counselors, and program staff and rooted in a consistent programmatic structure appears to make a greater impact on student learning and persistence. Confirming existing research on the importance of integration and connectedness (Deil-Amen, 2010; Tinto, 1993; Karp, 2011), programs such as the ALC highlight how persistence is not only an individual endeavor, but also a social and collective process.

Embed academic and social help within courses.

The women in our study suggest that the responsibility for seeking support should not be placed solely on students' shoulders. While it may be unfeasible to eliminate long lines, long wait times, and the need for appointments, we nevertheless need to recognize that students see these issues as obstacles to seeking help, especially when there are numerous other pulls on their time both on and off campus. Moreover, even if instructors are approachable, reluctant students may not seek help because they are self-conscious or afraid (Cox, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). And students who *are* willing to ask for help may not do so until they are critically behind. For students who are reluctant or unable to seek academic help, for whatever reason, structured supports that are formally embedded in given courses—for example, through tutoring or learning communities—are critical.

At LCC, Supplemental Instruction (SI) provides structured support to students. The program provides not only academic assistance but also what we refer to as framing tools, which students need in order to utilize available help (e.g., changing negative thinking

patterns to positive ones). Rather than targeting individual students, the SI program works with students and faculty in courses with high drop, failure, and/or withdrawal rates. Supplemental instructors, who are generally peer tutors with intensive training, explain to students how to approach the material and help them understand that the benefits of seeking help outweigh any perceived costs to their self-esteem. Shifting students' thinking about what it means to ask for academic tutoring is a conscious strategy on the program's part. As the SI Coordinator shared:

We don't go to at-risk students. We go to at-risk classes, and that's a big difference. ... We found out that it takes that stigma away from saying, "Oh you think I'm stupid." You find a lot of students think that, "Well I don't need help like that." We've found when we attack courses in that manner, that's where you can get the students' interest and they say, "Oh, ok, I honestly do need help because I'm not getting it."

These framing tools allow students to acknowledge that they need help without attaching static, negative labels to their individual abilities. The approach concedes that the class or subject matter is difficult for many students, so no one feels as though he or she is the only one struggling. Support is made available early and often, allowing students to receive help before they fall too far behind. And importantly, course-based interventions such as SI provide students with multiple sources of support beyond their classroom instructors. For example, SI sessions are conducted in groups, giving students opportunities to develop peer networks. Additionally, because SI leaders are students, they also act as peer role models.

ASSUMPTION #3:
Providing general information and advice is sufficient to aid students.

REALITY:
Students need personalized guidance and need to be coached on decision-making.

Like many community college students, low-income women are often the first in their families to enroll in higher education. As a result, they may lack access to institutional resources and knowledge about navigating college pathways, and thus it is essential that they have access to information and advice that can guide their decisions. But simply making basic information available is typically not enough; often it must be tailored to individual circumstances to be of value. Unfortunately, the students in our study tended to express dissatisfaction with counselors and support staff who did not provide sufficient time or attention to help them figure out their goals and plans. Fewer than one-fourth (22%) mentioned counselors who helped them set goals and clarified the pathway to attain them. Others felt like they wandered for semesters or even years before fully understanding how to achieve their goals, or they changed majors more than once before finding a direction.

One-fourth of the women (25%) mentioned counseling sessions that were rushed, left them feeling unsure about how to proceed, or simply frustrated them. Jeselle, a 25-year-old woman, hoped for a counselor who would not only show her what courses were required, but also the multiple pathways she could potentially take toward her goal. Instead, her encounters with the general campus counselors at LCC left her frustrated:

It wasn't really helpful. I went in there with questions and still came out with the same questions. I mean, it was okay. They showed you your regular and standard things that you needed to do, but they don't show you a better route or suggest other things.

General counselors and counselors tied to specific support programs do fulfill similar duties, though general counselors serve all students, while program counselors serve only those enrolled in their programs. Given the comparative caseloads and

diverging roles, it is not surprising that the women in our study more often reported receiving adequate attention from program counselors than from general counselors. And this problem is only compounded by logistical and procedural disconnects. For example, an educational advisor from a student support program provided some insight into why the educational planning sessions that students receive from general campus counselors might be confusing and/or ineffective:

[Students] look at this list of classes on the educational plan. It doesn't make any sense to them. It literally is just a list. Different counselors have different symbols that they use and I don't know what these symbols are because they all use different ones.

Beyond simple procedural issues, though, there also appears to be a lack of personalization in counseling sessions. Kim, a 20-year-old student, described the feedback she received when she met with a general counselor:

I think it's really hard meeting with the [general] counselors because when I actually sit down with them they don't really talk to you face-to-face. They just write down, "Oh you need these classes, this class, this class, this class." And I'm like, "Okay, like, what does that mean? How am I supposed to get them?" It's really competitive to get classes, so I'm like, "Okay, I want to sit down with them." And what if I can't get into this class then what do I do? What do I take?

It was clear from our conversations that some women felt they were not receiving the information and guidance they needed to visualize and plan their short- and long-term goals.

Lessons Learned and Promising Practices: Developing Students' Decision-Making Capacities

Require students to meet with counselors and educational advisors on an ongoing basis.

Consistent and regular sessions allow counselors more time to become familiar with students, which in turn may contribute to more personalized attention and the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships. This type of advising relationship was cited by the women in our study as one of the main benefits of their experiences in student support programs. More than one-third (38%) specifically

pointed to the value of counseling experiences where they were provided with contingency plans or alternate routes toward their goals, or were simply helped with problem solving when roadblocks came up.

Students especially appreciated when counselors and staff in student support programs elaborated on the steps they could take to move toward achieving their educational goals. Lilly, a 22-year-old woman, appreciated that the CalWORKs counselors “actually sit there and they help you figure out your goal plan and everything... and I was like, ‘Oh my gosh I have options? They’re giving me options?’” Because she was a first-generation college student, Lilly needed clear guidance in order to fully understand how to navigate unfamiliar educational terrain. She was pleased to find out that she had a choice among different educational paths and valued the fact that the counselor took the time to explain what was available to her. Lilly received basic information about course options and the potential consequences of different pathways from someone who could speak to her individual circumstances.

The ALC program’s educational advisor is similarly deliberate about the advising process. She refers her students to specific general school counselors she thinks will work well with them, and then makes herself available to consult with them afterward:

They bring me their [educational] plan from the counselor, so everything’s correct, like, I’m not messing with that. And then we sit together and we plan out the next two, three years. Literally every class that’s on here, we put on a plan. And when I see all of these students, they always say, “This is so helpful.”

The advisor’s efforts center on taking the original educational plan, which students find quite archaic, and translating it into a schedule that is more meaningful and relevant to their needs. The ALC program’s course schedule plan takes the format of a timeline that is organized semester-by-semester, so students can better conceptualize the series of courses they need to take as well as their progression toward their educational goals. Educational advisors and other paraprofessionals play a critical role in helping students make sense and take control of their educational plans. They also play a vital supporting role for general counselors who are often overburdened and lack the time needed to work closely with students.

For students who have had prior negative experiences when asking for help, the positive relationships initiated by faculty, staff, and counselors may make them less likely to withdraw and help them overcome the perception that counselors and faculty do not care about them. In the EOPS-CARE program for low-income students, for example, counseling is considered a core feature of student support. Students in the program are assigned a single counselor for three mandated counseling sessions each semester. Ongoing meetings between students and counselors who are familiar with them are a central part of helping students plan their educational trajectories and allowing both students and counselors to track their progress.

SPOTLIGHT PROGRAM: EOPS-CARE

Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) is a statewide initiative with a 40-year history. It is designed to go “above and beyond” the traditional educational and student support programs of the college in order to:

- Recruit and retain students;
- Provide personal and accessible services;
- Facilitate the transfer and career placement of students;
- Stimulate and support student interest in their intellectual, educational, and vocational achievement; and
- Positively affect student self-concept and self-esteem.

Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) is a component of EOPS that offers additional supports specific to parents, such as funds that may be applied toward childcare. In 2011–2012, the EOPS program at LCC served approximately 400 students who received a wide range of supports, including counseling, tutoring, priority registration, educational supplies, skills/career workshops, and book vouchers.

Provide ongoing coaching through counseling or college success strategies courses.

Students need personalized guidance that speaks to their specific circumstances and goals. At the same time, they also need to learn how to make decisions on their own, so that when such supports are no longer provided, they have the capacity and tools to be independently successful. Quite a few of the participants (22%) explained that advice related to course taking strategies was crucial if they were to persist to transfer or degree.

Personalized counseling sessions provide an opportunity for students to develop these skills and strategies. For example, Betty, a 29-year-old single mother, described her EOPS counselor as someone she could turn to on a frequent basis, not just for help outlining a course plan but also for more general help

with strategizing and making decisions about school. Calling her counselor her “fairy godfather,” Betty described one session in which he offered insight into the transfer process and how to fulfill the necessary course requirements in math and science:

I was having trouble when I was retaking the courses. So he helped me understand that I can just do the courses that I'm more confident in and leave the physics out. And if I do Math 1-A and 1-B, this calculus transfers and it's comparable to 1-A, 1-B and 1-C at the university. ...He really mapped that out for me and let me understand it and then took all the pressure off of me in terms of what I could register for and what I should [do]. He'd say, "If you're going to register for this, this, and this, why would you want to do that to yourself? You're going to have a big load. You may want to just take this one over here, space this out 'til summer."

SNAPSHOT: College Success Strategies Class

As part of the Academic Learning Community program, students are required to take a college success strategies course. On this day, Nina, the course instructor and educational advisor for the program, begins her introductory lesson entitled, “Enroll Your Instructor in Your Education.” She first directs the students to practice the note-taking skills they learned in a previous class. Nina continues the lesson by advising students to research course instructors before enrolling and then asks, “What do you think that means?” As an example, she suggests that if there were three English classes that fit a student’s schedule, that student could research the instructors by asking friends, talking to instructors, or asking to sit in on a class. She also cautions students to weigh input from friends by considering their own study or course attendance habits.

Next, Nina advises her students to show visible interest during class when instructors are trying to engage them. At the same time, she notes, students also need to make an effort to know instructors. She suggests going to their office hours and asks, “How many have come to my office hours?” Only three students raise their hands, so she encourages others to come. Nina suggests that if an instructor’s office hours do not match the students’ schedules they should email to find alternate times. She stresses, “It’s really important to get to know your teachers.” She mentions that they are people too and not just teachers. She also shares other reasons to build relationships with faculty, including for letters of recommendation, which they may need if they want to apply to other colleges, or for scholarships, graduate school, or selective programs.

Finally, she advises students to “seek alternatives” if they end up with bad instructors, including teachers who are not accommodating about office hours or are not helpful outside of class. She asks, “What can you do?” She and the students list options including supplemental instruction, individual or group tutoring, workshops at the writing or math centers, services for disabled students, library services, psychological services if they are feeling depressed or stressed, counseling, financial aid, and EOPS.

Students may not always be aware that course scheduling is about more than simply getting into the courses they need; it is a balancing act that requires spreading out time- and labor-intensive classes. In addition to working out a course plan that allowed Betty to fulfill her transfer requirements, the counselor advised her to pace herself so that she could complete her coursework successfully. This coaching is part of helping students understand their learning needs and limitations and providing them with effective time management skills—both of which are likely to be more effective when students and counselors develop personal relationships.

Programs like ALC, guidance classes, and educational advisors all contribute to an important web of support, but they also augment the work of counselors by teaching students college survival skills. For example, as part of the linked courses in ALC, students take guidance courses, such as “Introduction to College” and “College Success Strategies,” which help them develop time-management and goal-setting skills. The courses also provide students with strategies for taking notes, being organized, and socializing with other students and instructors on campus. Thus, they help students develop skill sets that are transferrable across contexts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Many community college students are challenged by balancing their work and home lives while meeting the demands of their studies. Low-income women—and especially women who are single parents—certainly face these challenges, but they often encounter additional barriers stemming from more limited financial resources and the particular demands of family and work that come from being breadwinners and caregivers. They need sustained, consistent support that enables them to focus their time and energies on academic success.

As the nation moves forward with reforming community colleges and developing robust student support programs, we can learn a great deal from the experiences of low-income women and the practitioners who seek to support them. Their feedback highlights practices that can benefit all students; their voices suggest that instead of piecemeal approaches to change, we need a cohesive vision with complementary practices that will positively and holistically impact student success.

From our conversations at LCC, we learned that low-income women are sometimes reluctant or unable to ask for help when they need it, but that some campus programs have found effective ways to overcome this challenge. While these types of supports are critical, students need coaching to develop individual decision-making skills, as well as accurate, personalized information about navigating educational institutions. We have already highlighted some specific programmatic implications that tie to the three key assumptions addressed in the brief. These can be distilled into several broader policy implications related to support for community college student persistence and completion.

Continually assess assumptions about students.

Administrators and practitioners must constantly question assumptions about students and assess the effectiveness of programs designed to serve them. Students’ help-seeking behaviors can reflect a range of attitudes, and this diversity of experiences needs to be considered when expectations are formed and supports are generated. To this end, community colleges should not only gather data on students who are served by support programs and services, but also on those who are not. This information would allow administrators and practitioners to “think like students” as they advertise, implement, and improve support programs. More specifically, it could be used to develop targeted outreach plans and practices that reach a broader group of students, thereby improving student success rates.

Develop social and academic webs of student support within and across courses and people.

Developing webs of structured and ongoing support for students requires coordination among multiple levels of the institution and across various departments. These webs require more than coordination, however. Meaningful social relationships that take into account the realities of students’ lives are key to facilitating student engagement; these are the social-emotional connections that support student success. Moreover, a cohesive student learning community arises out of a professional learning community. An integrated and team management approach to student support services must move beyond faculty to include program providers, counselors, and staff. It includes students developing relationships with peers, faculty, and program staff but also requires faculty and program staff to build ongoing relationships with one another so they can

communicate and share best practices. An integrated, student-centered approach can help students succeed not just for one semester, but for the duration of their college careers.

Make student empowerment and relationship building explicit goals of counseling services and guidance courses.

Student empowerment must be integral to advising, tutoring, and other types of services. Information is only one in a range of provisions that students should be able to access. Counseling and guidance experiences that empower students to chart their own pathways are more likely to benefit them in the long-term than traditional information sessions with no explicit emphasis on skill development. Likewise, counselors, advisors, and instructors need to form personal connections with students as they help them formulate strategies, familiarize themselves with alternative pathways, and develop decision-making and other transferrable strategies. These relationships can bolster students' confidence and skills, and help them build attachments to the institution.

Provide community colleges with necessary resources to improve and evaluate support services.

Finally, reality needs to match rhetoric. If student success is a priority, then funding, resources, time, and effort need to align with this goal. Material support for students is part of a cohesive system. Work-study and other financial aid programs that provide living stipends would be of great benefit to all lower-income students, particularly those who must support themselves and other family members as they work toward certificates or degrees. Furthermore, affordable and flexible childcare is crucial for single parents. These types of resources and supports may make the difference for students as they decide whether they can enroll full-time and continuously or whether they must stop out.

By the same token, ongoing, personalized guidance can allow students to gain information and decision-making skills and to successfully navigate college, but community colleges often lack the resources and counselors to provide such supports. In California, the ratio of students to community college counselors ranges from 800:1 to more than 1,800:1 (California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force, 2012). Even on the low end, the number is well over the suggested ratio of 370:1 (Academic Senate

for California Community Colleges, 2003). Without adequate counseling services, students are more likely to make uninformed choices about their educational futures, are less likely to take advantage of available support services and, as a result, are arguably more likely to take longer to obtain their educational goals or stop out before completion.

More so than any other sector of higher education, community colleges serve students from wide-ranging backgrounds and with diverse educational and vocational needs. But they are increasingly asked to do more with much less. Indeed, since 2009, California's community college system has suffered a 12% budget cut (Baron, 2012). These cutbacks do not merely affect auxiliary and administrative services; they impact the core mission of the schools, including reduction of academic courses and student support programs. The programs we have highlighted here serve fewer and fewer students each year—even as staff put in more volunteer hours, so that students can continue to receive the same quality of support. To make California's Student Success Act of 2012 a sustainable reality, capacity-building for community colleges needs to be a priority. Developing robust models of student support is achievable, but adequate resources and support must be given to the colleges in order to accomplish these goals.

Notes

- 1 We thank the participants of the study who generously gave their time and shared their experiences and insights. We would also like to thank our external reviewer, Rebecca Cox, for her helpful comments, Karen Jarsky for her editing assistance, and Amanda Datnow and Daniel Solorzano for their feedback.
- 2 All names of schools, participants, and school-specific programs are pseudonyms.
- 3 To recruit additional participants, we posted flyers on campuses, asked program staff members to send out letters and emails about the study, and relied on referrals from other participants. Members of the research team also attended program orientation sessions to advertise the study. As compensation for participation, each of the women received a \$50 gift card to a local grocery store.
- 4 We used purposive sampling to identify participants (Merriam, 1998). Women were eligible to be included in the study if they qualified for or received student financial aid, were eligible for needs-based welfare assistance, and/or reported their household income as 185% of the poverty line or lower. We only included women who were between the ages of 18 and 31 at the start of

the study and who were attending or had attended community college. All of the study participants lived within the case study area and defined themselves as single. Although the U.S. Census Bureau generally defines a single parent family as a household with one or more children under 18 years old living with a parent who has never been married, or who is widowed or divorced and never remarried, we used a broader definition that includes women separated from their husbands.

- 5 These other support programs include first year bridge programs (such as Puente), TRIO, academic support programs for students of color, and services for students with disabilities.

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