

Celebrating Exemplary Student Support Leaders:

Stories and Practical Advice from California
Community College Faculty and Staff



As part of the California Guided Pathways Project (CAGP), the College Futures Foundation, in partnership with The Ada Center and Phase Two Advisory, is supporting the development of resources for institutions pursuing holistic student support approaches (HSS). HSS seeks to provide students with the critical and individually relevant academic, social, and personal supports they need, when they need them. In its ideal state, this approach establishes a more student-centered campus, one that is more equitable, accessible, and easier for all students to navigate.

 The Ada Center

This publication was authored by Brittney Davidson and Sarah Zauner at The Ada Center with support from our colleagues Andrés Hernández, Candice Wilson-Stykes, Judy Marquez Kiyama, and our Advisory Board. The Ada Center helps higher education leaders more effectively use technology to support success and equity goals. We partner with states, institutions, and national organizations to provide practical research and technical assistance. The Ada Center supports the California Guided Pathways Project by providing guidance and resources on how to effectively use technology to strengthen success and equity goals, and by supporting efforts to scale holistic student supports among partner institutions.



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College Futures Foundation works to ensure that more students who reflect California's diversity complete a B.A. and access the opportunity for a better life. College Futures Foundation believes this is best accomplished when California's education system is designed to meet students' needs, dedicated to fulfilling their aspirations, and ensures equitable outcomes. College Futures Foundation has supported the California Guided Pathways Project since its inception in 2017.



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Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into equity-forward reform strategies. Phase Two Advisory provides strategic planning and implementation support, just-in-time research, and professional learning opportunities to leaders and practitioners throughout the higher education sector as they shepherd transformative change. Phase Two Advisory supports the California Guided Pathways Project by helping build communities of practice and supporting efforts to scale holistic student supports among partner institutions.

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FROM COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

Dear Student Support Leaders,

At a time when our country was paralyzed by a global pandemic, you took action. As the related economic recession and racial reckoning unfolded and the pandemic kept us away from campuses, your living room sofa, your breakfast table, or whatever corner of your home you could find, became your advising desk, your tutoring center, your classroom. These spaces also became places of refuge for your students. As they turned on their phones and computers, they sought out your faces and voices as sources of strength, consistency, and connection. In addition to guidance, you offered hope.

Through this project, 46 individuals from 25 California community colleges were nominated for recognition by their peers, leadership, and/or direct reports for the ways that they went above and beyond to support students in 2020 and 2021. This publication honors each of them and draws on their perspectives and ideas.

At College Futures Foundation, we believe there is nothing more transformative for individuals, our economy, and our society than educational opportunity. We work to ensure that more students who reflect California's diversity complete a B.A. and access the opportunity for a better life. We believe this is best accomplished when California's education system is designed to meet students' needs, dedicated to fulfilling their aspirations, and ensures equitable outcomes. That requires strong leadership. We believe that institutional leaders are critical in enabling those outcomes and, equity-focused, holistic student support leaders are absolutely essential to ensuring that students' degree and career dreams come true.

We have learned through this project that extraordinary student support leaders come from all walks of life and hold many kinds of roles. You are program leads, deans, faculty, classified staff,

and Guided Pathways and Student Equity leads. You take phone calls from stressed students and teach colleagues how to set up Zoom breakout rooms. You rally individuals from different departments and break down silos to find resources for your students. You do what needs to be done. You exemplify the extraordinary power of everyday leadership.

Of course, the work you do didn't start in 2020. For years, you have been student advocates. You have asked tough questions and invited courageous conversations, because you have dared to challenge the status quo. You push California's institutions to be better. On behalf of the students you serve, we thank you. It is an honor for our foundation to learn from you and, in partnership with the Ada Center, to lift up the lessons you offer.

In addition to expressing gratitude for the leaders recognized in this report, I would also like to thank the many nominators who answered the call to recognize changemakers in their midst. I know you, too, wear many hats and work tirelessly on behalf of colleagues and students. And yet, you took the time to lift up someone else. This is a testament to your character as well.

As we look forward, beyond the unprecedented events of 2020–2021, we know there is still much to reimagine and improve when it comes to supporting students. We hope that through this project and publication, you take a moment to reflect on the power of showing up and working together. And we hope that others find inspiration and wisdom from your voices and stories.

With gratitude,



April Yee, Ph.D.

Senior Program Officer

College Futures Foundation

CONGRATULATIONS

TO THE RECOGNIZED HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT LEADERS

The following honorees were nominated by their colleagues for their exemplary and equity-focused efforts to advance holistic student support:

STACEY ALLEN El Camino College

MELANIE APONTE CHU Lake Tahoe Community College

TARYN BAILEY El Camino College

DEVON BOONE MiraCosta College

LISA BREWSTER San Diego Miramar College

KELLIE BUTLER Folsom Lake College

MICHELLE CAMPUZANO Cuyamaca College

ALEX CASARENO Cosumnes River College

TIFFANY CLARK Cosumnes River College

LISA CLARKE San Diego Miramar College

AAREN COBB Reedley College

GINA CULLEN College of Marin

MARIA DELA CRUZ Santa Ana College

MICHELLE FRANCIS West Valley College

RACHEL MORING-GARCIA Clovis Community College

TINA GIRON Modesto Junior College

KIM GOFF Sacramento City College

TRACEY GOMEZ Sacramento City College

MONIQUE GREENE Riverside City College

NAN HO Las Positas College

CÉSAR JIMÉNEZ Compton College

SERGIO LEMUS Madera Community College

ANA LOBATO West Valley College

SARAH MARQUEZ Lake Tahoe Community College

JETHRO MIDGETT Norco College

INEZ MOORE Riverside City College

MATTHEW MORIN Chaffey College

JAZZIE MUGANZO MURPHY American River College

LORENA NEWSON Victor Valley College

ANNIE NGO MiraCosta College

POLLY PARKS El Camino College

DIPTE PATEL El Camino College

JANICE PON-ISHIKAWA El Camino College

MARGARET PROTHERO Santa Barbara City College

DANIELLE REENTS Reedley College

JOSHUA ROSALES El Camino College

MARISSA SALAZAR Cuyamaca College

DAVID SCHLANGER Norco College

MOLLY SENEAL Folsom Lake College

LIZ SHAKER College of the Canyons

JENNY SIMON El Camino College

ROBERT STEVENSON Modesto Junior College

JASON SUAREZ El Camino College

ANGELLA VENJOHN Las Positas College

DANA WASSMER Cosumnes River College

MARCIA WILSON Los Angeles Trade-Technical College

THANK YOU

FROM YOUR STUDENTS

Over spring 2022, The Ada Center interviewed 32 California community college students and recent graduates from 17 institutions about the people and practices that impacted them most during this turbulent period. Invariably, students pointed to college faculty and staff who encouraged them to hold fast to their dreams and, crucially, to their belief in themselves. They would like to say thank you:

“I would tell them [student support leaders]: You probably don’t even know how much it means to us students. To have someone who cares... it’s like a lifeline when everything else feels like chaos. **I think, oh, they say I can do it. So I think, maybe I can.**”

“**It really does help when your faculty cares.** I was ready to give up. But then I got encouraging words or feedback or advice from them. Or maybe some leniency with due dates. That really keeps me going. You think, this person is going out of their way to help me out. Let me make sure I don’t let them down.”

“There was a point and time I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do this because I was moving and I had to do other things to sustain myself. And she was very kind and supportive, she was flexible. **It made me feel like I wasn’t alone.** She’s the biggest supporter I have on campus. I honestly love her, she’s wonderful.”

“She made it okay to try things out, and even if they didn’t work out, I could try again next time. I learned from her how to voice myself as a student and make changes around campus. **I’d want to say thank you, because of her, I’m a better leader.**”

“I did not know how I would be able to feed my child for the rest of this month. The last couple months has been so incredibly hard. This food [from the college’s drive-through food bank] will be put to good use. **I am forever grateful.**”

THANK YOU TO OUR NOMINATORS

While our student support leader honorees have unquestionably achieved great things, we also want to thank our many nominators, many of whom are exemplary student support leaders themselves, for helping to elevate others.

“The truth is, she deserves to be honored, too! We found out she nominated us and we both just thought, no, she deserves this too! **And of course it’s just like her to raise up the people around her while staying so humble!**”

“We nominated each other because, the truth is nothing gets done alone. We all respect one another, we have the same drive to make things better. **We don’t always agree on how to do things, but we all deeply understand the why.** It’s what brings us together.”

“**This means so much. To be seen.** You work so hard, and sometimes it feels like things aren’t moving, and it can start to feel really hard. That’s when you need your leaders to say, I see you.”

“The most valuable thing someone can give you is their time. And **I am just so grateful for all the time I have been given, to the people who have taught me.** [Faculty Member] gave me the nudge to speak up, she taught me how to navigate this space.”

“**You need someone in your corner when you’re doing this work.** And that’s what she does. She supports us, she blocks and tackles at the top so we can get the work done.”

Introduction: About this Publication

Beginning in 2020, California’s community colleges faced an unprecedented period. Newspaper headlines captured the progression of a deadly global pandemic, a racial justice reckoning, and wildfires sweeping across the state and the nation.

But underneath these apocalyptic headlines were quieter, parallel stories. There was the student who found the drive-through food pantry just as she was wondering how she would feed her family that week. There was the faculty member who transitioned student employees into virtual Guided Pathways ambassadors, allowing them to earn enough to avoid having to choose between their education and their income. There are hundreds of these stories that did not make the headlines. They are stories about college faculty, counselors, classified staff, deans, program managers, librarians, tutors, and so many others who formed a constellation of hope and support in a climate often marred by tragedy and chaos. These extraordinary circumstances brought out extraordinary responses from our student support leaders.

So, in the spring of 2021, The Ada Center, in partnership with the College Futures Foundation and Phase Two Advisory, encouraged California’s CAGP¹ colleges to nominate equity-focused, holistic student support leaders. This effort focused on leaders at the frontlines of student support, including faculty, department leaders, categorical program leaders, or classified professionals; the individuals responsible for bringing the colleges’ holistic student support vision to life on the ground. A total of 25 colleges nominated 46 individuals (referred to in this publication as “honorees”). The nominations were read by an advisory board consisting of a collection of thought leaders and practitioners from across the state and the country, and over 30 nominators and nominated honorees shared their perspectives through a series of in-depth interviews. *(continued on next page)*

¹ CAGP: The California Guided Pathways Project supports *Guided Pathways* implementation across a subset of California Community Colleges. College participation was based on a competitive application process. More about CAGP can be found here: <https://foundationccc.org/What-We-Do/Student-Success/California-Guided-Pathways-Project>

Illustration by Morgan Liu

The goal of this was two-fold:

One, we and our students have been living through unprecedented times, and so many individuals over the last few years worked hard and sacrificed so much in the pursuit of making things better for our students. They deserve a spotlight.

And two, across the course of the last few years, faculty and staff noted that they missed the ability to have a cup of coffee with a near-peer, ask the hard questions, and get candid answers. While nothing can replace this experience, we have, through the support of our advisory board and conversations with student support leaders themselves, crowd-sourced some of these difficult questions and recorded the honest perspectives and “messy human details” of how the work gets done.

In the words of one honoree, “We don’t need the ‘everything is awesome’ campaign. It’s more refreshing to hear the truth.” Nominators and their honorees have instead shared triumphs, frustrations, and failures, and leveled with us about when, for some topics, the most honest answer is, “We don’t quite know yet...but we’re trying.”

Given this candor, some of our interviewees have requested anonymity, which we have honored.

While the content of this publication was sourced from current holistic student support leaders in California’s community colleges, their advice and their stories offer valuable insight for:

- College leadership interested in understanding how to collaborate with and empower student support leaders;
- Existing student support leaders interested in learning how others have navigated common challenges and driven impact; and
- Emerging student support leaders, who may use this as a pocket guide of advice from mentors across departments, institutions, roles; we hope you may learn from their journey as you chart your way forward.



Photographs by Ryan DeVera

ALPHABET SOUP



Illustration by Issa Saldívar

Key Terms Within this Publication

The Ada Center, in partnership with Phase Two Advisory, has developed this publication as one part of a broader set of resources for institutions and individuals engaged in holistic student support reforms. The following **key terms** are referenced across these resources:

Equity-Forward Perspective

For the purposes of this suite of holistic student support resources, we see equity as a process by which campus practices, programs, and mindsets shift such that students' educational experiences and outcomes are not predetermined by their racial, economic, or social background. This approach requires that institutions and leaders work to create conditions that support the success of student groups historically excluded from higher education and for whom higher education was not designed. The Ada Center also consulted and recommends a number of other resources on cultivating an equity-forward institution, including several from the USC Center for Race and Equity. These are listed on page 83.

Holistic Student Support (HSS)

Holistic student support systems, as defined by The Ada Center and Phase Two Advisory, address the reality that students' needs beyond the classroom play an important role in their ability to be effective learners. From an institutional perspective, this means colleges must address a broad range of student needs to ensure that students are served equitably. Colleges do so by offering a diverse selection of information, services, and resources that are intentionally integrated into a proactive system of academic, social, and personal supports. Students are therefore able to easily navigate and access relevant support, regardless of their background or college knowledge.

Student Success Teams (SSTs)

To implement holistic support systems, institutions may organize into Student Success Teams. These are cross-divisional teams of individuals who collaboratively engage in cohort management to support and assist a group of students from entry to completion, with a focus on equitable outcomes. According to SST research conducted by Phase Two Advisory, "At its core, this means that a team structure: Identifies cohorts of students; assigns them to a team, and; provides cohort-based case management to meet students' needs in and out of the classroom in proactive and personalized ways."²

² For more information about Student Success Team implementation, see Karp, M. M. & Lyons, S. M. (2022). *Student Success Teams: An Implementation Guide for Community Colleges*. Phase Two Advisory.



Illustration by Isa Saldivar

This publication also references several other terms that are central to broader community college reform in the state of California, including:

 **Guided Pathways**

Guided Pathways refers to a framework for whole-college transformation centered on the idea that colleges should create an intentionally structured design “to help all students explore, choose, plan, and complete programs aligned with their career and education goals efficiently and affordably.”³ Guided pathways concepts were originally organized around several core “pillars,” or reform ideas: (1) mapping pathways to student end goals, (2) helping students choose and enter a program pathway, (3) keeping students on path, and (4) ensuring students are learning. However, the model continues to evolve with new research on effective practices for student success.

 **Classified Staff**

In the state of California, community college-based “classified staff” are individuals in key support staff roles, including student support office employees, custodians, health aides, academic assistance providers, etc. These roles are generally represented by unions and have defined classification specifications with specific job duties, responsibilities, and pay scales. Classified staff also follow specific rules and regulations around the number of hours per week they work and the allocation of those work hours (i.e., what tasks they may or may not do as a part of their job).

A list of resources recommended by student support leaders interviewed for this publication, including work by the RP Group, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII), Phase Two Advisory, the USC Center for Race and Equity, and others can also be found on page 83.

³ Community College Research Center (n.d.). *Guided Pathways*. Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research/guided-pathways.html>. Accessed June 9, 2022

Who Are Our Exemplary Student Support Leaders?



At first, there were disgruntled murmurs throughout the room.

It was the kickoff event for El Camino College’s Guided Pathways initiative, and everyone had been assigned seats—not with their most familiar colleagues and friends, but with leaders from other departments and units across the institution. Faculty sat alongside counselors, who sat alongside the Umoja program staff, and so on.

“People were a little upset, they wanted to sit with their people,” laughed Taryn Bailey, El Camino College’s Guided Pathways Program Administrator, “but after a few hours, people started to learn from each other. Instructors realized they only knew the student in the context of their classroom, the counselor only knew the student in the context of their appointment. But when you start to talk to each other, the student becomes more multi-dimensional. Faculty and staff start to say, ‘I didn’t realize all this needed to happen just to keep the student here, at the college.’ You start to see students as a whole individual, you start to see how each unit impacts them, and it gets real. And then that’s when the work can begin.”

The El Camino College team underscored a critical idea: anyone and everyone at a college can and should play a role in advancing holistic student support efforts. In fact, the list of nominated honorees for this publication included not only Guided Pathways coordinators and leads, but STEM faculty, data analysts, counselors, librarians, institutional researchers, art professors, and career center staff.

“When we say, ‘holistic student support leader,’ you usually think of the Guided Pathways lead, someone on that team,” explained Polly Parks, an Assistant Professor of Biology and a Data Coach at El Camino College, “but when you’re supporting students holistically, truly, it takes all of us. Our students don’t see us in silos, they just come to the college. Which means that you can and should make a deep impact regardless of where you sit.”

However, one of the realities of holistic student support reforms is that they require (unsurprisingly) transformation. Professional titles and roles may shift. While the goals of the work may remain consistent—to provide all students with an education and the support to attain it—the how of the work changes. Faculty are asked to think differently about what happens in the classroom, counselors are tasked with learning how to use new technology, data takes on a new weight and meaning across the campus.

The individuals identified as exemplary student support leaders understood not only how to take these changes in stride, but oftentimes, they leaned into the evolution. They honed in on the unique strengths of their respective units, departments, and roles.

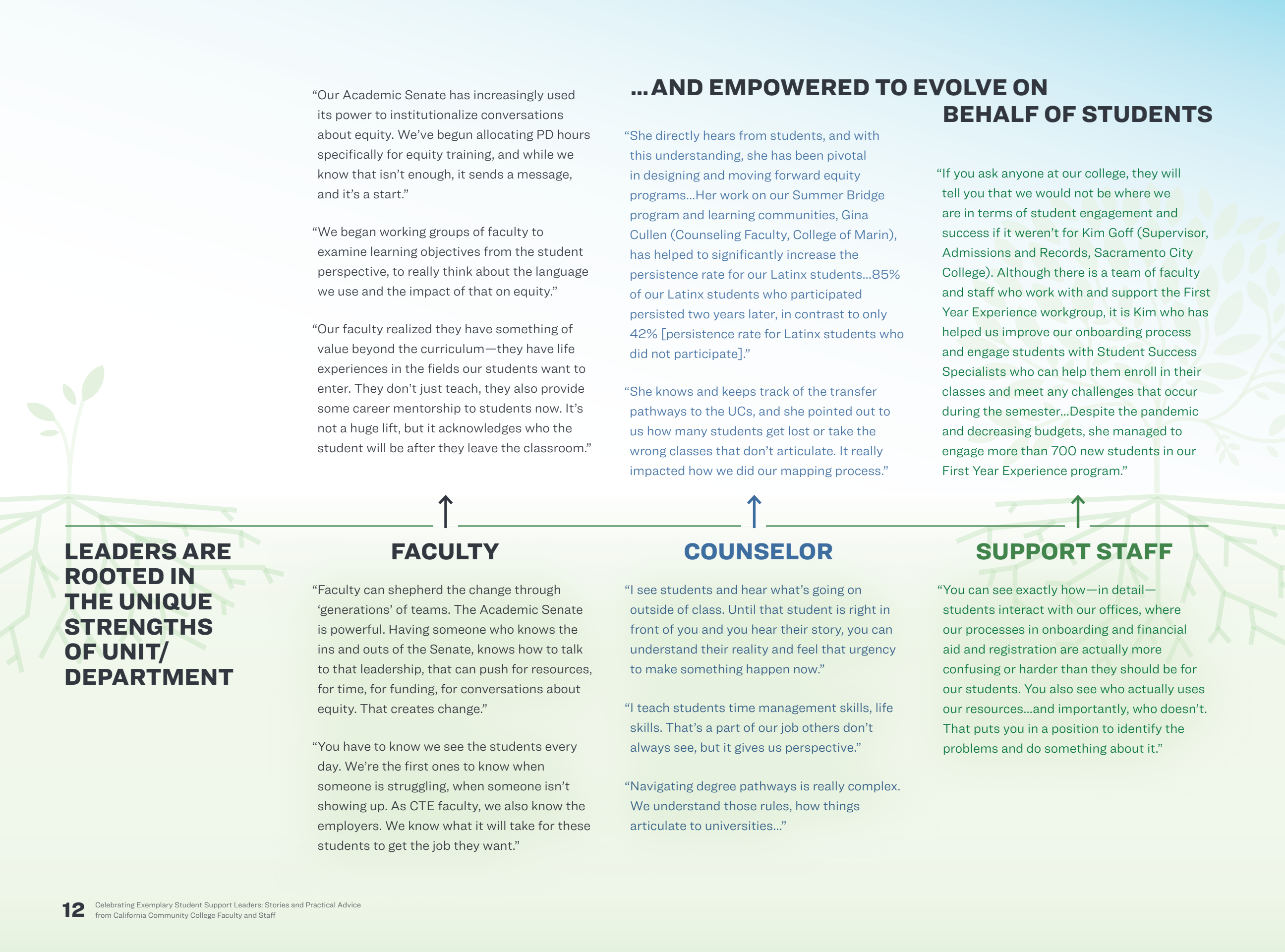
And then, drawing on these strengths, they were able to push their peers and the college as a whole to adapt, to become more equity-focused and student-centered.

Illustration by Morgan Liu



“...when you’re supporting students holistically, truly, it takes all of us. Our students don’t see us in silos, they just come to the college. Which means that you can and should make a deep impact regardless of where you sit.”

—Polly Parks, El Camino College



**LEADERS ARE
ROOTED IN
THE UNIQUE
STRENGTHS
OF UNIT/
DEPARTMENT**

“Our Academic Senate has increasingly used its power to institutionalize conversations about equity. We’ve begun allocating PD hours specifically for equity training, and while we know that isn’t enough, it sends a message, and it’s a start.”

“We began working groups of faculty to examine learning objectives from the student perspective, to really think about the language we use and the impact of that on equity.”

“Our faculty realized they have something of value beyond the curriculum—they have life experiences in the fields our students want to enter. They don’t just teach, they also provide some career mentorship to students now. It’s not a huge lift, but it acknowledges who the student will be after they leave the classroom.”



FACULTY

“Faculty can shepherd the change through ‘generations’ of teams. The Academic Senate is powerful. Having someone who knows the ins and outs of the Senate, knows how to talk to that leadership, that can push for resources, for time, for funding, for conversations about equity. That creates change.”

“You have to know we see the students every day. We’re the first ones to know when someone is struggling, when someone isn’t showing up. As CTE faculty, we also know the employers. We know what it will take for these students to get the job they want.”

**...AND EMPOWERED TO EVOLVE ON
BEHALF OF STUDENTS**

“She directly hears from students, and with this understanding, she has been pivotal in designing and moving forward equity programs...Her work on our Summer Bridge program and learning communities, Gina Cullen (Counseling Faculty, College of Marin), has helped to significantly increase the persistence rate for our Latinx students...85% of our Latinx students who participated persisted two years later, in contrast to only 42% [persistence rate for Latinx students who did not participate].”

“She knows and keeps track of the transfer pathways to the UCs, and she pointed out to us how many students get lost or take the wrong classes that don’t articulate. It really impacted how we did our mapping process.”



COUNSELOR

“I see students and hear what’s going on outside of class. Until that student is right in front of you and you hear their story, you can understand their reality and feel that urgency to make something happen now.”

“I teach students time management skills, life skills. That’s a part of our job others don’t always see, but it gives us perspective.”

“Navigating degree pathways is really complex. We understand those rules, how things articulate to universities...”



SUPPORT STAFF

“If you ask anyone at our college, they will tell you that we would not be where we are in terms of student engagement and success if it weren’t for Kim Goff (Supervisor, Admissions and Records, Sacramento City College). Although there is a team of faculty and staff who work with and support the First Year Experience workgroup, it is Kim who has helped us improve our onboarding process and engage students with Student Success Specialists who can help them enroll in their classes and meet any challenges that occur during the semester...Despite the pandemic and decreasing budgets, she managed to engage more than 700 new students in our First Year Experience program.”

“You can see exactly how—in detail—students interact with our offices, where our processes in onboarding and financial aid and registration are actually more confusing or harder than they should be for our students. You also see who actually uses our resources...and importantly, who doesn’t. That puts you in a position to identify the problems and do something about it.”

Evolving Admissions and Records to Enhance Holistic Student Support

ANA LOBATO

Assistant Director, Admissions and Records, West Valley College



Admissions and Records is often overlooked in holistic student support conversations. However, Ana Lobato, a first-generation student herself, exhibits how every department or unit on campus can transform to become more student-

centered and positively impact holistic student support efforts.

“I subscribe to a philosophy of ‘everyday leadership,’” Ana says. “I believe we can exercise excellence and reflect the highest skill levels in our respective areas. People think leadership exists at the head of the institution or the chair of the student equity commission, but really, it lives in the objectives within that work. It’s in finding ways to bring those principles and that vision back to your desk and to push it out to your peers, your students.”

Lobato has modeled this belief through her work in the Admissions and Records Department, but notes that this requires a certain shift in mindset. “There’s so much work to do that in a place as insulated as admissions, you can feel like your role is isolated to admissions. But I want my team to see their role within the campus community, and how our goals align to serve students. How do we all contribute to

“People think leadership exists at the head of the institution or the chair of the student equity commission, but really, it lives in the objectives within that work. It’s in finding ways to bring those principles and that vision back to your desk and to push it out to your peers, your students.”

—Ana Lobato, Admissions and Records, West Valley College

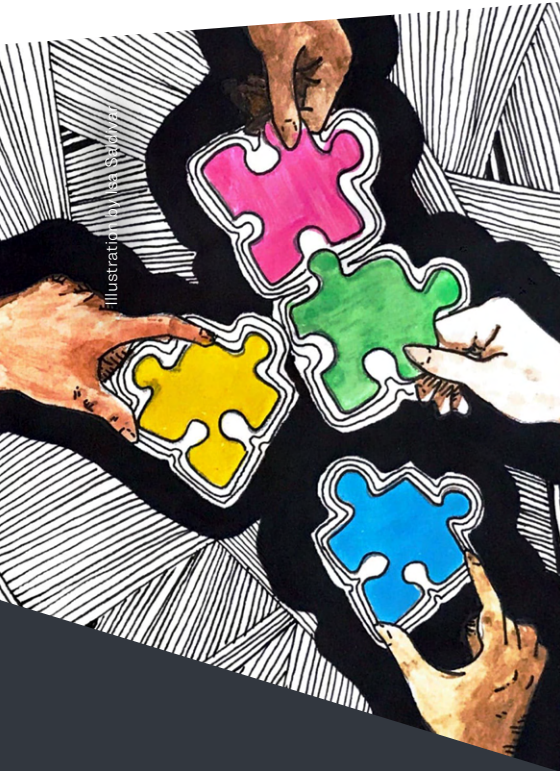
the campus climate and make this space safe and supportive for them?”

For her part, Lobato sees her position in Admissions and Records as an opportunity to engage in intentional observation. How long were students standing in line to register for a course? What experiences made students seem more or less comfortable in the office?

These intentional observations—ones that could only be made in the context of Lobato’s particular office—allowed Lobato and her team to continuously re-imagine the admissions and records processes to make things clearer and more inclusive for students, including English Language Learners, undocumented students, first-generation students, and others who might feel intimidated by the admissions process or confused by common higher education jargon. She provided feedback on the college’s onboarding processes, considering, for example, which types of information students should submit through technology-enabled platforms versus in-person conversations.

“In this role, you can notice, on the phone or in person, those questions that make students feel a little nervous,” Lobato explained, “For example, we’ve made changes to how we ask for residency documents. That requires some intentionality, particularly with our undocumented students. We now have the space configured to be accessible both virtually and in-person. And we continue to look at outcomes—qualitative and quantitative—to really examine what’s happening day-to-day.”

West Valley’s Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Stacy Gleixner, sees the impact of Lobato’s approach on the entire Admissions and Records Department: “Through [Lobato’s] leadership, there has been a noticeable culture shift in Admissions and Records towards being student centered. Lobato exemplifies the focus of our classified professionals on ensuring the entire college acts as a safety net to all students. She is working to ensure the backbone of the college is built to support and serve all students, not just those who know to actively seek out help.”



“I can innovate because I’ve seen how all these different pieces work, I can see the ideas in one and apply it to another, but still keep it grounded in the context of this community.”

—Dr. Marcia Wilson, LATTC

Authentic Leadership Comes from Tapping into Life Experiences, Regardless of Background

Beyond titles and units, exemplary student support leaders embrace how their own personal backgrounds and experiences can contribute to student support efforts.

For some exemplary leaders, experience within an institution and/or across higher education proved to be vital. Dr. Marcia Wilson began her employment with the Los Angeles Community College District in 2001, and since then, has worked in grant and resource development and workforce development initiatives. She’s managed Los Angeles Trade-Technical College’s (LATTC) Strong Workforce Initiatives, the Reentry Pathway to Success for formerly incarcerated students, and the Personal Support and Assistance Program which provides mental health services to students. And, she is actively engaged in the South LA community, serving on the Executive Steering Committee of SLATE-Z (the South Los Angeles Empowerment Zone). “It gives you perspective,” notes Dr. Wilson, “I can innovate because I’ve seen how all these different pieces work, I can see the ideas in one and apply it to another, but still keep it grounded in the context of this community.”

And Robert Stevenson, an Art and Art History Professor at Modesto Junior College, spent years learning the inner workings of higher education as well. “I definitely credit some of my success to time. I built trust with people. And I got to know how things worked through the Academic Senate.”

Certainly, academic credentials and training help to orient leaders to reform movements, education policy, and promising practices. But for holistic student support in particular, colleges also benefit from having leaders who bring fresh perspectives to their college or role.

Lake Tahoe Community College counselor, Sarah Marquez, for example, has been able to leverage her expertise as a former marriage and family therapist. Marquez’s non-traditional path into her higher education role also made her approach the work with a degree of gumption. “Coming here, there’s committees, different groups we have to push things through. That was a huge thing for me to learn...where to get approval from, how things work. But that was also a benefit. It made me a bit more bold.”

Jazzie Muganzo Murphy had a similar approach, having come in as a new hire to lead American River College’s Guided Pathways implementation. The institution had already undergone several reforms before Muganzo Murphy joined the team, but, “When you’re new you’re freed a bit from the baggage of the stuff that came before. You get a fresh start,” Muganzo Murphy explained.

But the honorees spoke most passionately about the value of being “of the community,” or in other words, having experiences and backgrounds that in some way mirrored the students they served. They spoke of their ability to

deeply understand and empathize with student needs while recognizing the innate value and cultural capital that each student possessed. They were able to remain motivated through challenge and picked up on equity gaps and issues that others might overlook.

“Look, I’m a North County San Diego, born and raised kid. And I wasn’t one of the good kids. I got kicked out of school. I know this life. I know how it is to be perceived as an unprepared student,” said nominator Dr. Jesús Miranda, Dean of Student Success and Equity at Cuyamaca College. “We don’t get to throw up our hands and say, ‘This is hard, they need too much, I give up.’ Giving up just isn’t an option if equity is at the center of our work.”

Honoree Dr. Monique Greene similarly grew up near Riverside City College, where she now works as an Associate Professor of Counseling. She shared, “I was a young mom. I had one kid in undergrad, one during my Master’s. I can bring a voice to the table about childcare, about nighttime and evening programs.”

But being from the same zip code as students was not necessarily a prerequisite to empathizing with the student experience. Honorees spoke about their own experiences as students—the intimidation they faced when they arrived on campus as the first in their family to pursue a post-secondary degree, the frustration of re-taking developmental education courses, the sense of confusion and anger they felt when they graduated with a degree but no direction for a job or career. Certainly, leaders from all walks of life can champion equity-focused transformation and develop a student-advocacy mindset. But honorees noted that there is a valuable perspective and drive that comes with seeing firsthand the ways in which higher education is, unfortunately, not designed to support all students.

“[As a first-generation college student] I was placed in Algebra I. How frustrating that is—to sit through those classes, know the material, but you’re required to take those classes. So I was personally very passionate about it [developmental education reform],” explained Sarah Marquez, “I was so excited and invested in that policy. That definitely impacted my drive to work with faculty.”

“It took me a while to find my way back. I just want our students, my community, to have a better experience than I had,” said honoree David Schlanger, the Title V Program Manager at Norco College. “I want to do better by them, for them. And maybe that’s for me as well.”

Regardless of position, personality, or background, holistic student support leaders were unanimous about one point: The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and exceptional teamwork is at the heart of true change. One pair described their teamwork as “the architect and the engineer” another as the “the relationship-builder and the analyst.” It is this allyship among people from all walks of life that allows student support leaders to tackle complex problems and find innovative solutions across the institution.



“I was a young mom. I had one kid in undergrad, one during my Master’s. I can bring a voice to the table about childcare, about nighttime and evening programs.”

—Dr. Monique Greene,
Riverside City College

On Being 'Of the Community'

DR. CÉSAR JIMÉNEZ

Dean of Counseling and Guided Pathways, Compton College



Dr. César Jiménez was cutting boxes as a factory worker when it hit him.

“I was cutting my hands, hurting my back leaning over. It was hard, hard work. I was working next to this older man, watching him bend over,

watching him cut his hands, knowing he had come to this job and done this work for years and years and years. And I looked at him and I thought, I feel bad for him...And I don't want to be him.”

Jiménez spent the next few decades persevering through high school, then college, and then began working within the education system. Today, as a Dean of Counseling and Guided Pathways at Compton College, he pushes his college to look out for students like him.

But the pathway was fraught.

“Growing up on the south side of Chicago, we lived off food stamps when they were physical food stamps. I remember being embarrassed having to pay for food with those food stamps. Having to go to the church for Thanksgiving dinner. I think about that for our students now, how we need to offer them resources without making them feel shame.”

“We lived in public housing. I saw my friends going to jail, my friends getting killed. I thought, ‘What am I going to do to survive? Am I going to live past 21?’ I didn't want to be a statistic.”

“They might say to our students, grab yourself by your bootstraps. But that's not easy. I know that for a fact. You need resiliency and motivation. And sometimes, you need a little empathy, too.”

—Dr. César Jiménez, Compton College

Jiménez had the drive to “get out,” but acknowledges the many people who helped him along the way.

“My sister helped me apply for the FAFSA. But at college, I was a first-generation student, I had no idea how to navigate. I was on probation maybe three or four times. My academic advisor in a support program shaped who I am today, without a doubt.”

Jiménez credits his advisors and supporters like his sister for helping him navigate through college as a student, and then mentors like Dr. Francisco Rodriguez, currently the chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District, for helping him to ascend through the higher education hierarchy as he advanced from advisor to assistant director to dean.

“I'm in a position to continue to give back. I'm a dean now, my goal is to be a VP next. I ground in what my personal experiences were, I listen to my people. Education is where I need to be.”

Today, Jiménez brings his lived experiences to his role. He mentors his staff as he was mentored. “Higher education was new for me as a student, and you know, at first I didn't know how to navigate it as an employee. I had a lot to offer, but you need someone to tell you how things work. And I do that for my staff, too. I make sure I offer feedback. I want them to grow.”

He gives students advice, and occasionally, money for gas (“It's expensive these days!”). “I think some people, they see a student angry, they see a student late for class, and they assume things, they assume deficits. They might say to our students, grab yourself by your bootstraps. But that's not easy. I know that for a fact. You need resiliency and motivation. And sometimes, you need a little empathy, too.”

“...You need someone who sees you. It's tough to do these things alone.”

Reflection:

Knowing Your Unique Value-Add to Holistic Student Support Efforts

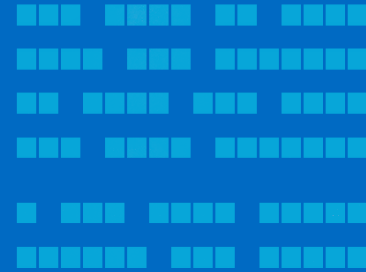
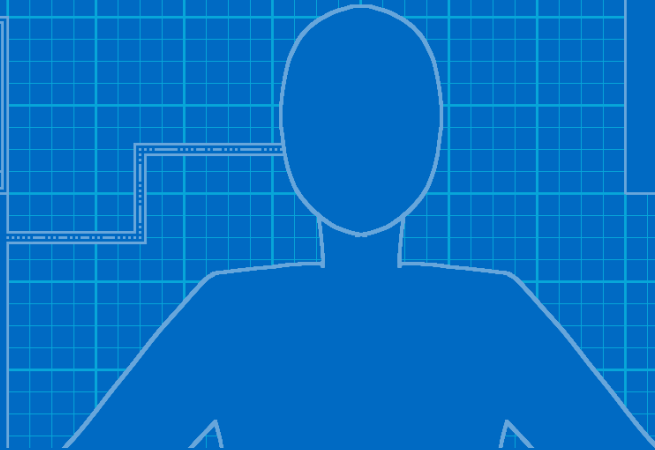
1. What unique perspective or skills do you have, based on the department or unit you currently serve? How can this help to advance holistic student support efforts at your institution?
2. What experiences in your personal and professional life have shaped your perspective on, and knowledge of, higher education? How might these experiences be useful in guiding how you or your college approaches holistic student support?



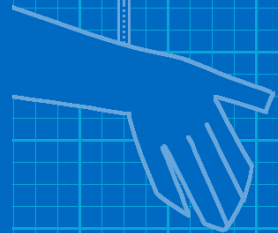
COMPOSITION OF A STRONG LEADER

A HELPING HAND

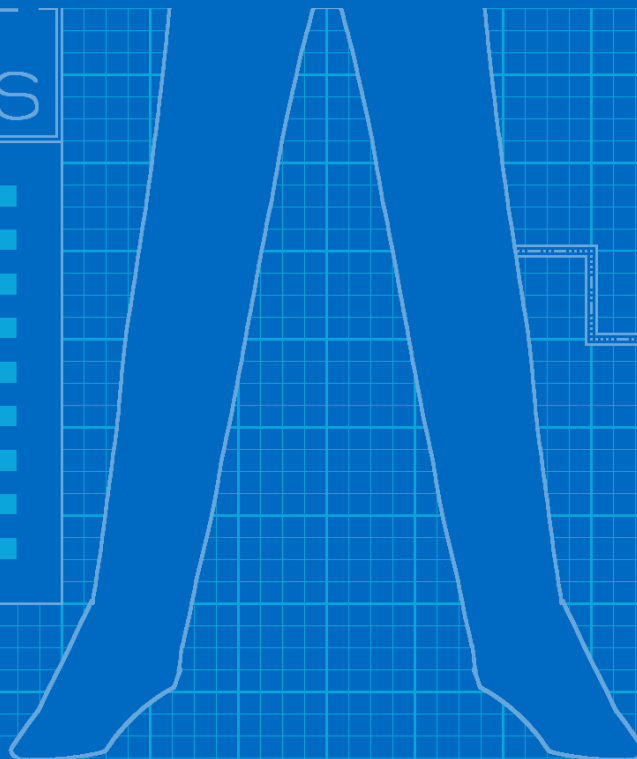
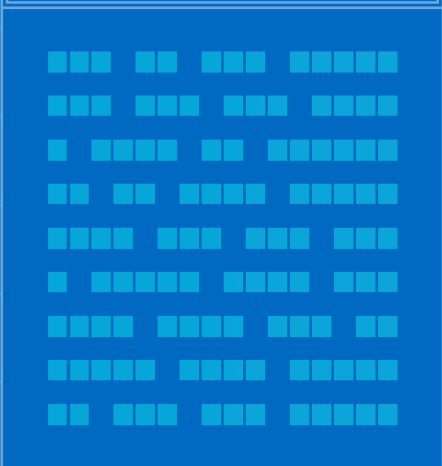
AN OPEN MIND



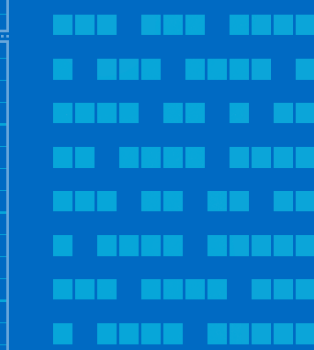
What Skills and Attributes Do Excellent Student Support Leaders Share?



GOOD GUT INSTINCTS



LEGS TO STAND UP FOR JUSTICE



Exemplary leaders know how to leverage the things that make them uniquely them: their backgrounds, experiences, and individual perspectives. They were self-described introverts, extroverts, college insiders and outsiders, the first in their families to graduate from college, and sons and daughters from long lineages of academic achievement. They represented a wide range of races and ethnicities.

“I just wish I could have a hundred of them,” was a common refrain from college leadership.

Of course, we cannot copy-paste individuals. So instead, we asked: What are the traits that unite these otherwise deeply differentiated leaders? What are the attributes they shared that enabled them to drive impact and to become so highly regarded by their leadership, peers, and students?

A close study of ~50 narrative nomination forms and interviews with both nominated honorees and their nominators revealed that, despite their differences, these exemplary leaders shared the following attributes, each of which will be explored across this publication:

The Eight Attributes of Highly Effective, Equity-Forward Student Support Leaders

1 Resiliency Mindsets and Practices: This work is hard, and often personal. Leaders admitted to, at times, feeling as if they were doing both too much and too little. “It can feel overwhelming. There is so much we need to do for our students, and I am so, so tired,” shared one honoree. So how do our leaders keep on keeping on? Interviews revealed a cluster of characteristics—a grounding in purpose, realistic optimism, a growth mindset, and an ability to set boundaries (i.e., on time, tasks, and the internalization of external stressors)—or in other words, resiliency traits and practices. These traits helped honorees not only navigate the already imposing challenges of transformative change, but to do so in extraordinarily challenging contexts. Zooming out of higher education provides some additional insight on the value of these traits. “We usually talk about resiliency in the context of other roles, like ER doctors or soldiers, but these past few years, it’s been crisis mode for us, too. And the stakes were high, for us and for our students,” shared one honoree, underscoring the increasing need to name and teach these strategies to help student support leaders avoid, in the words of one nominator, “burning bright and then burning out.”

Illustration by Morgan Liu



1. Resiliency Mindsets and Practices
2. Equity Muscle
3. Situational Awareness
4. Strong Say/Do Ratios
5. Showing up
6. Cross-Functional Literacy
7. “Students at the Center”
Not Just a Slogan
8. Curiosity and
Humility > Judgment

2 Equity Muscle: Honorees consistently seek to build their “equity muscle.” They are perpetual learners who proactively seek to understand the varied and intersectional identities and needs of their students and broader community. They confront and grapple with complex questions about power and privilege within higher education, about the historical and current structures that reinforce inequity, and then set out to rectify those imbalances. They have the courage to engage with and understand students, the community, their peers, and other leaders, even if it requires conversations outside of their comfort zone. “You can’t be too afraid of saying the wrong thing,” noted one honoree, “We all have to learn, and we are not all perfect learners. You have to put effort into learning how to approach different people. And learn to say sorry when mistakes happen.” And, they have an unwavering bias for action. “We have tons of trainings on equity,” noted one honoree, “but the real litmus test is, has that training made its way into the day-to-day interactions with students? If not, then we can’t call ourselves champions for this work.” Honoree Margaret Prothero agreed, “You can’t send a memo or have a conference about culturally responsive teaching and have that be it. People need to do the work. It’s about being in action in very deliberate ways.”

3 Situational Awareness: Recognized leaders built an acute understanding of power dynamics within institutions and committees, and between individual people. They strategically leveraged their role to have the “ear of authorities” but the credibility of someone working directly with those on the frontlines. “There is an art and a science to being able to push things forward without, frankly, blowing yourself or your college

up,” noted one nominator, a Vice President of Student Services. “When it comes to discussions about student success and equity, these can be deeply personal things. Meetings can get heated. It can be tempting to either go into your shell and wait for things to blow over or stop progress on any real meaningful and needed changes, and it can be tempting to just go out all ablaze and set things on fire. But the people who get things done know how to push the envelope without stepping on the landmines.” Nominators described individuals who knew which conversations to have in public, and when to pull individuals aside privately, and, importantly, when their mission was best served by allowing other teammates to step forward as key messengers and co-advocates for change. “Some groups are only going to hear things from certain people. You have to know where you have influence, and find allies where you might not,” noted one faculty member.

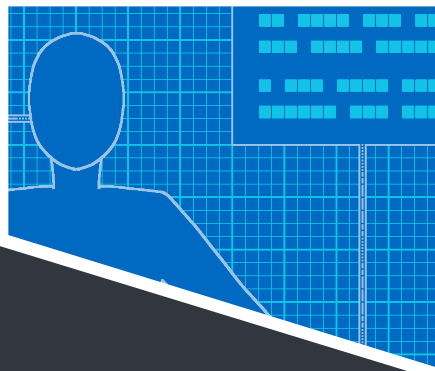


4 Strong Say/Do Ratios: “Trust is at a premium,” noted honoree, Robert Stevenson, Guided Pathways Co-lead and Art and Art History Professor at Modesto Junior College, “You have to earn this trust.” So how do leaders build this trust? In many instances, the answer was simply time—time to get to know someone, time to build rapport. But the leaders who were able to build trust most quickly in the most difficult environments were universally described by two key words: “good listener.” We asked, “What is the difference between someone who thinks they are a good listener, and someone who is authentically and broadly perceived as one?” Their answer: It comes down to say/do ratios. In other words, what do you promise to do, and how much of that do you actually follow through on? As Professor Stevenson reflected, “The only way to earn that trust is to create a track record. People always remember when you cross them. People will always remember when you go back on your word. So be honest. If you’re earnest, people will recognize that.”

5 Showing Up: Multiple stories from both nominators and honorees followed a common theme: show up. There was the story of the leader that raised a hand to lead an initiative they believed in. The one who attended and spoke up at meetings with intimidating executives or peers. The one who interviewed for a position typically dominated by individuals unlike themselves. “Everyone who had ever held this [Guided Pathways leadership role] chair was a tenured faculty member. I wasn’t. I applied anyway,” said the honoree, “I felt called to it. I had a vision and I had written out a whole strategy based on the issues I had personally witnessed and the solutions I had researched and believed would work for our students. I did the work. I took the chance. I got the job.” But showing up isn’t always easy. Honorees often had to walk into spaces where they did not always feel welcome and choose to hold their ground with the very fact of their presence. “I remember the first time I attended a leadership meeting, and I sat at the conference table,” noted one honoree, “and then a tenured faculty member showed up, and he looked at me. And he looked at the chairs that lined the side of the wall. It was clear what he was saying. I was a classified staff member. How dare I sit at the table? But I knew I had something to say. So I didn’t move from the table. I just pulled out the chair next to me...And I offered him that seat.” In other words, one part of showing up is initiative. The other part? “Courage. Guts. Moxie!”

6 Cross-Functional Literacy: Stand-out leaders reach outside their own division to understand their institution’s broader systems and the people that work within them. They acquire a baseline level of data literacy and learn to become comfortable with technology, as these are increasingly critical tools for enacting and understanding the impact of student success strategies. They orient themselves to institution policy and budgeting, knowing the more they understand how decisions are made and how resources are allocated, the savvier they can be about how they guide

Illustration by Morgan Liu



“I felt called to it. I had a vision and I had written out a whole strategy based on the issues I had personally witnessed and the solutions I had researched and believed would work for our students. I did the work. I took the chance. I got the job.”

initiatives forward. They also learn to “speak the language” of multiple units. They become akin to diplomatic envoys tasked with understanding the perspectives, subcultures, and norms of administrators, faculty, counselors, IT staff, etc. Grounded in empathy, they can communicate and problem-solve with a variety of stakeholders.

7 “Students at the Center” Not Just a Slogan: Increasingly, college leadership and field literature has focused on the importance of integrating student voices and perspectives into the college’s strategic work, to ask with each decision, “Is this really what is in the best interests of our students?” But as our rhetoric has shifted, has our practice? Exemplary student support leaders actively put students at the center of their work by bringing students into strategic conversations as valued stakeholders (and prepare those students for that often-intimidating role). They educate themselves on student perspectives and examine and change broader structures that do not meet students’ needs. They push on approaches that seem more performative than impact-focused, and continuously check their own assumptions with disaggregated data and the most reliable source of truth: the students themselves.

8 Curiosity and Humility > Judgment: Albert Einstein touted the idea of “holy curiosity,” an unabashed embrace of the unknown. This is, hypothetically, the call of academia as well, but, in the words of nominator Dr. Jennifer Zellet, Vice President of Instruction, Modesto Junior College, “We literally enter the field of academia with something called a ‘defense.’ It’s about judgment and exclusion, being the smartest in the room. Yet, what sets effective leaders apart is their willingness to be curious, and that requires a willingness to say, ‘I don’t know.’” Honorees exhibited a genuine curiosity about new ideas and approaches. Regardless of their accomplishments, academic degrees, and past experiences, they remained dedicated leader-learners. “You can only be as good as the ideas you encounter,” shared Compton College honoree Dr. César Jiménez. “Why would I shut myself down to those ideas, just because they’re new, or just because they didn’t come from me?” This curiosity extended to people, as well. Honorees often created dedicated time and space to learn about others’ perspectives, particularly around sensitive topics. Rather than approaching with the mentality of a seasoned debater, armed with all the case points to validate their own perspectives, they often began new relationships or tricky conversations with open questions, posed without judgment. This openness allowed them to uncover and address hidden friction points and individual fears. They knew, in short, how to get to the root, human issues behind resistance and barriers to change.



Illustration by Morgan Liu

“We literally enter the field of academia with something called a ‘defense.’ It’s about judgment and exclusion, being the smartest in the room. Yet, what sets effective leaders apart is their willingness to be curious.”

—Dr. Jennifer Zellet, Modesto Junior College

Reflection:

Cultivating the Attributes of Highly Effective Student Support Leaders

1. Which of these attributes do you feel you embody the most? The least? Why?
2. What is your “say/do” ratio at your college? With groups you work with well? With groups you struggle to work with? With your manager? Peers? Direct reports?
3. What cross-functional literacy skills do you feel like you have mastered? For which do you feel like you could use more support? Are there certain departments/units that you understand better than others?

How Do You Authentically Center the Student Experience?



Illustration by Isa Saldivar



“Even if I’ve had a similar experience, my experience is not theirs. And it’s ignorant to think otherwise. We must be constantly learning and honoring their perspective as it stands for them.”

—Dr. Jesús Miranda, Cuyamaca College

An influx of previously incarcerated students was coming to Los Angeles Trade-Technical College (LATTC), and honoree Dr. Marcia Wilson, Dean of Pathway Innovation and Institutional Effectiveness, was tasked with developing a program so they would feel welcome, to feel that their past did not define them, and to ultimately use LATTC as a steppingstone to a promising new chapter. But where could she start? One of the primary challenges was the fact that previously incarcerated students can feel sensitive about their past and may not want to reveal that part of their background. This, of course, makes it especially challenging to create the kind of supportive peer community that could be deeply beneficial to these students.

So, Dr. Wilson started by hiring caring staff and listening to these previously incarcerated students themselves, empowering a few intrepid individuals to take the lead on how to frame and name a student club of their own. After some discussion, the students picked the name “Amaranth.” “There is a story about the amaranth that describes it as ‘the flower that never fades,’” Dr. Wilson explained. “The students said, ‘Even though we’ve made mistakes, been plucked out of our lives, faced hardship, we still have something beautiful to offer the world, and we can be proud of that.’” Today, that ethos serves as the backbone of the Amaranth Club, which recruits shoulder-to-shoulder with every other student organization on campus. “They’re self-empowered, not ashamed, and so when new students with that background come in and they see that, they realize, oh, I don’t have to hide either,” said Dr. Wilson.

To celebrate the club’s success, Dr. Wilson and her team created floral arrangements made with amaranth flowers.

One amaranth bouquet sits on her desk to this day. It has yet to fade.

Dr. Wilson, like many other honorees, understood a simple truth: Students are the authorities on their own experiences, and as such, can provide impactful insight on how to create safe and supportive college environments. In the words of Cuyamaca College’s Dr. Jesús Miranda, “Even if I’ve had a similar experience, my experience is not theirs. And it’s ignorant to think otherwise. We must be constantly learning and honoring their perspective as it stands for them.” Devon Boone, the CARE Manager for MiraCosta College, concurred. “I always believe in letting students practice self-determination. Even when we refer them to services on campus, I advocate for the idea that it’s best practice to talk to the student about that referral, first. You don’t build trust by catching them off-guard.”

Nominators and honorees explained that being a student advocate starts first from grounding oneself in the student perspective.

Then, they took efforts to responsibly and effectively empower the student voice in rooms where important decisions about the student experience were being made. Over time, these student advocates were able to begin to infuse student-centered thinking to transform the very structure of the college itself.

The following section explores insights from those honorees. For those interested in further practice research on centering students, the Career Ladders Project and the RP Group both provide in-depth, actionable guidance on this topic (See *Resources*, page 83).

Understand (and Help Others Understand) and Value the Student Perspective

It starts with the internal work. “You have to challenge your assumptions about who our students are. You have to talk to them to understand where they come from,” advised Riverside City College’s Dr. Monique Greene. Nominator Melinda Gándara, a faculty member at Santa Barbara Community College concurred. “It’s been a learning journey for our whole staff to see students as experts on their own experiences, as assets to our work.”

Excellent student support leaders actively seek to stand alongside students as allies and advocates. They do their homework and take a multi-pronged approach to understanding the students they serve, relying on research, data, and most importantly, the voices of students themselves:

- **Research:** Dr. Jesús Miranda emphasizes the value of doing research to better understand the cultural and historical roots of the different students the college serves, recognizing that “the student perspective”—as often as we use that term—isn’t singular, but rather made up of a plethora of often very different individuals. Honorees mentioned taking time to research the political, historical, and environmental factors, including social policies, economic shifts, and community/cultural attributes that may have shaped students’ experiences with and perspective on education (and educators).
- **Data:** As the old adage goes, what gets measured gets managed. Data can help to unify, quantify, and validate the student perspective and experience. Leaders spoke about the importance of not only disaggregating this data (i.e., by race/ethnicity, income, etc.), a commonly known foundational practice, but also beginning with not the data itself, but a focused research question. Others also noted the value of data visualization to make insights more accessible to wider audiences.

Illustration by Morgan Liu



“It’s been a learning journey for our whole staff to see students as experts on their own experiences, as assets to our work.”

—Melinda Gándara, Santa Barbara
Community College

- *Student Voice*: Of course, no one is more of an expert on multi-faceted and varied student perspectives than the students themselves. “We had a student come in and speak to us faculty about his experience, and it was eye-opening,” noted Gándara, “He gave us a very profound reality check...Some instructors have been teaching here for 30 years, they own their own homes. [We didn’t understand] how difficult it was for students to find a space and a place to do their work. And how awful it was to hear us belittling that process [when reprimanding students for incomplete work].”

MiraCosta College’s Devon Boone, for example, explored how to combine research, data, and student voices to bolster his institution’s understanding of students’ basic needs. “As an institution, we have data dashboards on things like enrollment, high-level student population information, but we didn’t have specific data on who had what needs,” Boone noted.

EXAMPLE OF MIRACOSTA'S BASIC NEEDS DATA DASHBOARD

HOUSING INSECURITY

33%

Data helps to quantify the student experience.

Direct student quotes capture and elevate the student voice

Research provides context, enables broader understanding of student circumstances

Housing insecurity is not easily defined by one definition but is often a result of multiple scenarios. Housing insecurity encompasses a spectrum of individuals who are displaced, meaning their housing situation is unstable and driven by economic pressure; doubled-up, meaning two or more related or unrelated families reside in one household; and homeless, both sheltered and unsheltered. (Sorgine, 2017). At MiraCosta College, 12.8% of students who completed the Pre-Registration Survey were housing insecure within the last six months of completing the survey. Some of the disproportionately impacted groups affected by housing insecurity continue to include

“IT TOOK A MASSIVE AMOUNT OF MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL STRESS OFF MY BEING. I WAS BARELY ABLE TO FOCUS ON SCHOOL OR EVEN WORK BECAUSE OF ALWAYS BEING STRESSED ABOUT PILING AMOUNTS OF DEBT THAT I WAS AFRAID OF BEING SWALLOWED BY. MY ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION HIT THEIR HIGHEST DURING THESE PAST 18ISH MONTHS AND FINANCIAL STRESS MADE IT INCREDIBLY WORSE. RECEIVING THE RENTAL AND EMERGENCY GRANTS HELPED TO ALLEVIATE A LOT OF THAT BECAUSE IT HELPED TO TAKE AWAY SOME FINANCIAL DEBT, ALLOWING ME TO FOCUS ON SCHOOL, WORK, AND PERSONAL GROWTH (I WAS ABLE TO DO RESEARCH CONFERENCES AND GET ALL A'S), KNOWING THAT MY COLLEGE ACTUALLY CARES SO DEEPLY ABOUT STUDENTS ALSO BROUGHT A LOT OF RELIEF--TO KNOW THAT WE ARE SEEN AS PEOPLE AND NOT JUST STUDENT IDS. THANK YOU.
- MIRACOSTA STUDENT, NURSING MAJOR

Black/African-American, Pacific Islander, LGBTQIA+, First Generation, and students between ages 25-49. Efforts to address housing insecurity have more recently been addressed through the rollout of Rental Assistance Grants. To date, more than (add dollar \$) have been provided to students. This is temporary funding was made possible through the Federal Government "CARES Act" dollars. Additional resources to address housing insecurity continue to be linkage to community referrals for shelter, transitional housing, and community based rental assistance programs.

PAGE 06

Boone started with research, exploring surveys and resources from the Department of Agriculture, the Kresge Higher Education and Transportation Brief, and The Hope Center 4 College, Community, and Justice, and examining how each tool described and asked about food insecurity, housing insecurity, and transportation challenges. Knowing that survey instruments need to be concise, he carefully selected a few key questions to add to an existing student Pre-Registration Survey, then visualized the data into a Basic Needs Data Dashboard with the support of the Dean of Student Affairs and research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Office. Beyond the data itself, Boone also spoke to students, and their individual voices—incorporated alongside the survey data and contextual research about basic needs—provided a way for faculty and staff to see students more comprehensively.

In the words of Devon Boone’s nominator, Dr. Nick Mortaloni, MiraCosta College’s Dean of Student Affairs, “The data dashboard helped us explore the intersectionality of identities and enable[d] us to support the students in most need of support.”

Empower Students to Take A Seat at the Table, and Ensure They Are Heard

The idea that colleges should center and elevate the student voice isn’t new. Many institutions conduct student surveys, engage students in focus groups, or bring students into strategy meetings to inform holistic student support efforts.

But, over and over, honorees pointed out that simply checking the box on these activities did not mean that a college was authentically centering the student voice. “I’ve been in a situation where we had a student advisory committee. They worked so hard. For students, time is precious, and they gave us their time. They provided great ideas for the institution to consider.

And it went nowhere. No one did anything with it or about it,” shared one Guided Pathways Lead, “And some leadership thought, okay, we did it. We had the student committee, we’re student centered. But in reality, that whole experience for students is actually disempowering. They felt so frustrated. Honestly, it may have been better to not have gathered them at all. It wasted their time, and it made them feel unheard.”

So, we asked student support leaders, what separates performative student-centeredness from authentic student empowerment? And then, we asked the students themselves. Here is what they shared:

Illustration by Isa Saldivar



THE STUDENT ADVOCATE

“They’re embedded in the work we do. It’s not just ‘we designed this, what do you think?’ but, ‘help us design this.’”



DR. MONIQUE GREENE

on Riverside City College’s (RCC) Guided Pathways Ambassador Program

Dr. Monique Greene was perplexed: “As the Guided Pathways Coordinator, I sat on almost every committee in

Leadership Council across our institution. In these spaces, we kept talking about students, and I found it so weird that we were guesstimating about how students felt.”

Then, Dr. Greene saw her opening. “Through the pandemic, our students were losing their jobs. They couldn’t come to school. So I said, ‘If I can hire a few student workers, I can make sure they show up to committee and council meetings.’” Dr. Greene’s “Guided Pathways Ambassadors” program aimed to pay students for 20 hours a week and offered a flexible schedule.

“You have to value their time, and that means pay,” notes Greene. “They shouldn’t have to give up the opportunity to voice their perspective because they can’t afford the hours that they would otherwise spend working a job that helps put food on the table.”

Dr. Greene crafted the program design with careful intention. Student ambassadors researched and visited different college committees to figure out which ones best fit their respective interests and career goals. “Wherever possible, we want to try to align our ambassadors with jobs that not only serve us, but also serve their goals,” noted Greene.

Students were coached on how to speak up in meetings and how to interpret student success data.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

“They want to hear students’ input, don’t be afraid to say things, they want to know.”



TRISTIN MORALES

Guided Pathways Ambassador at Riverside City College

“I knew I needed more income, and I like being a student employee. It’s more flexible than other jobs

because it’s on campus, and since it’s the college, they try to work around your class hours. It makes everything easier, so you don’t get stuck choosing between income and going to class, you know? So I saw this posting on the student employee website about creative people willing to work with students on campus and improve the college, and that seemed interesting. I like helping people, so I went for it.

When I first joined, Dr. Greene had us visit four different committees, and do research on which ones we liked the most. It wasn’t random. But at first I was nervous that like, my professors would judge me? Because some of them were there, and I wasn’t sure how to interact with them outside the classroom... like how do I act? What do I say, what if they don’t like what I say?

But Dr. Greene was always reminding us, ‘They want to hear students’ input, don’t be afraid to say things, they want to know.’ And I guess people knew we’d be there, they came up and said hello, and treated us like we were important. And they actually listened, too, when we spoke, like they asked questions and were interested.

We had weekly meetings with Dr. Greene so she could check in on us, too. She’d say, how is everyone doing? How’s life? And if I told her I was stressed out, she’d let me just focus on one thing that week. Oh! And she

Photo credit: ASRCC Student Government

As a part of their jobs, they conducted research on student success strategies, and were then empowered to act on them. “They ran an entire campaign on mindfulness and mental health around midterms week because they knew that was what their peers needed,” Dr. Greene shared. “It was received really well.”

The bottom line, Dr. Greene noted, is that “They’re embedded in the work we do. It’s not just ‘we designed this, what do you think?’ but, ‘help us design this.’”

limited how much email she sent us. We get 50-60 emails a day. We can’t read all that. We don’t. She knew not to add too much to that.

We got projects each month and we’d work on them in pairs or as a team. Like, one might be, ‘Start Strong, Finish Strong’ to come up with research and ideas to help students start school successfully. Like, there are all these resources that students don’t know about. So we talked to financial aid, Mannie, he’s great, and the head of the healthcare center, and helped get the word out there. We did videos, fliers.

It’s just really showed that as a student, they really care about your input on campus. Like, hey, I can make changes even as a student, I don’t have to be super high up to make a difference.

I owe thanks to her [Dr. Greene]. Thank you for making me a better leader overall. Thank you for showing me that it may seem hard at first to go to these meetings, but in the end, it helps you be come out of your comfort zone.

Helps you be brave.”

(continued from page 28)

Many other colleges and honorees have increasingly built up their own version of Guided Pathways Ambassadors. Elizabeth Shaker, Counseling Faculty, College of the Canyons, notes that students serve on the college’s Institutional Effectiveness and Inclusive Excellence Committee. This committee works in partnership across constituencies to redesign the student experience. Student inclusion in this committee created a launchpad for further student-centered approaches. This year, the college launched their first student success team known as the Ujima Scholars program. Two students, buoyed by their experience on other college committees, have played, in Shaker’s words, “key roles in the implementation and design of our student success teams.”

Interviews with students and student support faculty and staff across the state illuminated several quick tips for how to engage and prepare students to take a “seat at the table,” and in parallel, how to prepare those rooms for students:

Recruiting Student Voices:

- Recruit diverse perspectives, and consider what this means for the structure of your program (e.g., Could a single parent without a car participate virtually? Are there avenues for an English language learner to communicate his/her/their thoughts?).
- Don't just use email to recruit students, as most institutions overwhelm students with messages. Instead, consider using peer recruiters, fliers, announcements through key faculty/staff, etc.
- Time recruitment with intention. The beginning of the school year tends to be intensive for students. Consider how applications can be worked into other existing tasks (e.g., First Year Experience courses), or timed slightly after the first few weeks of class.
- Be clear about payment and hours. Pay and flexibility are critical for students that are currently balancing coursework and part-time (or even full-time) jobs.

Preparing Students to Share Their Perspectives:

- Tell students what to expect in the meeting. Details matter. Where can they sit? How will they be introduced? What is the structure of the meeting? Helping students to visualize the experience can lower their anxiety and allow them to feel more prepared to enter the room.
- Reassure students that their input is wanted, and that their candor is needed.
- Set students up for success by enabling them to know and research meeting topics ahead of time.
- Meet in a small group ahead of larger meetings to allow students to practice articulating their ideas and feedback with peers and trusted staff/faculty.
- Provide relevant skill-building if possible (e.g., public speaking).

Preparing the Room to Hear Student Perspectives:

- Encourage faculty and staff to proactively welcome students and reiterate that student input is valuable.
- Prepare meeting participants that they may not like the feedback that they hear from students, but still need to remain respectful; consider sitting with the feedback and contemplating it before reacting.
- Show interest by asking students follow-up questions, but be considerate of the fact that students may get overwhelmed if they are barraged with too many questions at once, particularly if they are newer to the advisory/ambassador role.
- Be prepared to take some action on student recommendations. While not all student input can be implemented, complete inaction is demotivating to students.



Illustration by Isa Saldívar

Use Student-Centered Thinking to Shape the DNA of the Institution

Student-centered practice can also change college culture, processes, and in some cases, the literal, physical layout of the institution itself.



“Prioritizing student needs sometimes requires upsetting the preferences of other individuals.”

—Melanie Aponte Chu, Lake Tahoe College

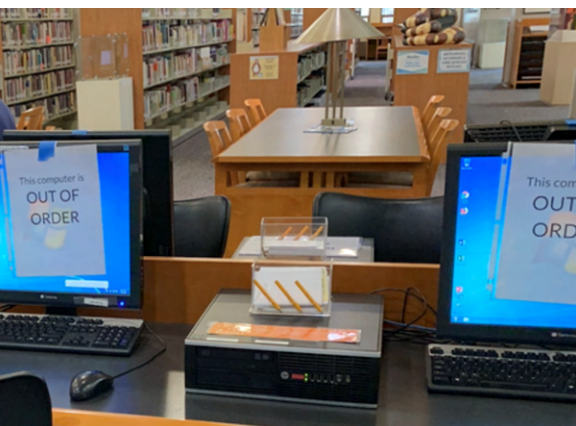
At Lake Tahoe Community College (LTCC), Melanie Aponte Chu, Director of Library and Learning Services, felt the inspiration hit when looking around the college library: “It was empty. There were no students. The space was primarily used by retired community members. They preferred the college library as a quiet place to read, it was less hectic than the public library. But in reality, we had community members shushing students, making it a hostile space for learning.”

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, Aponte Chu recognized that the call for equity extended to the institution...and the library.

“We weeded the collection of outdated materials, removed a third of the bookstacks, enclosed the reading room, and replaced broken desktop computers with new chromebooks. This opened up our library commons and essentially flipped the usage. The main area is now a dynamic learning space for tutoring and collaboration and those needing quiet focus have the reading room,” Aponte Chu explained.

LAKE TAHOE COMMUNITY COLLEGE LIBRARY TRANSFORMATION

BEFORE



AFTER



“When the college merged the library and tutoring center, there was some tension. Local community members felt like we were ‘taking the library away from them,’ it was something they felt entitled to. But the change has brought us more in line with our mission. We’re not removing services from the community, we are centering students in our spaces and services.” In this way, Aponte Chu elevated a sentiment shared by many other student advocates: Prioritizing student needs sometimes requires upsetting the preferences of others. It can be a challenging path to follow, but like Aponte Chu emphasizes, it is a stand student support leaders must be willing to take.

“A library is not some silent, sacred space,” Aponte Chu asserts. “A library is about curiosity and connection. Connecting students with the resources and support they need, students connecting with each other. Students should come first and foremost in everything we do.”

At Las Positas College, Dr. Kristy Woods, Dr. Nan Ho, and Angella VenJohn all count themselves as student advocates. Recently, the college enlisted paid “student assistants” to weigh in on the college’s digital environment—its website. The team realized that the homepage of their website was just as often (if not more often) the “front door” to the college than its actual building, particularly for prospective or newly onboarding students. They wanted students’ initial interactions with the college to feel welcoming and intuitive, whether it happened in person or online.

And who better to help design this experience than students themselves?

“When we started the program, we did presentations at every department on campus, we knew we needed a representative and diverse group... veterans, students from different races and ethnicities, older students, younger students, students going into a career and students transferring,” said Dr. Woods, who helped spearhead the effort.

Student assistants researched other institutions’ online recruitment and onboarding experiences, noting which aspects Las Positas College should emulate and which pitfalls it should avoid.

“It made us really think about how to structure the site, which steps of the onboarding process felt unnecessary or off-putting,” Dr. Woods explained.

Critical to the success of this effort: The Las Positas team made sure to provide the students with structured guidance for how to approach the task and how to provide feedback, which both ensured students felt confident about completing the assignment and that the college received insights that it could (and did) act upon.

“It was a cool job.
You get to see it
all happening right
in front of you,
decisions for the
entire school. And
when they took
what we said and
actually listened to
it, that’s amazing.”

—Brittanie North, Student
Ambassador, Las Positas College

How Do You Authentically Center the Student Voice and Experience?
(continued)

“It was a cool job,” notes Brittanie North, one of Las Positas College’s student ambassadors. “You get to see it all happening right in front of you, decisions for the entire school. And when they took what we said and actually listened to it, that’s amazing.”

“Going forward, we hope to expand the program and have one student assistant for each academic pathway,” shared Dr. Woods, “The pandemic made things a bit tough, but we see the value in this. Instead of working at a chain restaurant and trying to juggle that with class, our students should be able to choose to work with us in a way that supports and enriches them as well. It’s win-win.”

SAMPLE STUDENT ASSISTANT PROJECT FROM LAS POSITAS COLLEGE:

Inquiry into Application Process for Current High School Students

Guided Pathways

Inquiry into Application Process for Current High School Students

- What is the onboarding process for current high school students who want to take classes at a community college while in high school?

Please do NOT actually apply! Just inquiry about the steps involved.

GOAL IS TO COMPLETE AT LEAST TWO EACH (LPC being one of them) BY WEDNESDAY 2/23.

Clear expectations and deadlines for project completion.

Specific questions help to generate targeted, valuable feedback.

College's Name	Las Positas - Everyone should complete!	Skyline Community College	Diablo Valley Community College
Student's Name			
Starting Application Process -How easy was it for you to find information on how to start the application process as a current high school student? As a current High School student there are actually TWO "applications", often times with deadlines to be able to enroll in courses on time. There is the Application to the College (CCCApply) and then Application for Concurrent Enrollment that has to be approved the student's high school.			
Notices about the Application Process -Please comment about anything that was interesting or notable for you as you went to a college's website and figured out how to start your application process applied.			
How clear was the process? What supports for completing the process were provided?			
Deadline information for completion in order to enroll in the next term?			
Forms for High School Students -Please download any forms for each school. -Please comment about anything that was interesting or notable about the forms.			

Students audited their own college in addition to several peer colleges to cultivate their own research skills while providing valuable insights to the Guided Pathways team.

Reflection:

Authentically Centering the Student Experience

1. How do you, and your institution, stay grounded and up-to-date on your understanding of student perspectives?
2. What can be done to ensure that students feel welcome and safe when providing your institution with their perspective or feedback?
3. What ongoing student support discussions/projects at your institution might benefit from student voices? What structures are needed to engage them?

How Do You Work With Senior Leadership (Even When It's Difficult)?

Holistic student support leaders translate big picture ideas from executive leaders into manageable steps for frontline staff.

Executive leaders describe them as indispensable to their understanding of what's "really happening on the ground." And in the most effective partnerships, student support leaders describe college executive leaders that provide a consistent vision, endorsement and resources for the work, and a willingness to remove or mitigate barriers that arise.

Even with excellent, consistent executive leaders, leading from the center of student support efforts is unquestionably arduous. Yet, the reality of the current moment is that many of our honorees—and many student support leaders nationwide—face a shifting executive tier. Nationally, the average tenure of a community college president has dropped year over year, from 8.5 years on average in 2006 to 5.1 years in 2020.⁴ The human impact of this statistic was echoed over and over in interviews. "In the past three and a half years, I think we've had four presidents, soon to be five executive vice presidents, and two different deans in this department...you don't get consistent vision with that. You don't have the foundation of trust," noted one Guided Pathways Coordinator.

Instead of being disheartened by these circumstances, interviews revealed that honorees were still able to drive impact, and in some cases, a vacuum or shift in leadership offered opportunities for these leaders to step up and play an even greater role as the core keepers of institutional knowledge and continuity and/or the champions for equity and change.

We asked them: How do you work effectively with your leadership team... whether that team is a beacon of vision and support for equity-forward holistic student support, or perhaps is more challenging? What do you need to thrive?

"In the past three and a half years, I think we've had four presidents, soon to be five executive vice presidents, and two different deans in this department...you don't get consistent vision with that. You don't have the foundation of trust."

Leverage Your Distinct Value to Leadership Teams

Much has been said about the challenges of pushing efforts forward without a carrot or a stick, so to speak. However, exemplary leaders recognized that operating from the center of the institution's hierarchy also offers unique advantages. "There are things you can do as a faculty member or a counselor that you cannot do as an administrator," notes nominator Dr. Jennifer Zellet, Vice President of Instruction at Modesto Junior College.

Dr. Zellet knows this fact well. "Rob kicked me and the other administrators out of the room one time," she laughs. "And it was the right call." Rob—or

⁴ Weissman, Sara. "A Culture of Leadership 'Churn!'" *Inside Higher Ed*, 6 Apr. 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/06/leadership-turnover-plagues-california-community-colleges>

Robert Stevenson—is Modesto Junior College's Guided Pathways Faculty Co-Lead and a Professor of Art and Art History.

It was early on in the college's Guided Pathways efforts. "It was our 'Paving Pathways' workshop, and it had been going on for days with very little progress [on academic program maps]. Everyone was tired. Everyone was frustrated," said Dr. Zellet.

"There was some confusion about the reform, and a bit of distrust still between administrators and faculty," noted Professor Stevenson, "I knew they [faculty] wouldn't necessarily speak as openly with administrators in the room, so I approached her [Dr. Zellet] and I said, I think maybe you should leave the room and let us talk among ourselves, faculty to faculty."

"So we did! Of course, it takes a tremendous amount of trust to do that. I trusted Rob. I trusted he wouldn't play into the politics of admin versus faculty, trusted he understood the vision and what we were trying to accomplish. And that's key to this too," Dr. Zellet said.

With the administrators out of the room, Professor Stevenson addressed his peers. What were the real concerns that were going unsaid? And the stories came out. Liberal arts faculty had felt under attack for some time, facing broader national questions that pit liberal arts against more technical fields. Would their respective areas be systematically deprioritized in the college's program maps? Would students stop taking their courses altogether?

Finally, a philosophy professor spoke up. If this reform was really about providing students with both a quality education and an efficient pathway through it, then they should talk brass tacks. "He asked: What is the one most important thing from your field you'd want a non-major student to know? What competencies and learning outcomes would you want them to gain?" Stevenson reflected, "Through this more open dialogue, everyone could learn what was valuable about specific general education courses across departments. This philosophy professor, who was fearful that he would be left out of pathways, suddenly found the ethics course he championed in the general education plans of several schools."

The group created "Flexible 15s" as the general education foundation for student pathways, allowing programs and students to mix and match various core courses from across the college while still staying "on-track." And, through the discussion, the group created general education "trading cards" for the next summer's process of building coursework roadmaps for all of the colleges nearly 200 programs that outlined key learning outcomes and competencies that students could gain from different general education offerings. "Now, when students ask, 'Why should I take [this



“You learn to ‘speak admin’ and ‘speak counselor’ and ‘speak faculty,’ which means you can go into rooms and have conversations that an administrator can’t have. You’re going to have that credibility with your peers because they feel like you’re on their side, you understand their concerns. You start from a place of shared professional identity that can’t be replicated.”

—Jazzie Munganzo Murphy,
American River College

course]?’ faculty and advisors have a set of trading cards as reference point to provide a good answer.” Both Dr. Zellet and Professor Stevenson note that these innovative ideas would not have come out with a more top-down approach. In Dr. Zellet’s own words, “You had to have Rob in that room.”

Multiple nominees echoed Professor Stevenson’s understanding of the distinct powers that lay outside of administration. Honorees and administrators alike consistently identified some of these “secret super powers” of leading from the middle:

- *The Chameleon/Translator*: Student support leaders can enter rooms and speak to constituencies with whom administrators may struggle to reach and persuade. “You learn to ‘speak admin’ and ‘speak counselor’ and ‘speak faculty;” said American River College honoree Jazzie Munganzo Murphy, “which means you can go into rooms and have conversations that an administrator can’t have. You’re going to have that credibility with your peers because they feel like you’re on their side, you understand their concerns. You start from a place of shared professional identity that can’t be replicated.”
- *The Viewfinder*: Student support leaders have important and strategically relevant insight from “on the ground” that can and should shape the contours of executive leadership’s broader vision. Multiple honorees were lead authors or co-authors on their institution’s strategic plans for holistic student support and “fed the vision to leadership.”
- *The Historian*: Student support leaders can help to orient new leaders to ongoing initiatives; leaders and teams often provided continuity through executive transitions. “Change can take ‘generations,”” one Guided Pathways lead noted, referring to the multiple cycles of different executive leaders and steering committee compositions. “We know the history, we know how we got to where we are today, what worked and what didn’t in our specific context. That can be gold for an executive leader who’s willing to listen.”



Illustration by Isa Saldívar

Look for Bright Spots and Allies to Navigate Challenge, Turnover

Many student support leaders spoke warmly of their leadership teams. They noted that strong executive leaders were integral to not only the success of various student support efforts, but also to their own personal success as professionals. “This work couldn’t have been done without him/her,” or, “They deserve recognition, too!” were common refrains among honorees.

Regardless of their current circumstance, all honorees could also reflect on points in their careers when they struggled to align or connect with leadership. Collectively, they described hundreds of tricky scenarios. While each relationship was unique, their stories revealed leadership challenge patterns, visualized below. There were leadership teams that remained too high-level and therefore felt disconnected from efforts on the ground, and those that became potentially too involved in day-to-day details. There were presidents and cabinets that were wary and careful about change, and those that plunged full-speed-ahead on new approaches and investments, regardless of broader college sentiment or concerns. Each of these archetypes came with their own unique set of strengths and commonly cited challenges. While no individual necessarily fits into any one box, student support leaders noted that as they cycled through different types of managers, it helped to slowly build a framework to more crisply define friction points and, eventually, map a more productive path forward.

(continued on page 42)



Photography by Ryan DeVera

LEADERSHIP MISHAPS MATRIX

“I think they were afraid of rocking the boat. They’d been at the school forever, I think the fear was tarnishing their legacy, creating headaches that they didn’t want to deal with. But that shut down our ability to innovate with new, really good ideas.”

—Guided Pathways Faculty Lead

IN THE CLOUDS

Executive Team remains focused almost exclusively on high-level issues and is less involved in student support leaders’ efforts

Strengths: Leader provides student support leaders with a great amount of autonomy to make decisions informed by their frontline observations

Risks/Challenge: May not provide a clear enough vision and executive endorsement to help prioritize goals, garner broad buy-in, and/or push back on resistance/obstruction

TRADITIONALIST

Honorees described “**Traditional**” leaders that had typically been in an executive leadership position, sometimes at a single institution, for an extended period of time. These leaders deeply understand existing institutional norms, dynamics, and policies. They value consistency and continuity in strategy, moving the college incrementally forward toward its goals.

Strengths

- Can navigate institution dynamics and policies, including how to manage and leverage the Board
- May have deep, established relationships with key community organizations and funders
- Provides a sense of stability

Risks/Challenges

- May be resistant to new approaches
- May be less willing to push back on resisters; avoids confrontation at expense of progress
- Adherence to hierarchy may limit ability of more junior staff, students, or newer faculty/staff to “speak truth to power”

INNOVATOR

Honorees described “**Innovator**” leaders who might be new to the institution, newer to executive leadership, or alternatively, simply more inclined to try new ideas. These leaders often see themselves as positive disruptors. They may challenge the status quo and imbue the college with a greater sense of urgency for change.

Strengths

- Willingness to “shake things up” and try new holistic student support approaches, hear ideas from many different perspectives
- Can push for results/action on a faster timeline
- Creates energy and momentum

Risks/Challenges

- May overcommit to too many ideas, creating confusion
- May underestimate workload lift
- May be impatient or insensitive with critics or resisters
- May overlook need for planning, contextualization, and communication

IN THE WEEDS

Executive Team very involved in the day-to-day work of the student support leaders’ efforts; has strong opinions on how the work should be done

Strengths: Well-informed about projects and committed to ensuring details are not overlooked

Risks/Challenge: May overwhelm the student support team, leading to burnout or resistance; may lose sight of broader vision and struggle to invest enough time in critical high-level efforts

“They had seen [student success technology product] work so well at [college] so there was this rush forward to do the exact same thing. But the devil’s in the details. Our college isn’t set up the same way, our data wasn’t ready, our team was confused. It’s been really hard.”

—Dean of Student Services

Regardless of the precise flavor of the college leadership challenges, student support leaders have found ways to persevere. Seasoned student advocates are clear-eyed about the challenge here. “Sometimes it takes time and team turnover for change. Sometimes you have to wait for your window, but you don’t necessarily have to twiddle your thumbs or feel disempowered. You can prepare. You can be ready with your vision, your evidence, and navigate to the position that will allow you to take action when the time comes,” shared David Schlanger, Norco College’s Title V Grant Manager.

Several student support leaders offered their varied approaches to managing through challenging seasons at their colleges:

“We Went Where We Needed to Be”

Initiative and Research Transform a Traditionalist Approach



JETHRO MIDGETT
Honorees, Norco College



DAVID SCHLANGER
Honorees, Norco College

Like many colleges, Norco College’s career counseling strategy and efforts were originally separated from the college’s Guided Pathways efforts. The college focused counselors on equipping students with Student Education Plans (SEPs), a critical piece of many Guided Pathways reform efforts, but for honorees Jethro Midgett and David Schlanger, the laser focus on SEPs made the relationship between counselors and students feel transactional.

“We know students come to us because they want to be economically mobile. We felt strongly that the career conversation needed to be embedded across their pathway, from their first conversations about onboarding through their decisions about which electives they want to take, or which faculty to connect with.” Schlanger explained.

The pair consulted best practice research, including *Entering a Program: Helping Students Make Academic and Career Decisions* (Karp, 2013), which provided them with a framework and vision for a different perspective on onboarding and Guided Pathways, one that embedded more career counseling earlier on—and throughout—students’ educational journeys.

“Guided Pathways literature talks a lot about administration needing to be willing to change roles. This is one of the most difficult parts of the transformation. Change can be top-down like that. It can also be bottom-up. For us, there was work we wanted to do, but we didn’t have influence over that area, which made change really hard,”

Midgett agreed. “You can’t build the puzzle without all the pieces. So, we had to go where the work was. David changed jobs into a role that would have more oversight over onboarding. And I moved into a role with more oversight of Guided Pathways.”

The role changes worked. Together, the pair was able to champion a new approach to career-focused advising and holistic student support.

And they saw the results of their strategies. Norco College students began thinking about their future goals earlier and planning for their future careers with more confidence and certainty:

Common Vision for Outcomes

Rethinking the Student Experience

From:		To:
Majority (75%) enter <u>undecided</u>	➔	Majority (75%+) enter decided
College solves student problems	➔	Students taught to solve problems
Planning based on academic interests and personality	➔	Planning and identifying
Primary focus on education plan	➔	Focus on education

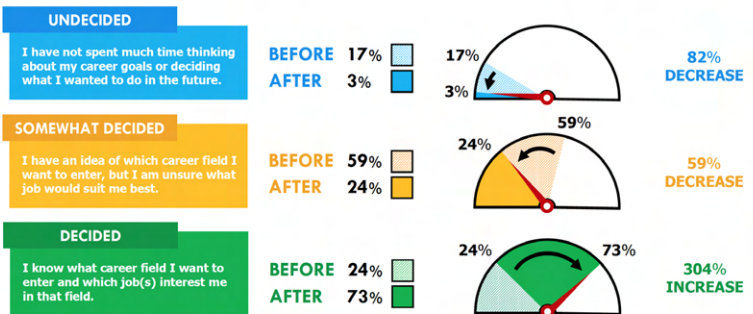
Shared Experiences

Rethinking Student Advising

From:		To:
Students still undecided after several years in college	➔	Students start college with a career goal in mind and informed major
Advising is transactional and based on student requests	➔	Advising is developmental/teaching and guided by student needs
Students return frequently to revise their education plan	➔	Students follow a career-focused plan and occasionally check in

NORCO COLLEGE SUMMER 2021 STUDENT SURVEY DATA

Moving the Needle: 6-weeks (Summer)



Photography by Ryan DeVera

“Find Your Pockets of Possibility”

Strategic, Cross-Functional Allyships Create Momentum Despite Conflict-Averse Leadership

“For whatever reason, that pillar structure didn’t seem to do a lot for us,” noted one faculty member, referring to the Guided Pathways pillar framework. “It was moving chairs on the Titanic, taking what existed and just reorganizing it into new departments. It didn’t fundamentally change much for students.”

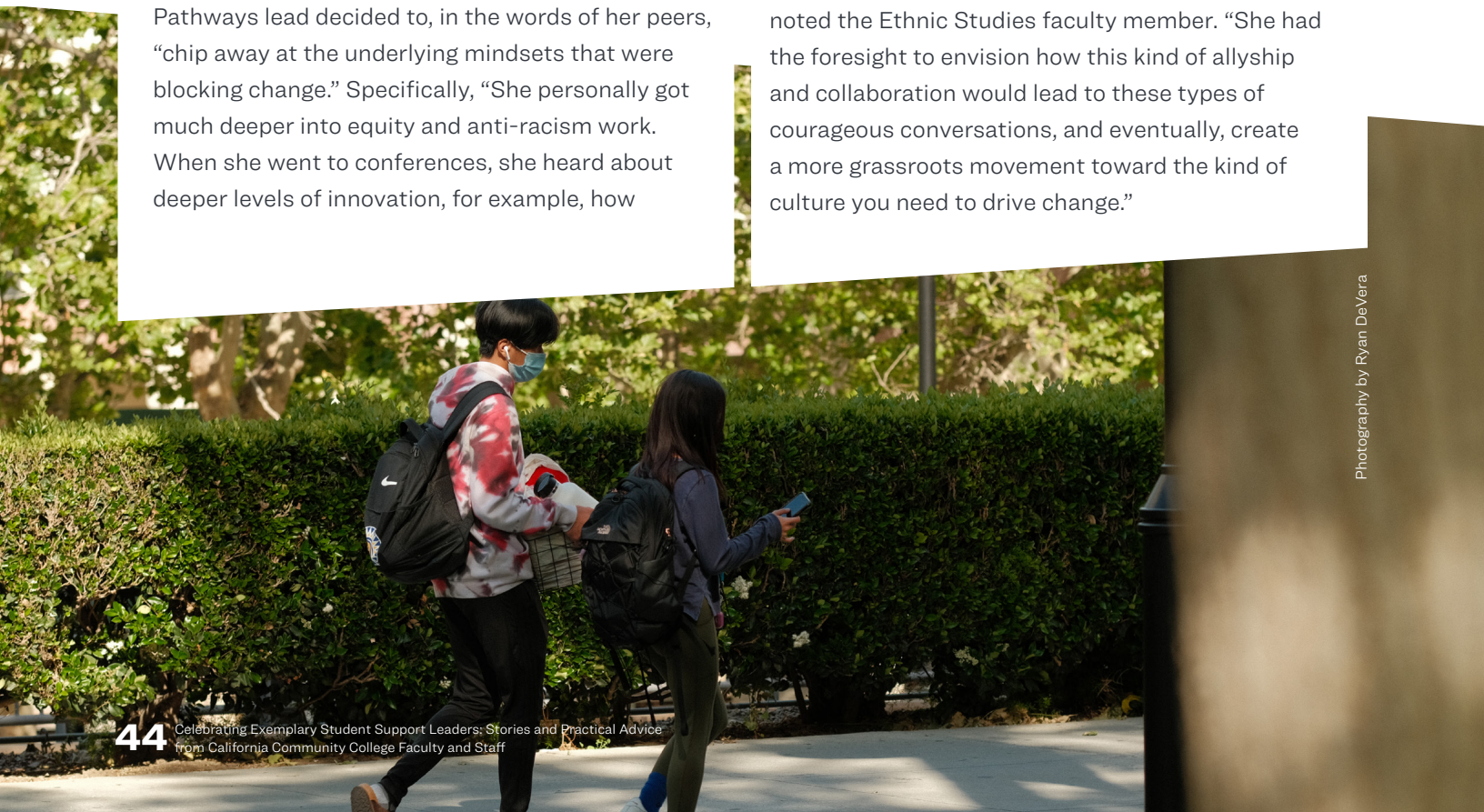
Then, a new Guided Pathways lead stepped in. She was charged with implementing a new vision for Guided Pathways at the institution, one that would start to shift practices, roles, and processes more dramatically.

“And it was...challenging is an understatement,” noted the faculty member. “While our administration was committed to having demonstrated outwardly that we’d ‘done Guided Pathways,’ they weren’t willing to put their necks out to help resolve some of the conflicts between units.”

Faced with a standstill on some of the process improvements and role changes, the Guided Pathways lead decided to, in the words of her peers, “chip away at the underlying mindsets that were blocking change.” Specifically, “She personally got much deeper into equity and anti-racism work. When she went to conferences, she heard about deeper levels of innovation, for example, how

do we really plan for students versus accepting existing structures. Then, she was strategic,” shared one English faculty member. “She approached departments that, for one, she knew would be open to it [anti-racism work], and for another, were likely to create a lot of impact. Like she approached me in the English department because most students have to go through an English course.”

Slowly, she was able to move those things forward. “We started doing data inquiry, and that work has fundamentally changed the ways my colleagues think about their teaching. It built a deep recognition of how our expectations may actually be the barriers to students’ success,” noted the Ethnic Studies faculty member. “She had the foresight to envision how this kind of allyship and collaboration would lead to these types of courageous conversations, and eventually, create a more grassroots movement toward the kind of culture you need to drive change.”



Photography by Ryan DeVera

“Bring Some Guests to the Family Dinner”

External Voices Can Offer Credibility to Ideas Leadership Struggles to Hear

“When you can’t find allies within the institution, seek them outside the institution,” shared one Guided Pathways Lead. “Bringing an outside facilitator in is like inviting a friend to Thanksgiving. People are on their best behavior. People are willing to listen. It dampens some of the uglier defenses and allows the conversation to begin.”

Multiple honorees noted that external voices can be helpful in multifaceted ways:

- 1) Provide expert guidance and strategies (data inquiry method, equity approaches, technology strategies)
- 2) Can facilitate difficult discussions as a “non-political” outside party
- 3) Can serve as a source of support (“You’re going to get through this! Don’t give up!”)

Honorees spoke about external facilitators helping to lead equity workshops, using careful, honest words to guide faculty and staff through data insights that were emotionally difficult to confront.

Other facilitators helped to guide “innovator” presidents and cabinets through technology investments, serving as a counterweight to flashy vendor demonstrations and promises and clearly outlining the true costs and resources required for successful product implementation.

“You don’t have to be the expert on everything,” shared one Vice President of Student Success. “As academics, we look to research, we look to the thought-leaders. That can be very welcome.”

Photography by Ryan DeVera

Dear Executive Leaders

Perspectives on How to Provide Support for Equity-Focused and Student-First Change from Your Direct Reports

Ask What We Need, and Follow Through: Great leaders know when it's time to be the follower. "The four greatest words an executive can learn to say are, 'What do you need?' or 'How can I help?' So many leaders believe leading is telling people what to do, assuming you know what that is," shares honoree Margaret Prothero, English Professor, Santa Barbara City College. "When really, the most powerful thing you can do is to ask the people doing the really impactful but challenging work what they need to make things happen."

Champion the Idea. And Then Champion It Again, and Again: Executive leaders "have the megaphone." They can create energy for and understanding of an idea. "But you can't just announce it and walk away," notes one honoree. "Our units are all so busy, we've seen so many initiatives, you have to consistently and succinctly talk about the idea, and the why. If I'm out here pushing people to do the work, I need to know you have my back. You'd be surprised how many times you need to say something before it really sinks in."

But, Don't Be Afraid to Change Your Mind: After championing a specific approach, it can be difficult to change course, even when it is apparent that the current strategy is not working. Executive leaders may fear losing face, but as honorees shared, pouring more resources and energy into a failing effort is rarely received well anyway. "I'd advise executives to be wary of the sunk cost fallacy," shared one honoree, referencing the psychological trap of investing more in an area simply because you have already invested so much there, even if the return on that investment is consistently negative. Simply put, "If you're given good information, don't be afraid to change your mind. It's a tough pill to swallow in the short term but going further down

a bad path is far worse for everyone, especially our students. Maintain the overall vision but be open to different ways of getting there."

Engage In Multi-Directional Feedback: Strong executives create safe spaces that both allow them to provide valuable feedback and coaching to their student support leaders and enable those leaders to give candid "upward" feedback in return. "You need your team to tell you if things are going off the rails," notes one Vice President of Student Services, "but you're not going to get that without dedicated effort and trust-building. They need to know they can trust that telling you bad news won't be bad for them or their careers." Similarly, student support leaders noted that they crave development as well. "For people to be successful in their work, there needs to be a growth aspect to it," notes honoree Jazzie Munganzo Murphy. Another honoree agreed, "I get frustrated when, maybe I mess up, and my VP jumps in, does things for me, doesn't explain. Like, don't just do it. Empower me. Help me be better."

Set Up Teams for Success with Structure, Resources: Do student success leaders have allocated time, space, and resourcing to take on the additional work required to advance holistic student supports? Are roles and responsibilities clearly delineated? Student support leaders noted that the little things can make a big difference: an allocated resource room for meetings, paid time to work on holistic student support efforts, executive endorsement and clear guidelines for steering committee and working group structures (e.g., composition, objectives, etc.).

Give Credit Where Credit Is Due: Student support leaders are often framed as "unsung heroes." But they shouldn't be. "There's this expectation of

selflessness in mission-driven work sometimes,” mused one honoree, “And many of us do put the students, put the work, ahead of ourselves. But that can wear on a person.” Leading change can be a mentally and emotionally draining task. Student support leaders can often find themselves battle-worn from navigating pushback or outright hostility. Recognizing wins—and the intensive effort they require—in this environment can be not only nice, but necessary for student support leaders’ ability to remain resilient and garner the broader respect and recognition that is be critical in leading future efforts.

Acknowledge the Reality of Burn Out, and Respond With Empathy: “I don’t think we can ‘manage’ burnout,” says Ana Lobato. “We have to

acknowledge it. We can make the best plans with the best intentions. Try to provide the resources and delineate responsibilities. But this will never perfectly align indefinitely with the dynamic context we live in. Everyone’s personal circumstances and needs are unique and different. In order for people to be successful, period, we need to recognize we are not a one-size-fits-all community. There will be a cyclical pattern to when we can and cannot invest a lot of ourselves into the work, it will ebb and flow with what’s going on with us as human beings. Leaders have to listen and adjust. Every day will not be 110%. Or even 50%. We have to be okay with the big steps forward, and the little ones, and the pauses in between when they’re needed.”

Contexts and Conditions for Transformative Change

Even though honorees proved that they could make an impact and drive change in a variety of circumstances, certain conditions and contexts—beyond college leadership—also impacted their ability to move projects forward. The following situational variables were mentioned most often:

National/Global Events: “It may sound odd,” said one Counselor, “but there’s something about a crisis that can really shift perspective.” Other honorees agreed, reflecting on how the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to remote learning, while challenging, also in some cases helped to accelerate long-neglected technology updates or to inspire new, creative approaches to teaching and advising. Similarly, the murder of George Floyd elevated conversations about racial equity. “The discussions have been messy and difficult, but this all starts with being able to have them,” shared one Guided

Pathways Coordinator. Of course, change cannot always wait for these kinds of external shocks, but in the words of one faculty member, “Sometimes when there is so much darkness, that’s the moment you can make the biggest impact, that’s when you take those bold strides forward.”

Higher Education Movements: For many interviewees, executive-endorsed visions for change—like a shift toward Guided Pathways and/or developmental education reform—were catalysts that moved the work forward with resistant groups and opened doors (and provided coverage) for student support leaders to push for other changes as well. These policies helped to loosen expectations and long-held beliefs about how the institution should be run, opening the door for student support leaders to push for both broad and targeted changes.

Professional Development: Institution-based or external professional development opportunities can also establish, endorse, or support ideas that systematically signal their commitment to transformative change and equity, thereby creating avenues for student support leaders to accelerate this work. Notably, this leadership can come from presidents and cabinet members, but it can also come from other fulcrums of power at the institution. At El Camino College, for example, the Academic Senate moved to allocate a portion of the college’s mandated professional development hours specifically for anti-racist training. To develop content to for these hours, El Camino College’s Polly Parks notes, “We formed a Professional Development Advisory Committee with classified faculty and management. Eventually a student will serve on the committee as well.” While the time allocation alone is not sufficient to holistically address equity, the mandate also served as a strong signal of the institution’s commitment to this work. This in turn opened doors for the El Camino team to advance other equity-related initiatives, including an Equity Minded Teaching Institute and an “impact grid” that “helps institutions analyze their policies and practices through an equity lens.” Other honorees credited programs like RP Group’s “Leading from the Middle” resources⁵ and Dr. Al Solano’s data inquiry approach⁶ for helping to bring together their student support teams and equip them with common frameworks and skills to help shape their institution’s ongoing work.

Technology Strategy: Too often, technology fails to meet its promise, costing institutions hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours of frustration. But done right, effective advising technology planning, procurement, and implementation can serve as a catalyst for transformative change. Careful technology planning involves asking specific questions to clarify

advising processes and to articulate precisely how different roles might need to change. It involves collaboration across departments and units, including IT, advising/counseling, support offices, faculty, and administration. The Ada Center’s *Advising Technology Procurement and Planning: A Practical Playbook for Higher Education Leaders* outlines the critical steps that college leaders should take to position their advising technology initiatives for success.⁷ In some cases, technology is critical to actualizing holistic student support practices. “Honestly, we were talking about cohort management for a long time, but that’s impossible to do, realistically, without a tool like Starfish,” noted honoree Tina Giron, a Counseling Professor and Modesto Junior College’s Guided Pathways Faculty Co-Lead. “Without that tool, our counselors were overwhelmed by the idea of keeping track of so many students. This gave us the capability to better target our efforts and start to really unpack what ‘cohort management’ should and could look like for us.”

Data Practice: Similarly, strong data practice allows student support leaders to leverage data for case making, strategy formation, and program evaluation. At El Camino College, for example, a new program to train Data Coaches is in the works to create more data capacity throughout the institution. At Cuyamaca College, nominator Dr. Jesús Miranda, the current Dean of Student Success and Equity, understood the power of data to inform change, and was an advocate in creating an “Institutional Effectiveness, Success, and Equity” office that reports directly to the President, thereby welding and elevating the institution’s equity efforts and its data analysis capacities. “When we can show things like, here’s the actual persistence rate of our students, here’s the completion rates, it shifts the conversation to, ‘oh wow, we have a lot of work to do. It takes the

⁵ See the RP Group’s resources, including information about Leading from the Middle at rpgroup.org/Resources

⁶ Dr. Al Solano’s resources and tools can be found at continuous-learning-institute.com

⁷ The *Advising Technology Procurement & Planning* publication can be found at <https://www.theadacenter.org/advisingtechplaybook>

blinders off.” But what is strong data practice? Honorees described three different paradigms:

- **Data Governance:** Are processes and infrastructure (human and technical) in place to reliably capture, store, and update data in critical systems? This ensures that data is available and trustworthy.
- **Data Access:** Are processes and infrastructure in place to distribute the right data to the right people easily and efficiently? This ensures that data is usable.
- **Data Usage:** Can people interpret and understand the data? This turns raw data into usable insight. Several institutions invested in data training and/or tools to help with data visualization to make data insights more accessible.

Time, Structure, and Resourcing for Collaboration:

Some honorees expressed frustration when they were “tapped to lead” holistic student support efforts, but were given few additional structural (e.g., a team, dedicated meeting time, etc.) or financial resources (e.g., payment for additional work hours spent on the effort) to move the work forward. Though they were still able to achieve some of their objectives, progress was slow and leaders grappled with burnout. At other institutions,

intentional structures, either spearheaded by college leadership or suggested by student support leaders and endorsed by college leadership, helped to keep teams connected, focused, and set up for success. At Reedley College, honoree Aaren Cobb, Next Up Counselor/Coordinator and 2020-2021 Success Team Design Team Faculty Lead, noted the importance of allocating time and funding for student support leaders that take on strategic roles: “We knew that we burned people out and lost them, that we lost a lot of creativity and passion. It was the culture around our district. One of the things I was adamant about was the need to compensate people for these [Student Success Team] positions. I knew these could not be ‘volunteer’ positions.”

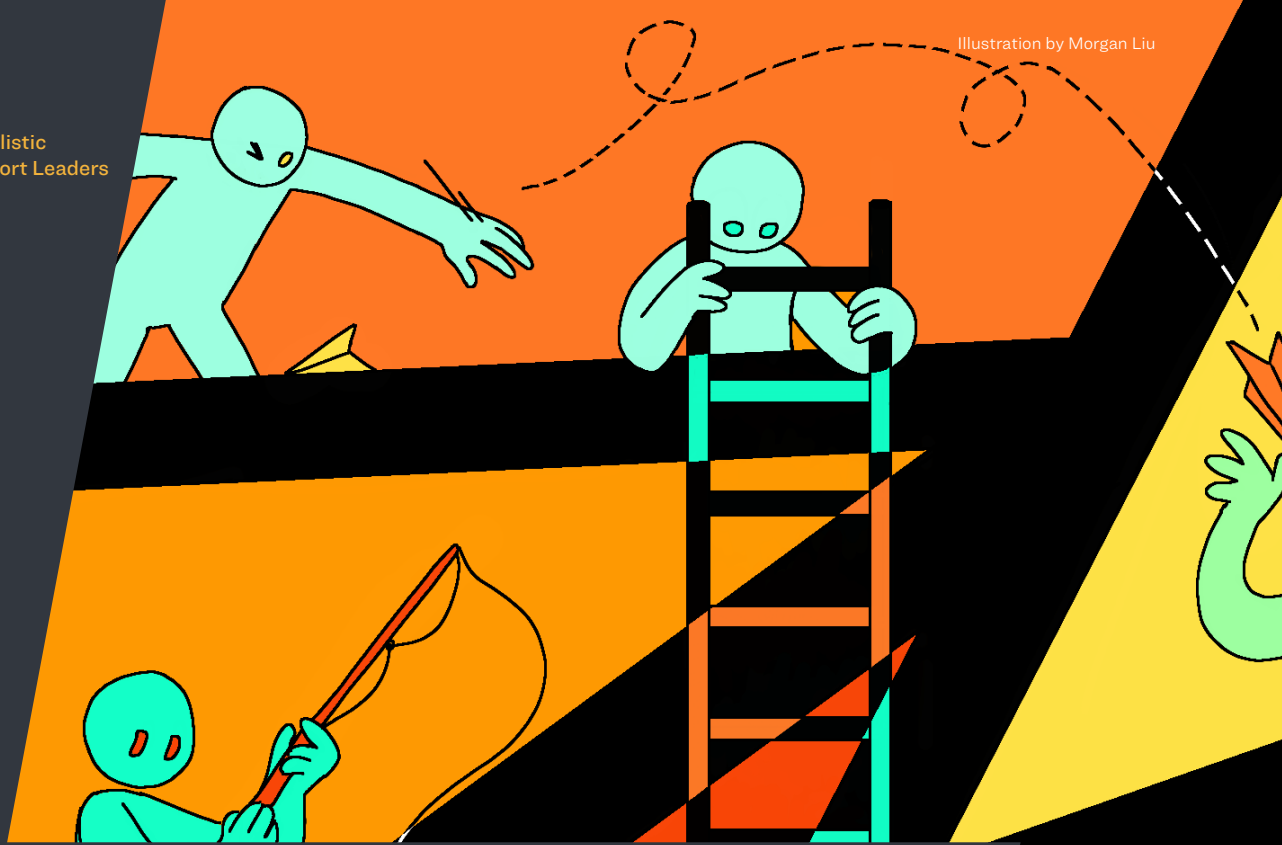
Now, for example, Lead Counselors on Reedley College’s Success Teams (one per pathway) are given three hours a week of paid time to run success team meetings. Each pathway team consists of a Lead Counselor, Lead Faculty, Intervention Specialist, and Data Coach. “The positions are cyclical,” Cobb notes, explaining another intentional part of their collaboration design. “It’s two years per term, but to maintain institutional knowledge, the cycles are staggered such that two positions roll off and two positions stay on.”

Illustration by Morgan Liu

Reflection:

Working With College Executive Leadership

1. What unique access (e.g., to people and their honest thoughts, to certain experiences or observations, etc.) do you have that your executive leadership may not have? Given this access, what insights of yours might be most valuable for executive leaders to understand? Are there ways to convey this information to them?
2. What strengths and challenge areas do you perceive amongst your executive leadership tier?
3. What advice might you give to executive leaders about working with student support leaders across the campus?



How Can You Unite Siloed Departments Around Student Support Efforts?



It was a non-traditional mashup, to say the least. At Santa Barbara City College (SBCC), a group of nursing students had joined forces with a group of theater students. Why? “The theater students were ‘acting’ the part of the nursing students’ patients,” explained nominator Dr. Elizabeth Imhof, Dean of Fine Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at SBCC.

Holistic student support efforts touch all parts of an institution. These efforts therefore require buy-in and collaboration across units and departments that may not have worked together before. Unsurprisingly, all nominators and honorees pointed to not one “superhero” individual, but rather to pairs, or tripartite teams or teams that collectively transformed the institution.

But what do the inner workings of these efforts look like? We asked honorees and their nominators: How do you find a direction to get started? What does it really look like to build trusting, productive relationships with critical stakeholders? When it’s time to act, how do you move projects from ideation to actualization?

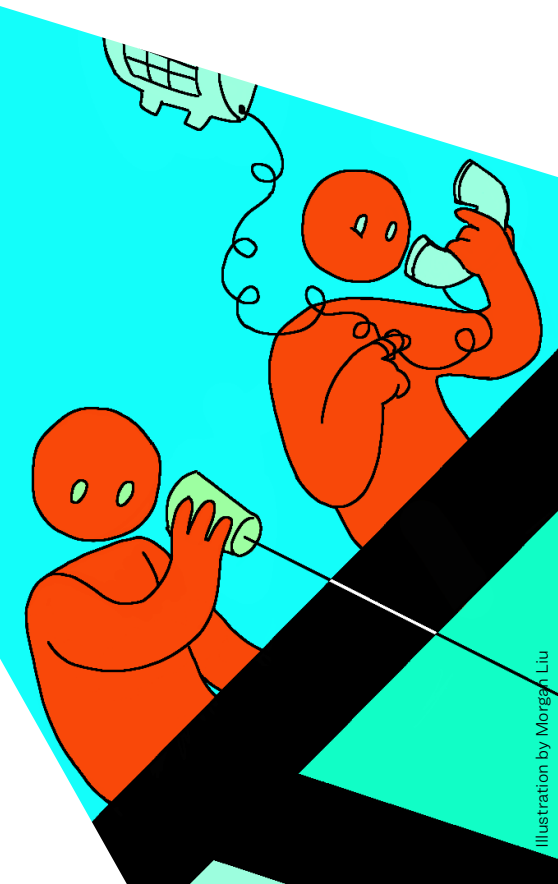
Ask Questions: Developing a Researcher-Inquiry Mindset for Initiatives...And People

The “holistic” aspect of holistic student support can be tough to tackle. It is, by nature, about everyone and everything. So where should student support leaders begin? We asked Guided Pathways coordinators and leads, specialized program heads, IT project managers, Vice Presidents of Student Services, and many others to reflect on their first few months leading student support efforts. While the details of each individual’s approach varied, 90% of interviewees simply said, “Start by asking questions.”

Even more interesting, these student support leaders unanimously pointed to some version of the same four powerful questions:

Why are things the way they are here, and is it really working?

Several honorees were able to push their institution to think differently about policies that unintentionally created barriers to student success and/or equity issues by consistently asking why those policies existed (are they mandated, or simply habit?) and whether they really made sense for students. This line of questioning was critical. It allowed teams to challenge their own assumptions and protocols without accusation or blame. “They follow the line of logic and then say, huh, you know...it’s just how we do things. I’m not sure why we thought that was a good idea...” shared Rob Stevenson. Reedley College’s Aaren Cobb agreed, and underscored the importance of this questioning: “How are we supposed to fix anything if



we're not honest about what we're not good at? Things can sometimes get caught up in 'meeting speak,' [i.e., talking around issues without clarity on next steps] which is frustrating. We need to confront what's really going on, and then do something."

What are others doing that works?

Often colleges can get caught up in the idea that their context is so unique, it necessitates customized innovation and homegrown reform ideas. However, strong leaders nearly universally rely on external ideas and research to form their own approaches. Before starting initiatives, they turned to literature, site visits at other successful colleges, and data to guide their approach. When leading advising reforms at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College, honoree Dr. Marcia Wilson began her journey by conducting site visits to other successful Guided Pathways institutions. At Compton College, honoree Dr. César Jiménez sets aside dedicated time each week to read through best practice briefs (e.g., EAB research, CCRC, etc.). "You're only as good as the ideas you encounter," stated Dr. Jiménez. "I believe in continuously looking for ways we can be better for our students. Things are always evolving."

Why do others think the way they think?

Before making a move, honorees got the lay of the land—not just in terms of institutional policies and practices, but also within the hearts and minds of their colleagues. How do they feel about student support reforms? And more importantly, why? What motivates them? What assumptions or knowledge gaps might they have? And what are the deeper fears or concerns that might be at the root of pushback or resistance. "You have to avoid the 'cold pitch.' Can't come in all Shark Tank, here's what I think, here's what you should do. No. People want to know you see them and understand them. Even if you don't agree with the way they think, that's useful information," shared one Vice President of Student Services.

What matters, and what can I impact?

Student support leaders, even those in excellent teams, cannot do all things all the time. At the end of the day, however extraordinary they may be, they are human. The most seasoned honorees and nominators, having been through multiple cycles of trial and error, success, failure and burnout, pause before moving forward on ideas. They conduct a reality check. What matters, or in other words, what is most urgent and important for students? And of those things, what is possible given the current context and college climate? In this way, they are able to systematically prioritize projects—things that can be done now, and things that might require more maneuvering to be set up for success. In the words of one Guided Pathways coordinator, "Start somewhere. But don't start everything at once. Getting one project done is better than having three projects spin up and crash and burn."

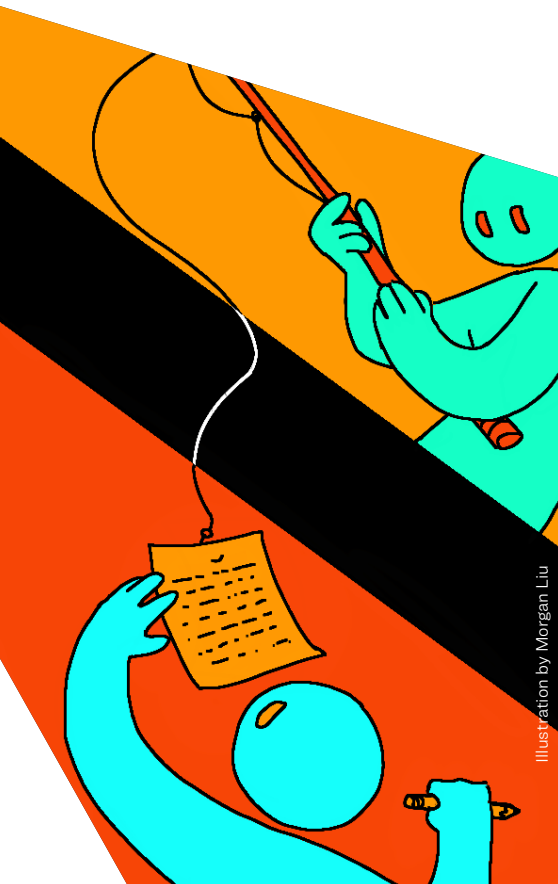


Illustration by Morgan Liu

Norco College, for example, approaches its Guided Pathways implementation through a unique and effective project-based approach, allowing appropriate structure and oversight for major components of Pathways implementation (e.g., reimagining student onboarding) and flexibility for more targeted work. Each project is approved by a steering committee, is accountable to an oversight body, has a clear charter, and is executed by a cross-functional, multi-level team. To mitigate against overwhelm, the college limits its focus to four major projects per year. These major projects do not, however, constrain the work, as faculty and staff across the college also engage in ad-hoc, informal projects that may also contribute to the overall implementation of Guided Pathways.

Authentic Listening: Building (and Re-Building) Trust Across Campus

Not only do they ask the right questions, but honorees across institutions had very similar approaches to how to listen and what to listen for, and they emphasized that “good” listening is as much about what happens in a conversation as it is about what happens afterwards. When asked, “What does it really look like to be a ‘good listener,’” nominators and nominees explained that it involved:

Making Time to Listen

Multiple honorees spoke about being deliberate about setting aside time to meet with direct reports, mentors, and peers—particularly those who might not yet be on board with an idea or do not yet trust that individual. Honorees spoke about the power of simply showing up to meetings with certain constituent groups, taking resisters out 1:1 for coffee or a drink, or simply “getting out of the office” and connecting with individuals in other units/departments.

Listen for Others’ Fears and Perceived Threats

When listening to resisters in particular, honorees probe for the “human reasons behind their complaints,” which often have to do with perceived threats to job security, autonomy, intellectual content ownership, or workload.

In the case of Folsom Lake College, for example, a Starfish implementation faced faculty union pushback against the technology. Faculty believed the technology would require extensive additional hours of work and resented some of the automated messages about the technology being “mandated” for faculty, which made them feel “steamrolled.” Through open conversations,



Dr. Molly Senecal, Dean of Student Success, was able to better frame the technology investment, remove the problematic messaging, and create pre-written alerts that faculty could select in the technology (rather than always writing their own notes).

Listen for Others' Motivations, Aspirations, and Points of Pride

Honorees universally try to understand what brings others into this work and what they enjoy most about it. “People need to see themselves in this work,” was a common refrain. Honorees ask: What brings you to this work? What’s something you really want to do that you haven’t been able to do yet? What have you done that has worked really well?

Echo and Follow Up

As one honoree noted “listening is only ‘good listening’ if it’s followed by action...otherwise, you’re just another talking head in the room. People are used to having leaders come in to show face, but then they think, ‘okay, what’s the use in that? Are they going to do something with what I share?’” In her role, the nominee shared that there was a lot of mistrust between divisions as the college began to restructure counseling roles to support their holistic student support transformation. Stepping into the role as a new hire presented a wide array of challenges. “One person would actually email me a very direct, sometimes pretty sensitive question, but ‘cc the 70 other staff in their unit. I’d calmly write back only to them, and then they’d re-cc the group in their response. Clearly, it’s a trust issue from before I got there,” the honoree shared. Eventually, she gained the trust of classified staff/counselors by first attending meetings with them and hearing out their wants and concerns. “But it’s important not to just be another body in the room, people get jaded if they keep saying their piece and nothing happens,” she said. So, she elevated their ideas to executives (and made sure they knew it). Eventually, this allowed her to “bring home a few wins,” in this case, facilitating an agreement to allocate a certain number of hours a week for counselors to work on self-selected targeted projects that benefitted students. “It showed them that I am trying for them, and in this case, it was good for everyone. They had good ideas, and now they had the autonomy to follow through.” The relationship has now evolved significantly. “The emails are back to normal!” She shared, “And now, even if my answer is sometimes no, they can hear me out on why. They understand that I hear them, that I’m not just there for lip service.”

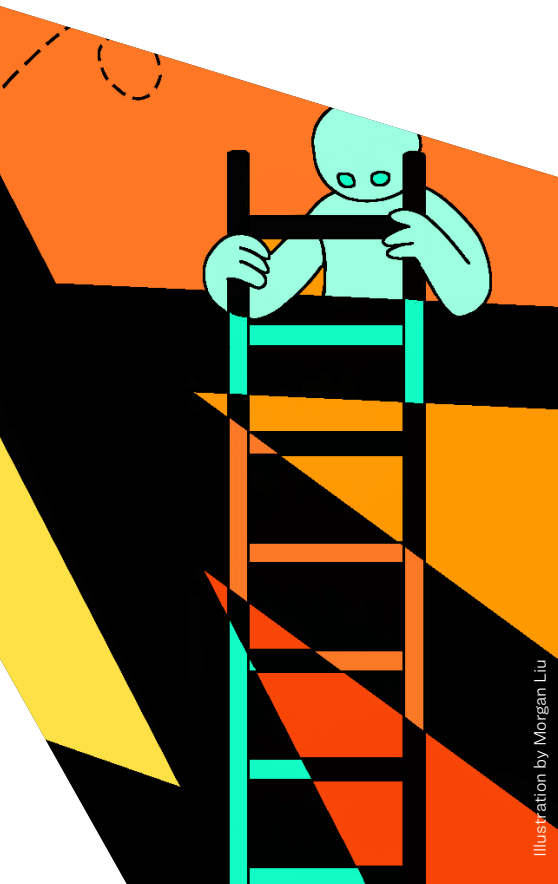


Illustration by Morgan Liu

Act: Approach Projects with “We” and “Why” Instead of “Me” and “How”

Honorees in this interview group universally shared a focus on sharing ownership and credit, a pattern that ultimately helped them to build coalitions across units, departments, and hierarchies.

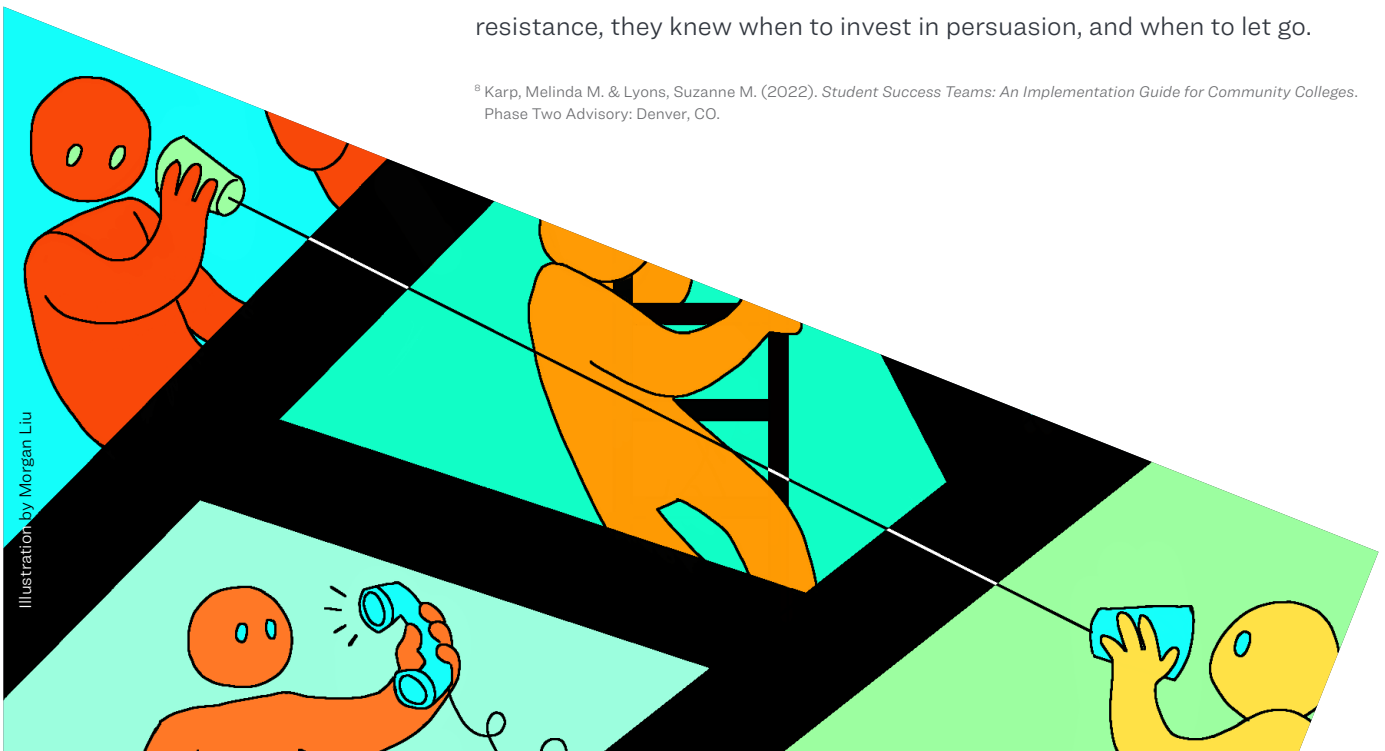
The We Instead of Me: Who Should Be Included at the Table?

“You have to remain humble,” noted LATTC’s Dr. Marcia Wilson, “Once I start to own the work entirely myself, that’s when it doesn’t work. Once it becomes “me,” the work falls apart. It has to be “we.”

Honorees used a variety of tools to map out which key stakeholders they would need for various initiatives and were thoughtful about how and when to involve them. *Student Success Teams: An Implementation Guide for Community Colleges* for example, cites several different models for Student Success Teams and the stakeholders involved in each of those models.⁸ The Ada Center’s *Advising Technology Procurement and Planning Playbook* also lists key stakeholders that should be involved in various stages of IT strategy development, investment, and implementation.

But exemplary honorees tended to look beyond titles. They were uniquely and strategically inclusive. When they checked their list of proposed stakeholders, they asked: Which voices are not represented here, and how do we get them involved? When they encountered potential allies and champions for their efforts, they not only enlisted them, but also empowered them to become leaders themselves. And when faced with resistance, they knew when to invest in persuasion, and when to let go.

⁸ Karp, Melinda M. & Lyons, Suzanne M. (2022). *Student Success Teams: An Implementation Guide for Community Colleges*. Phase Two Advisory: Denver, CO.



Who's Not Here?

Every institution has challenges. Technology projects go forward without input from an end-user group. Advising strategies overlook parts of the Career and Technical Education “side of the house.” And, as noted earlier in this publication, strategic meetings about students sometimes fail to include students themselves.

But the most commonly cited group amongst interviewees? Classified staff.

“Oftentimes, when you come to campus, the classified staff wear uniforms so they’re the ones that students seek out for help. They’re usually the first people that students see,” shared one Guided Pathways leader. “[Classified staff] were never included. And they run the college! If you do Guided Pathways, and the custodial staff wasn’t looped in, well you’re changing schedules, room usage, that affects them. You need them brought in and weighing in too, or you’re setting yourself up for failure.”

QUICK TIPS FROM HONOREES:

How to Include Classified Staff

Ana Lobato (West Valley College), a classified staff member herself, provided a few ideas for how other institutions can create conditions that better include classified staff:

- Schedule strategic meetings when classified staff can make it; Lobato notes that while this “seems so simple,” too often, meeting times fail to consider classified staff work schedules.
- Allocate a few hours a week (Lobato suggests at least three) for professional development aligned to the college’s student success goals and staff aspirations and needs.

How Do I Activate My Allies?

Riverside City College’s Dr. Monique Greene leveraged others’ strengths and passions to build coalitions: “I enjoy being able to tap into people who are doing transformative work. If someone is doing something good, I approach them about it. Everyone wants to talk about what they’re already doing successfully. Everyone likes to feel recognized and valued. So I say, you know what, come with me! Let’s go tell others what you’re doing. And then let’s have you teach them how to do it, I’ll back you! They know now my compliments come with asks! But it works!”

The Santa Barbara Community College team agreed with this assessment. “I didn’t know Margaret [honoree Margaret Prothero] that well,” reflected nominator honoree Melissa Menendez, English Department Chair, “She just called me up and said something along the lines of, ‘Hey I was talking to this student of yours. He mentioned that you were doing xyz in your English class, and it just worked wonders. Anyway, I thought you should know you changed his life.’ And then she would enlist me to help scale the idea. And it worked! Everyone likes to feel impactful.”

Which Resistors Do We Need?

Honorees could all cite at least one example of someone who stood against their holistic student support efforts.

Persuading these individuals takes time and effort, both rare commodities on college campuses. So which resistors are most important to bring on board?

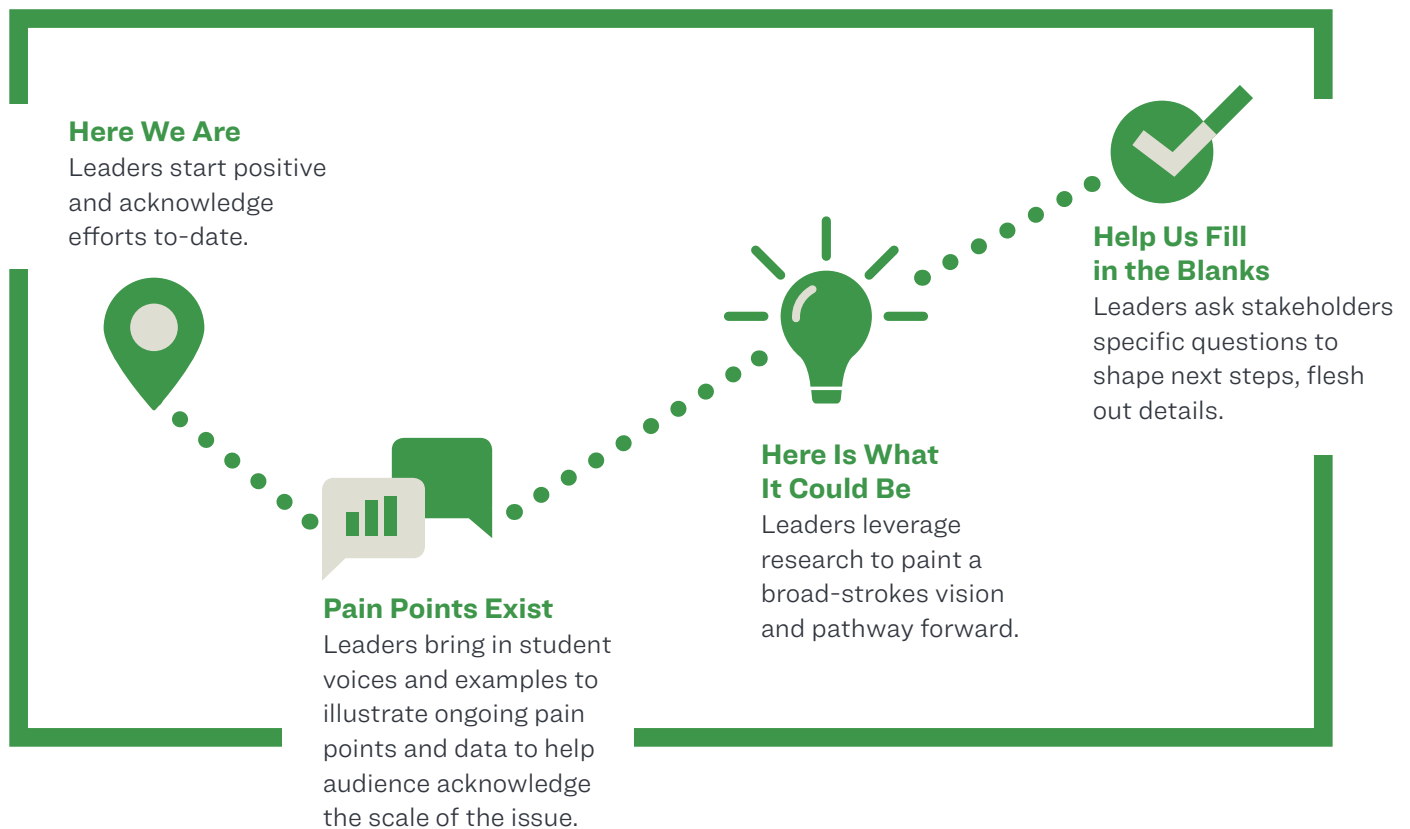
Our honorees weighed in, advising others to consider:

- Which resistors are gatekeepers for key efforts? Are they the only gatekeepers, or are there others who might be more amenable?
- Which resistors have direct power over certain departments or units? Are there people with referent power and influence within those departments or units who could also help to spur efforts?
- Which resistors do you have the best relationships with? Or, which might have strong relationships with your allies?
- Consider allocating resources to enable parity between faculty reassignment and classified staff time allocation. (i.e., overtime pay)
- When engaging in equity work and conversation, examine and address if there is any disparity in the position and power of Classified Senate (especially relative to Academic Senate)

The “Why” Instead of the “How”: Don’t Fully Bake the Cake

While student support leaders often have great ideas, the savviest among them understand that, in the words of Modesto Junior College nominator Dr. Jennifer Zellet, “If you walk into a room with a fully baked plan, it can be the best plan in the world. And it will be torn apart. Not because it’s bad. Simply because you didn’t involve them [faculty and staff] in it. If their voices aren’t in it, it’ll be tough to get their voices behind it.”

Instead, leaders and their managers spoke about starting with a big picture vision and a strong case for why the work needs to be done. While each honoree used different data points and student testimonials for different types of initiatives—from new onboarding practices to entire program pathway redesigns—their most effective approaches followed a general storytelling flow:



Importantly, leaders understand how to toe the line between “doing their homework,” or in other words, having some research-based, thoughtful hypothesis for an approach, and “doing it all,” or walking into meetings with ideas that have been fully baked in a vacuum. As Professor Rob Stevenson explains, “You can’t build things by committee. You can improve things by committee and you can approve things by committee. That’s what you have to learn to balance.”

Putting It All Together

DR. MARCIA WILSON Leads “Days of Dialogue” Help Evolve Holistic Student Support at LATTC



“We were, for some time, ranked something like 113th out of 114 colleges in the state for student success,” said Dr. Wilson, reflecting on LATTC before their holistic student support work commenced. “There was a lot of trying to

rationalize around our completion numbers. Some people might say, ‘Oh, well students only come here to take a few classes, not get degrees,’ for example.”

But that wasn’t a good enough answer for the college anymore. Over the next few years, Dr. Wilson was part of a team of innovative administrators, faculty and staff who leveraged data, research-informed approaches and an inclusive leadership style to push the institution to dramatically reform academics and student support, eventually earning LATTC’s “Pathways to Academic, Career and Transfer Success” (PACTS) initiative recognition from The Aspen Institute and the opportunity to serve as a model for impactful innovation state-wide.

She and the others pushed their colleagues to ask questions of their own as well. “We’d ask them, what do you think students need to be successful?”

“You need to truly want input, not just pay lip-service. Then, you have to make it fun.”

—Dr. Marcia Wilson, Los Angeles Trade-Technical College

Applying a Researcher-Inquiry Mindset to Design Ideas

“It took years,” Dr. Wilson shared. “We started by doing research. We traveled to other community colleges across the country. Anyone doing something different, we studied. We looked at characteristics of high- and low-performing institutions. We wanted this to be an evidence-based innovation.” She pushed her colleagues to ask questions of their own as well. “We’d ask them, what do you think students need to be successful?”

As reforms progressed, Dr. Wilson, steeped in data practice from her experience teaching research and evaluation, turned to formative and summative evaluation. “We looked at student outcomes regularly to check in on our impact. But we also did qualitative studies—focus groups with students, faculty, staff. Constant temperature-taking.”

Days of Dialogue Provide a Forum for Listening, Participatory Inclusion...and Fun

“Days of Dialogue” created dedicated time and space for the entire campus community to engage with holistic student support reforms (first PACTS, then Guided Pathways), and advanced a culture of inclusion and transparency. Dr. Wilson notes that it was necessary for developing collective understanding and building shared will across the institution.

“If you’re not part of the process and don’t understand why something is good for students, you don’t know why we’re doing these things,” Dr. Wilson explained. “You need to truly want input, not just pay lip-service. Then, you have to make it fun.” With support from her vice president, Dr. Wilson and her fellow deans accomplished this through campus-wide “Days of Dialogue,” which created dedicated time and space for the entire campus community to engage with the evolution of holistic student support reforms.

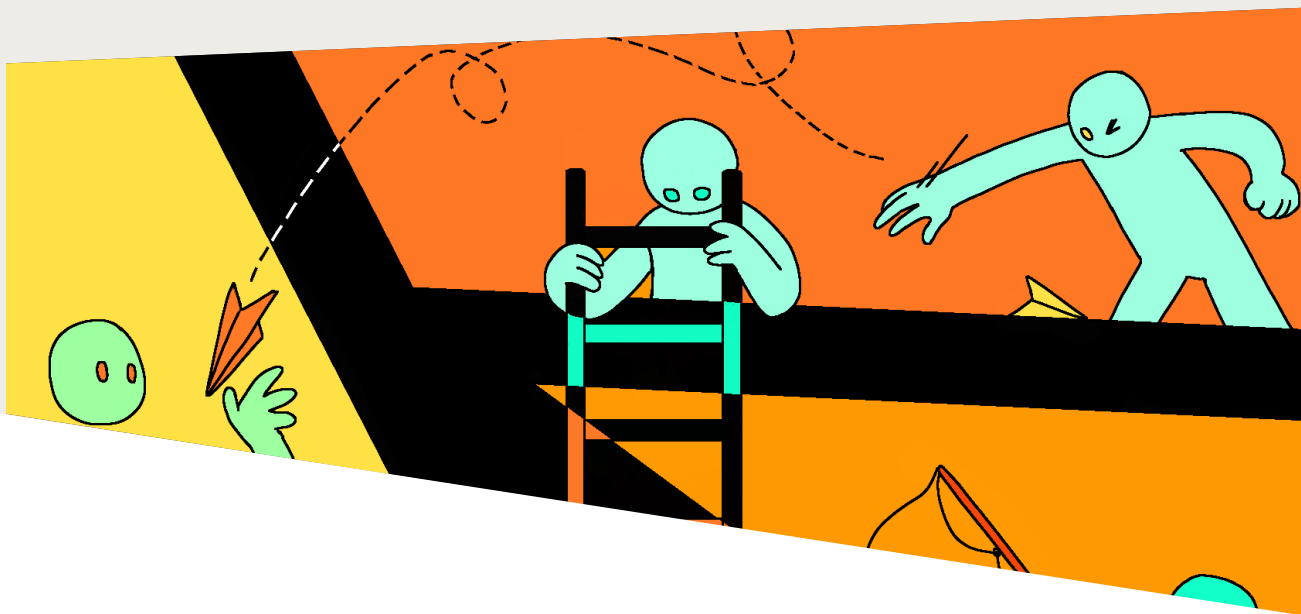


Illustration by Morgan Liu

Key Tenets of “Days of Dialogue”

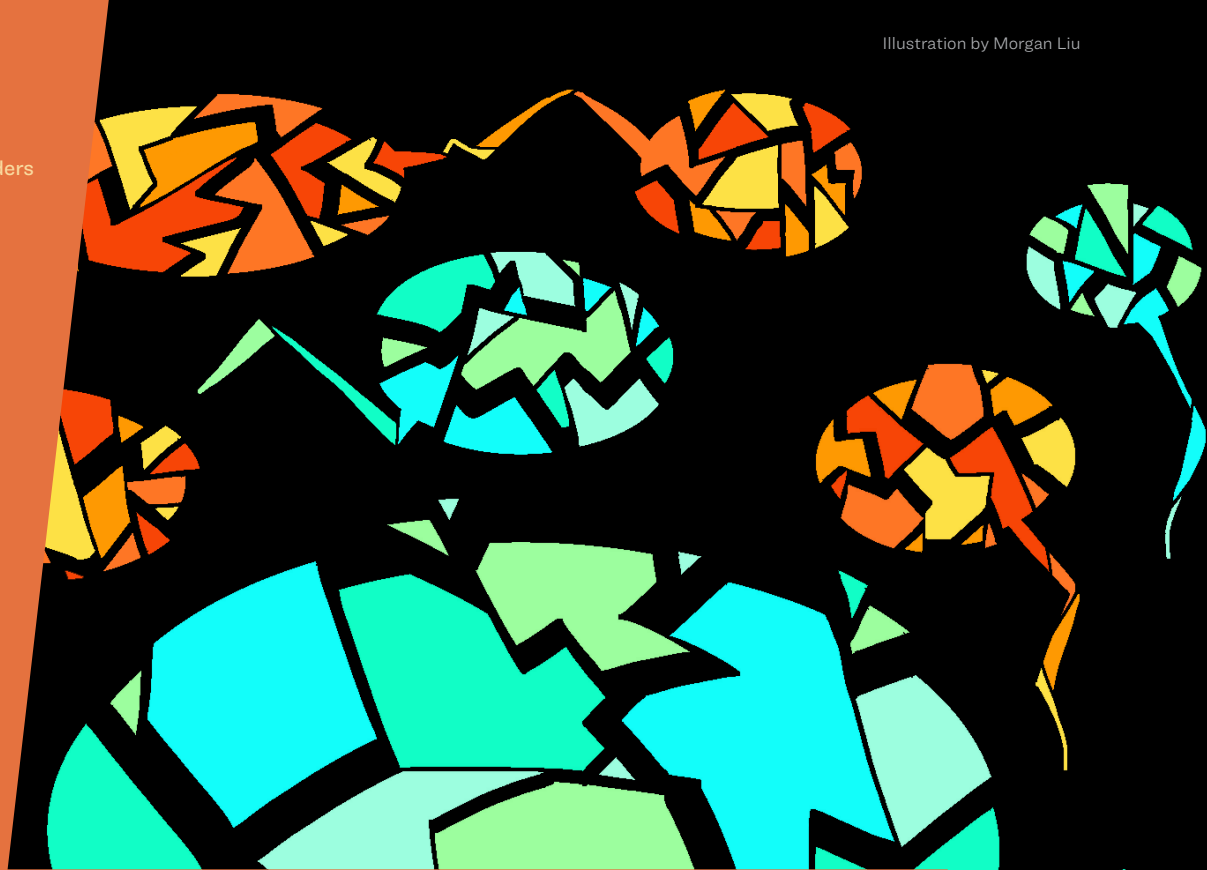
- **Structure, Resources for Purposeful Inclusion:** The president endorsed a move to shut down the entire campus on the third Thursday of every week in the beginning of the year, ensuring that all faculty and staff could attend, from Deans to custodial staff. “It was mandatory for everyone, librarians, counselors, VPs, Deans, student services, everyone had to join, maybe over 400 people total.”
- **Tri-Chair Model:** Dr. Wilson orchestrated matrixed buy-in by organizing individuals into teams with representatives from different parts of campus. For example, when discussing Guided Pathways, Dr. Wilson insisted that an administrator, faculty member, and classified staff member to be the “triad of leadership” for each Guided Pathways pillar.

- **“Sage on the Stage” Replaced by Fun Learning Activities:** Though it may sound frivolous, the fun design of Days of Dialogue was key to keeping participants feeling positive and engaged. Rather than relying on standard PowerPoint presentations, Dr. Wilson designed games to teach Guided Pathways pillars and ideas (e.g., Guided Pathways Jenga, Guided Pathways Taboo), ensuring that everyone on campus had the background knowledge to engage with reform discussions with confidence.
- **Multiple Avenues for Input and Feedback:** Dr. Wilson employed multiple strategies to gather individual and group feedback. At one gathering, participants split into groups and co-designed their own version of “What should the student experience look like?” People could write in comments and questions on documents posted to a shared drive. At meetings, clickers allowed participants to live vote on various ideas and issues.

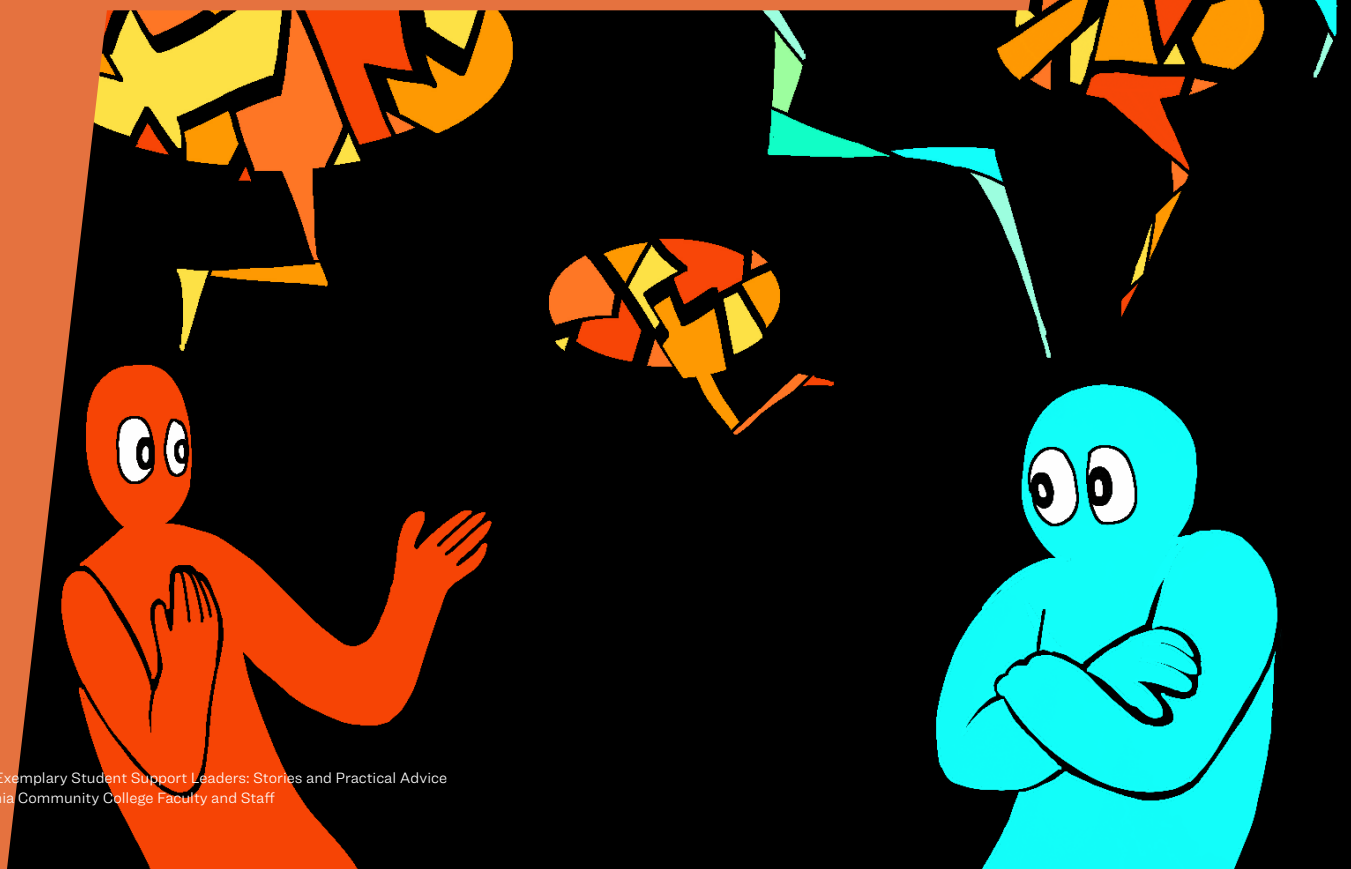
Reflection:

Uniting Siloed Departments

1. Why are things done the way they are at your institution? Consider which of these approaches may or may not benefit students.
2. Consider a person (or people) who might resist holistic student support redesign efforts. Which of these individuals are most important to include in these efforts, and what fears or beliefs are at the root of their resistance? How (and by whom) might these be addressed?
3. Consider a person (or people) who are doing exemplary, equity-forward work, who are, in the words of one nominee “hungry to make a change.” How might you or your team help to align their work and passion with your ongoing efforts?
4. Which individuals or groups do not currently have a strong voice in your institution’s holistic student support design and decision-making? How might processes be amended to be more inclusive?



How Have You Handled the “Crunchy Conversations” Across Campus?



“You have to be able to have the courage to approach those sensitive conversations. That’s step one. And then you have to be able to actually have those conversations,” said nominator Sonia Ortiz-Mercado, reflecting on Folsom Lake College’s equity-focused initiatives, which include mandatory staff DEI training on topics like implicit bias and microaggressions, and its PEAC2E (Peer Engagement for Achievement, Culture, Connection, and Excellence) program, which is designed to “enrich the experience of our Black/African American students.” “You can be passionate,” Ortiz-Mercado notes, “but if Kellie [Dr. Kellie Butler, Honoree, Dean of Student Services] didn’t have the understanding of the nuance within different situations and constituencies, and the ability navigate various dynamics, we wouldn’t be as far as we are today.”

“It’s not just the equity discussions, though that obviously permeates everything. Change can be uncomfortable, whether that involves something as deep as confronting your own internal bias or something more logistical, like having to rethink what your role at the college will need to be,” shared one Vice President of Student Services. “It can be tempting to default to fire and brimstone, but ultimately, that doesn’t typically get far with people. Maybe they get defensive, maybe they get quiet. But if they aren’t in the ‘right space’ to listen and engage, it’s the students that suffer.”

Honorees and nominators pointed to a number of resources for navigating difficult—or as several leaders coined them, “crunchy”—conversations more generally and about equity specifically (See *Resources*, page 83).

They also provided some specific advice and stories about how they have approached these conversations and inspired action.

“It can be tempting to default to fire and brimstone, but ultimately, that doesn’t typically get far with people. Maybe they get defensive, maybe they get quiet. But if they don’t listen, it’s the students that suffer.”

—Vice President of Student Services

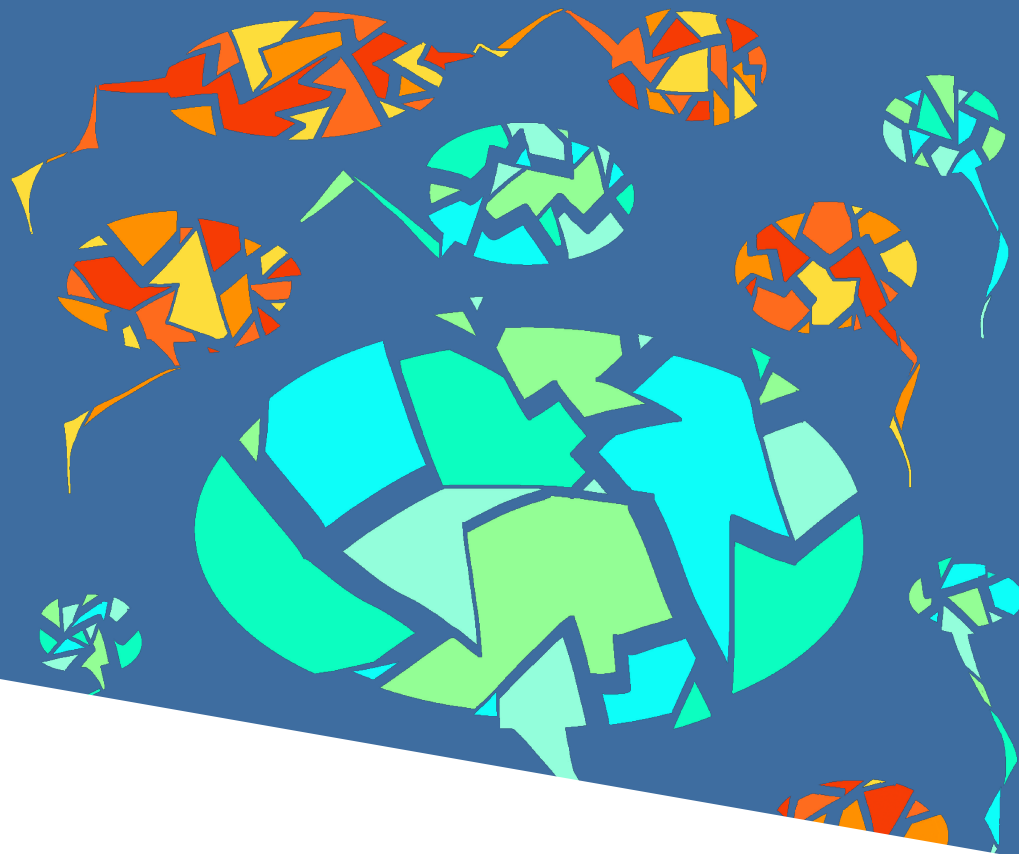


Illustration by Morgan Liu

“Words Matter.”

Exemplary leaders understand the power of words and have honed their ability to reconsider the common words and phrases used across campus. They are intentional in how they frame both big ideas and nuanced instructions, understanding that words can mean the difference between a message resonating with someone or shutting down a conversation before its even begun.

For example:

- Dr. Monique Greene (Honoree, Associate Professor of Counseling, Riverside City College): “The term ‘academic probation’ can be so problematic, particularly for our students who may know that word—‘probation’ in a totally different context. And you have to think, how might using that term bias us as well?”

Note: Around the country, institutions are pushing back against terminology that could harm students. Equity experts have extensive resources on addressing deficit framing. Some of these resources are listed on page 83.

- Dr. Nan Ho (Honoree, Dean of STEM Division, Las Positas College): “There is some guided pathways literature implementation that refers to ‘excess units’...well when you use that word, you’ve just disenfranchised half our campus because when one talks about excess units, it sounds like those units that student took and faculty taught, with care and expertise, are not worthy in some way.”
- Angella VenJohn (Honoree, Counselor, Las Positas College): “Another example is ‘intrusive advising.’ I looked up all the synonyms for ‘intrusive,’ you know, none of them are positive. We’ve changed it to “intentional advising.”
- Tina Giron (Honoree, Counseling Professor, Modesto Junior College): “They call us “non-instructional staff,” but okay, then what about all those hours each week that I am standing in front of a class teaching?”

“Motivational Interviewing,” a Wedge in the Door, and a Little Elbow Grease

AARON COBB

Next Up Counselor/Coordinator and 2020–2021 Success Team Design Faculty Lead, Reedley College



Aaron Cobb nods to his Master’s in Rehabilitation Counseling degree, interest in behavioral psychology, and intensive focus on “pulling off hard things” for his students for equipping

him with several useful tools for his role as a counselor and 2020—2021 Success Team Design Team Faculty Lead.

• **Empower and Persuade Through Motivational Interviewing:** “People will go a long way if they sense you believe in them and get some affirmation that they’re doing a good job,” shares Cobb. “I use the principles of ‘motivational interviewing’ to have some of those conversations.” Cobb explains that motivational interviewing is a specific way of “phrasing things in terms of the person you’re working with,” and is frequently taught as part of social work programs. “It involves having unconditional regard for the person you’re speaking with, using ‘you’ statements and affirmations,” Cobb explains. “I use it with students as their counselor. It’s the difference between, for example, saying ‘Go study’ and dictating what someone should do, which they might automatically push back on, and instead approaching with something more like, ‘I see this potential in you, what do you think could be done to have that show up in your grades more?’ You ask questions as a way of guiding. It can be a really helpful practice for working with others...general human interactions.” Cobb points to resources like the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) for those interested in cultivating this skill themselves.

• **Get a Wedge in the Door to Start:** “There can be a lot of hesitancy at the college to start things,” notes Cobb, “so I deliberately pitch things as, ‘Let’s just try this one small thing out, just try.’ The reality is, once you start in on something, once you get that little bit of wiggle room, it’s easier to get some momentum going.” Cobb advises others, “Be unafraid to jump in and try something, have faith you won’t break it just by trying. You learn through trial and error.”

• **Do the Little Things to Grease the Gears:** Sometimes, actions speak louder than words, and hesitation can be overcome with a little elbow grease. “Sometimes you just have to remove little barriers and blockers that make people nervous about even getting started on the work,” Cobb explains. For example, when setting up a “Pathways Orientation” for students, Cobb needed each pathway team to own their own pathway-specific content presentation. “I helped handle all of the student invitations. I emailed all the students for all seven pathways, I took care of the filtering of all our student lists in our tech system, just so that administrative work wasn’t a barrier. Teams could just focus on the presentation and not get freaked out by, ‘oh, how does this outreach mail merge work? How do I create a filter? Oh this is too much, I give up.’ It’s amazing how the little things can sometimes cripple momentum. So I just remove them.”

“You ask questions as a way of guiding. It can be a really helpful practice for working with others...general human interactions.”

—Aaron Cobb, counselor, Success Team Design Team Faculty Lead

“Lean In with Empathy and Snowball Up”

DEVON BOONE

CARE Manager, MiraCosta College



When Devon Boone joined MiraCosta College as its Campus Assessment, Resources, and Education (CARE) manager, he was unfamiliar with the inner workings of higher education. “I have a Bachelor’s degree and

Masters in Social Work, I spent time working at an emergency shelter and doing direct practice, so I knew a lot about connecting with people, but navigating higher education was new for me.”

While Boone was coming up the higher education learning curve, he also recognized that he had a lot of knowledge that the institution could use to better actualize its commitment to being a “culture of care” for students. The question then became, “How do I build up other departments and individuals to be able to help out with students? It can’t be just our unit, we needed a broader shift in how to address students’ basic needs at scale, how to understand and interact with students.”

“The lived experience of many of our faculty and staff is quite different from our students. I would empathize with faculty who don’t have the training or tools or resources to navigate those situations.”

—Devon Boone, MiraCosta College

As Boone built relationships with faculty and staff, opportunities arose. “A faculty member would approach me to ask about a ‘disruptive student.’ And when they frame it that way, you know they may benefit from understanding what is under the ‘disruptive’ behaviors. I had to attempt to shift how that faculty member was seeing and interacting with that student.” Boone explained. He was thoughtful about how to approach these difficult conversations.

“You have to lean in with empathy. I thought, our faculty, their focus is academia. Our students can bring up concerns that may be really traumatic or scary to hear about, especially for those that haven’t had to experience that before. The lived experience of many of our faculty and staff is quite different from our students. I would empathize with faculty who don’t have the training or tools or resources to navigate those situations.”

Word about Boone’s expertise and non-judgmental support spread across campus. “But I’m only one person,” Boone noted. He knew the institution could benefit from more explicit training on (1) how hardships faced outside the classroom could impact student behavior on campus, and (2) in very practical terms, how to (and not to) manage these interactions effectively.

Leveraging his background and experience as a social worker, Boone “took a shot in the dark” and offered to run a Basic Needs Advocate Training (BNAT) professional development session during “flex week” mid-semester. The workshop focused on how faculty and staff could be more “trauma-informed” in their work with students, pulling from research-backed approaches leveraged in social work programs as well as testimonials from students themselves. “The biggest takeaway from those lessons is learning to shift your lens from ‘What’s wrong with you?’” Devon notes, referring to challenging student behavioral issues, but rather... ‘What’s happened to you? How can I understand where you’re coming from today?’”

This training was revelatory for those in attendance, and demand for more sessions allowed Boone to scale up from a one-time workshop to a more robust training that has served hundreds of faculty, staff, administrators and student workers. Over time, Boone also developed CARE Resource Guides and other CARE Support Guides that are now utilized campus-wide to connect students to resources and support, and co-facilitated a powerful nationwide training called, “Equity Grounded Counseling: Serving Black Students—Addressing Basic Needs in Educational Counseling Environments,” a workshop that builds

practitioners’ capacity to supporting Black students and colleges and universities across the nation.

“Through Devon’s leadership, the CARE team is integrated throughout MiraCosta College’s culture of care and support, including our Student Success Teams,” shared Boone’s nominator, Dr. Nick Mortaloni. “As we continue on the path toward closing our equity gaps and improving student outcomes, Devon and our CARE program are at the center of how we will remove non-academic barriers to student success.”

How Have You Handled the “Crunchy Conversations” Across Campus?
(continued)

While there are many other stories that showcase student support leaders’ talents in leading these courageous conversations, honorees caveated their accomplishments with one critical observation: “You need allies.”

“Having his [Dr. Nick Mortaloni] support was really important. We met almost weekly to break down structures within the college. He helped me identify key players across the division, set up meetings with them. He had my back.”

—Devon Boone, MiraCosta College

“It can be exhausting to carry this torch alone. Sure, administration might turn to me and say, can you lead this conversation, I know you’re adept at it, I know you can do it. But as a woman of color myself, I deal with things in life, I get tired of having to also be the resource. I look around sometimes and I say, is there no one else? Where are my allies?” one counselor shared.

In all the cases highlighted here, honorees cited their allies. For Devon Boone, it was Dr. Nick Mortaloni. “Having his support was really important. We met almost weekly to break down structures within the college. He helped me identify key players across the division, set up meetings with them,” shared Boone. “He had my back.”

Several teams noted that they collectively set group-supported norms for “crunchy conversations” to create a safe space to regularly discuss critical issues, enabling dialogue to happen more frequently and more openly.

“Look for the people doing the work. Ask how you can support them,” shared an honoree. “This work is on all of us.”

Reflection:

Handling Crunchy Conversations Across Campus

1. Skim through your college strategic plan and meeting agendas. Are there words or phrases that might disenfranchise some of your community? Your students?
2. Part of being prepared for “crunchy conversations” involves thinking about when they might arise. What upcoming encounters might require courage and extra thought from you and your team? What tactics might you use to approach them?
3. How might you find allies to help you have challenging conversations on campus? How might you be a better ally to those who are leading these conversations?



How Do You Identify and Cultivate the Next Generation of Student Support Leaders?





“In my dream of dreams, we cultivate faculty into deans, classified staff into directors, students into staff.”

—Vice President-level nominator

“Something I’m working on with the executive team here is to establish formal succession plans,” shared one Vice President-level nominator. “This isn’t necessarily to guarantee jobs, but rather to give people the training required to be successful.

Traditionally, the role of higher education is to weed out. We know what that’s code for. Academia, especially the chair I sit in, is notoriously White and male.

We have to be intentional about diversifying our administrative team through mid-level leader empowerment because the system wants to perpetuate itself and it will not happen on accident... In my dream of dreams, we cultivate faculty into deans, classified staff into directors, students into staff.”

Honorees and nominators alike echoed this sentiment. Across the board, honorees spoke not only of their responsibility toward students, but also, their responsibility toward their staff. “This job is first about the students, but it’s also about your people who serve the students, the students who may become your people,” noted Dr. César Jiménez. Jazzie Muganzo Murphy concurred, “I think of my job as, ‘I take care of the people who take care of our students.’ You want to treat those people well, you want to pass that good will along.”

We asked nominators and honorees: Given the evolving state of higher education, who are the “next generation” of student support leaders that we need most? What skills will they need to adapt to the changing field, and how are you supporting their growth? They answered below.

Recognizing Talent Pipelines for the Next Generation of Representative Student Support Leaders

“It’s about diversity of backgrounds,” shared one honoree, a Guided Pathways Coordinator. “It’s about building a pipeline of faculty and staff who are representative of our students. That includes race and ethnicity, yes. And it also includes socio-economic factors and life experiences.”



Where can colleges find these talent pipelines?

“I don’t think anyone grows up being like, I want to be a counselor, I want to work at a community college. You have these skills, empathy, listening, that would make you a good fit, but then you need people to see you and nudge you there.” Riverside City College’s Dr. Monique Greene stated.

“There is so much talent right here in the institution and around the community,” Modesto Junior College Tina Giron shares. “We just need

better pathways and support for them. A different approach to recognizing talent and a more purposeful way to support folks up the ladder.”

Honorees pointed to up-and-coming talent pipelines:

 STUDENTS	 LOCAL COLLEGE/ MASTER’S/PH.D. STUDENTS	 FRONTLINE STAFF, ADJUNCTS	 EARLY-CAREER FACULTY, MID-LEVEL LEADERS
<p>Who knows the pain points and sees opportunities for student support improvements more than students themselves? Still, student employee programs remain limited and pathways to fulltime employment can be difficult to surface without guidance. But, interviewees note that their former students often make the most committed, impactful employees.</p> <p>“Danielle (‘Elle’) started as a student assistant. And she showed so much promise, and there she was working at a hotel. She graduated in the Spring with an associate’s degree, and we hired her on as a classified staff member, and she’s fantastic.”</p> <p>—Dr. Kristy Woods, Faculty, Las Positas College</p>	<p>Several honorees noted that opportunities to intern or conduct research with community colleges deeply impacted their career trajectory.</p> <p>“We only hire people with experience. But how are underrepresented folks supposed to get that experience? How do you get an internship or shadowing experience without friends or family or connections in the field? We have to reach out to those graduates who need that exposure and opportunities.”</p> <p>—Dr. Monique Greene, Associate Professor, Counselor, Riverside City College</p>	<p>Interviewees note that frontline staff (including classified staff) are often more diverse than those in upper-level positions. Though they may want to ascend the career ladder, they are often unsure of how to do so, or rely on ad-hoc guidance and mentorship from supervisors.</p> <p>“You need to encourage people and mentor them and reward them when they apply. We have people who want to move up. When they apply, the search committee goes, oh this shiny person over here and they can bring something new to our campus. So what happens to those people who have served you for years, who have been in this community for years?”</p> <p>—Tina Giron, Professor, Counseling, Modesto Junior College</p>	<p>Nominator and more senior-level honorees alike note that they constantly learn from more junior faculty and mid-level staff, who can bring fresh ideas, energy, and a commitment to equity-focused redesign to the table.</p> <p>“Look for people coming in who have humility, a willingness to educate themselves and have an imagination for something better. My team, they walk in willing to learn new things, even though they’ve already done so much work with and for racially minoritized and marginalized groups. There’s an understanding that oppression exists, a willingness to redesign those systems of oppression.”</p> <p>—Dr. Jesús Miranda, Dean of Student Success and Equity, Cuyamaca College</p>

Honorees emphasized that equity-forward approaches belong not only in student support structures, but also within college faculty and staff development practices. One honoree noted that, for years, he was one of the only people of color in his institution's Academic Senate, and the only person of color on the Senate Executive committee, a center of power for the college. At times, he found himself alone and at odds with the other perspectives in the room. At one point, another faculty member "out of ignorance rather than spite" used a racially charged term to describe people from the honoree's own ethnic background. "I pulled him aside to speak to him about it," noted the honoree, "But it was also clear that we needed more than my voice at that table."

The transformation took time. "The group [Academic Senate] remained predominantly white and male until about four years ago," the honoree said. "And then two prior senate presidents and I intentionally started looking for new senators to bring into leadership. All three of us worked in our discipline with a brilliant senator [a young woman of color], who we were able to convince to take on a minor role at first, and now she has just become senate president."

The power of this new leader was immediately evident. "She agreed we needed diversity in our leadership...when she was elected president, senators [also people of color] we had been pursuing [but had been hesitant to join] said 'yes' when she asked. Everyone was involved in leading in some way but having her take the reins was the thing that got each more involved and willing to take on higher offices and more responsibility."

Today, the honoree describes a "generational difference" in the Academic Senate, and is intentional about empowering the new, diverse leadership team. "We still have asymmetrical levels of experience, so I find myself trying to remain silent and encouraging others to speak even though they want to defer to the experience [of the honoree and his peer group]."

This story illustrates how equity-forward thinking can play a role in next generation talent development, and it underscores how one move toward inclusion opens doors for a much broader sea change. Today, the institution's Academic Senate is intentional about bringing an equity lens to student support efforts, tackling legislation to support refugee and veteran students, establish gender-neutral restrooms, and empower students to use their preferred name throughout the college. Senators also began reshaping college structures and expectations. Resolutions committed the college to making a more concerted effort to recruit, hire, and promote diverse employees and to work towards a more explicitly anti-racist and inclusive culture overall.

"It is a work in progress," The honoree notes, "But I am finally really happy with the direction."

"Look for people coming in who have humility, a willingness to educate themselves and have an imagination for something better."

—Dr. Jesús Miranda, Cuyamaca College

Key Knowledge and Skills for Tomorrow's Student Support Leaders

The higher education field, like any other, continues to evolve. As a result, the skills and knowledge required for student support roles has also begun to shift, a fact that honorees and nominators both acknowledged.

So what should the next generation of student support leaders know? Interviewees coalesced around the following ideas:

Historic Roots of Inequity, and How to Truly Be an Ally

The students of tomorrow will be the most diverse generation yet. As the nation has grappled with racial justice and income inequality, current student support leaders have acknowledged that dedicated training and development is needed to prepare college leaders to engage the many equity-focused discussions and reforms yet to come.

“That includes knowing the roots of the community college system,” states nominator Dr. Jesús Miranda of Cuyamaca College. “In order to drive progress or redesign a system, we have to understand how we got to today.” Another honoree adds, “And a part of that is also knowing how to uplift others, regardless of your background. Privilege and power comes in many forms. You have to know how to use yours. How to stand with others.”

College Context

Honorees note the importance of onboarding to their own institutional context. While most colleges offer general onboarding, current student support leaders noted that mentorship and listening tours can help to answer several other critical questions, including:

- What do different teams do, specifically? For example, what is actually involved in the day-to-day job of a counselor, a financial aid officer, etc.?
- What is our strategic plan, in layman's terms? How are we progressing on it?
- How does funding for initiatives work at our college/in our state?
- What are the various power structures within our institution? How do they operate?

Current Higher Education Movements

Multiple honorees noted the steep “learning curve” involved in understanding higher education jargon and reform strategies.

“We had our student ambassadors create an onboarding document with key Guided Pathways and other higher education terminology. And then we realized, wait, this would actually be great for anyone who joins our Guided Pathways team!” shared Dr. Monique Greene.

This faulty/staff-focused “college knowledge” might include:

- State policies, for example, AB 705 in California, which focuses on developmental education reform
- Guided Pathways pillar explanations
- Student support reform acronyms (e.g., SSIIP, the concept that supports should be “Sustained, Strategic, Inclusive and Integrated, and Personalized”)

Data and Technology

“Increasingly, you need to know enough to be dangerous,” stated honoree Joshua Rosales, a Research Analyst at El Camino College.

Honorees overall nodded to the utility of data/IT know-how, including:

- Knowing how to frame impactful questions of data
- Differentiating between correlation and causation
- Understanding how IT connects to broader student support strategy

“As an example of this,” shares Tina Giron, “we created a position for a student services liaison to IT. Our staff needs someone to go to who can be a bridge, someone who understands the flow of information and data from onboarding through completion, someone who speaks student success and also speaks IT.”

Developing Tomorrow's Student Support Leaders

What do rising holistic student support leaders need to be set up for success? To flourish over time?

Exemplary student support leaders emphasized that their best practices for management often mirror much of what we already know as best practices for our students. “We talk about Guided Pathways for our students,” shared one Vice President of Student Services, “but what about pathways for the people who serve our students?” Honorees noted that when it comes to new faculty and staff, institutions should provide an orientation, offer mentorship, explain confusing jargon, and provide avenues for continuous improvement and support, “just as we try to do for students.”

Here is how several leaders empower others as a part of their everyday work:

Check-ins More than Just Progress Reports

Multiple leaders set aside dedicated, regular time to check in with their direct reports. Rather than defaulting to static “share outs” about project progress, honorees emphasized the importance of instead using time to:

- Provide relevant context for ongoing projects, including political dynamics, policy/budget considerations, and/or background on student support reform ideas/models
- Empower staff to share their own observations and ideas to improve student support and/or address equity gaps
- Learn about staff interests and aspirations and explore avenues for development in line with those
- Offer coaching ahead of big presentations or meetings, and feedback immediately after

“I treat my team like they are partners in this work, because we all are. We use our time together to strategize and plan as a team,” notes Folsom Lake College’s Sonia Ortiz-Mercado. “We have one-on-one time to focus on each individual’s area of responsibility, but collectively we work to use our time as a Student Services leadership team to have more in-depth planning discussions on not only what we need to do now, but where we need to be the next semester and in the future. In this way, the team is well-informed and engaged in the overall vision for student services at the college.”

“I make a point to let my team present on their own work, their own ideas. And if they make mistakes, that’s fine. I’ll debrief with them and go over,

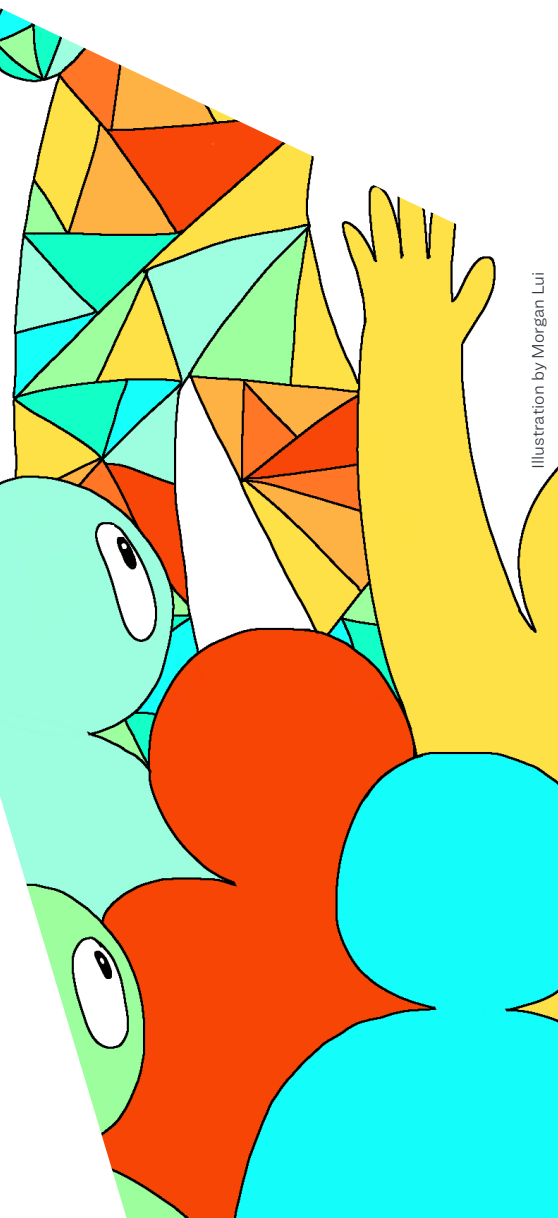


Illustration by Morgan Lui

“this is how you presented this, but this is how it was received by X person and why. Here’s how to adjust for next time,” Compton College’s Dr. César Jiménez shared. “It’s what made the biggest difference for me, especially as someone not coming from a family with a lot of experience in higher education.”

Create Opportunities for Exploration

“The way I measure success is not people in my department being static at their desks from 9-5. I make every possible effort to pave the way for my staff to pursue opportunities that empower them,” shared honoree Ana Lobato. Like other celebrated student support leaders, Lobato encouraged and enabled her direct reports to pursue projects outside of their day-to-day jobs, firmly believing that, “Credentials can’t teach them what these institutional opportunities can teach them.” One of Lobato’s frontline Admissions & Records staff went on to become a foster youth liaison and served on the institution’s Guided Pathways task force, all of which solidified her interest in higher education.

“You need to provide your team with sightlines into growth,” Lobato states. “Some leaders are afraid of ‘losing’ their direct reports that way, but you lose them anyway if they become demotivated. This way, I’ve helped make the institution stronger by making this person stronger. And now I have another ally working alongside me to improve outcomes for students.”

Support Professional Skill Development

Several student support leaders pointed out a critical truth: Not all people receive the same kind of career preparation. Just as students benefit from career services and opportunities to build their professional skills, aspiring community college leaders need this support as well, particularly if they themselves come from first-generation backgrounds or did not have the

privilege of being explicitly coached on topics like networking, resume writing, and interviewing for the world of higher education.

Several leaders noted that this skill development is often most impactful when delivered through organized cohort training models that allow aspiring leaders to not only grow their own skillsets, but also develop networks of peers and mentors who may serve as champions and allies within the institution and throughout their career journey.

Illustration by Isa Saldívar



From Student to Tenured Faculty: A 20-Year Journey Illuminates The Challenge and Promise of Forging Pathways for Student Support Leaders

TINA GIRON

Faculty Counselor, Modesto Junior College



“When I became a single mom as a student at Modesto Junior College, it got hard. My two year plan took me seven years between having babies and paying the bills. I couldn’t go full-time,” Tina Giron shared, “but I owe MJC my life. It’s because of

the people at MJC that encouraged me, that said, hey, education can pull you out of the life you’re currently in. That’s what this school means to me.”

Tina Giron is currently still at Modesto Junior College, or MJC. Only now, she’s a tenured faculty counselor.

The journey to get there, however, was long. It also took the efforts of other students, support staff, and faculty who saw something in Giron and took the time to help her cultivate her talents and find opportunities for advancement.

She began as a student worker in the mail room. “There was the secretary in the health services offices. She eventually became a counselor here, but she saw me as a 17-year-old in the mail room. And she pushed me to think about what I wanted in my life. The custodian who would bring all the boxes to the mailroom, he’d say, “So what are you going to do with your life?””

Giron worked up to becoming a classified short-term contracted employee, a facilities clerk. Then, “One of my bosses, Maria Baker, she was the Director of Financial Aid and the Facilities Office, and she sat next door to my office. I was at the end of my contract days and not sure what I’d do next, and she came in and gave me the opportunity to fill

in for someone on bereavement leave. She gave me that opportunity, and it meant everything. She saw something in me, and thought hey, let’s encourage you to carry on.”

And carry on she did. After completing her Associate of Science degree, she became a support staff member in the college’s career center. A Bachelor’s degree helped her step up into a job as a career center coordinator. “I had to jump around to a lot of different positions to get the experience I needed to become a counselor. It was other student support leaders, like the Director of EOPS, that helped me get volunteer opportunities so I could get the experience I needed as a counselor, another contact that helped me find job opportunities to get a foot in the door as a faculty member.”

Reflecting on her path, Giron is attuned to the needs of other student and adjunct workers who attempt to follow in her footsteps. “I review resumes. I do mock interviews. When I became the coordinator at the career center, I didn’t just work with students, I also started a workshop for my classified employees. They tend to be the ones who are more representative of our students, and they just need to understand how to navigate their careers in this field.”

“I am very proud of the tireless effort I put into my job now. Every step, every decision, every volunteer hour I take, I want to help someone else, some other single parent, someone who is struggling out of poverty to put food on the table like I did,” Giron shares.

She notes that there are others out there like her, striving to move up and make an impact. “We just need to see them, support them, give them a chance.”

“Some leaders are afraid of “losing” their direct reports that way, but you lose them anyway if they become demotivated. This way, I’ve helped make the institution stronger by making this person stronger. And now I have another ally working alongside me to improve outcomes for students.”

—Ana Lobato, West Valley College,
Student Support Leader Honoree

The impact of investing in the next generation of student support talent has the potential to create long-term, transformational change, both to institutions and to higher education as a whole. Tina Giron is not alone in her efforts to curate this support for that next generation. At College of Marin, honoree Gina Cullen, Counseling Faculty and Guided Pathways Faculty Lead, has created a more formalized counseling internship program, recognizing the power of applying an equity lens to the college not only as a place of learning, but as a major employer.

“Gina has been instrumental in the College’s diversity and equity efforts via the counseling internship program. After completing their graduate programs and internships at the College, counseling interns are being hired as adjunct faculty in the department and the composition of the faculty is more reflective of the student body,” explains Cullen’s nominator, Tonya Hersch, Dean of Educational Success Programs. “The interns and adjunct faculty are working with our learning communities...and enhancing direct support to students. Gina’s commitment to the program has yielded tangible results in just a few years and is establishing a pipeline of diverse faculty to the College.”

Over and over, honorees spoke about equity not only in terms of students, but in terms of the makeup of the institution itself. For that reason, they create opportunities for student workers from wide and varied backgrounds. They reach out to underrepresented graduate students seeking mentorship and opportunity. And they invest in their very own direct reports, imbuing them with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets they will need to one day pick up the torch and march onward toward a vision of equity and success at all of our colleges.



Photography by Ryan De Vera

Reflection:

Identifying and Cultivating the Next Generation of Student Support Leaders

1. Who is and is not represented in different groups/hierarchies at your college, particularly among those that have strategic and decision-making power (e.g., Academic Senate, tenured roles, leadership positions)?
2. What skills and attributes do you believe are most important for future higher education student support leaders? Is there anything you wish you knew before starting in your role?
3. How might you or your team adapt the way you manage your team or advocate within the college to support the next generation of student support leaders?

Concluding Thoughts: Dear Leaders—On Burning Bright Without Burning Out



DEAR ASPIRING LEADERS

Advice from College Leadership About Moving Up the Ladder

The leaders interviewed for this publication represented a wide range of seniority. Some had aspirations of ascending to senior level positions; others had already ascended executive-level positions.

We spoke to several student support leaders that had ascended the career ladder quickly as well as those who had influence over hiring and promotions. We asked: If we think about what can be controlled individually, what practices have been most effective? What lessons have been most hard-won?

In their own words, they shared the following advice:

Raise Your Hand and Show Up

“Go to committee meetings. Join working groups. Listen to how people from different departments speak and think. That’s how you learn what’s really going on around campus, that’s how you get involved. You can’t always count on someone tapping you on your shoulder. Sometimes you have to have the courage to raise your hand.”

What Got You Here Won’t Get You There

“When you move up, you have to kind of kill your inner faculty member. The perspective you have at the mid-level or frontlines, that’s different than what you’ll get when you have to see across units, when you see the give and take things take to get done.”

“It’s a shift in mindset from managing the work to visualizing the big picture and staying focused on that vision.”

Learn How to Take a Hit

“It takes a while to learn to take a hit. When you move from being a faculty member to a person in a leadership position, you might have to make decisions that your former peers don’t like. Maybe your department or your unit expects some kind ‘loyalty,’ but in the end, you have to do what’s right for students. And you’ll have to take some hits. It helps to know that going in.”

“I’ve learned not to take things personally. When someone says something unkind or gets frustrated, I silently remind myself that this is not all about me, this is about the position that I’m in. That just comes with the job, no matter how good you are at it.”

Think Fast, Talk Slow; Speak From a Place of Knowledge

“One of the things I saw in him [honoree] was how good he was at commanding respect. And some of that is very teachable. When you’re explaining important things or making a controversial case, speak slowly but confidently. It gives people time to absorb what you’re saying. Speaking too quickly can overwhelm people, or they might not get a chance to process properly. And speak from a place of knowledge. Do your research so you can add insight.”

Put Problem-Solving Over Politics

“It sounds like common sense, but you’d be amazed how many people this trips up. As you ascend, you have to know there’s a time and place for complaining about policies or leadership. There are so many instances where we’ll see someone engage in the gossip or engage in very public confrontation out of anger or frustration, and yes, there are times to take a stand, but so often we’ll sigh and think, ‘someone should have coached them better, their manager should have taught them how to create that change they want.’ Because in those instances, it doesn’t matter if you’re right, you’ve used up that social capital, burned that bridge, and that idea is going to burn up with it.”

Learn the College Levers

“Know how the Academic Senate works. Know how funding formulas work and where money comes from, know what policies influence the way things are, from developmental education to major pieces of union contracts. These are the things that make the college do what the college does. These are your parameters of your equation. Ask about them. Sit in meetings and listen. You gotta know the levers if you wanna make the change.”

DEAR FRIENDS

Advice from Exemplary Student Support Leaders on Taking Care of Yourself

To be a truly impactful and equity-focused leader is challenging. To continue to be one year in and year out is even more so. The job involves an incredible amount of “empathy gymnastics,” an ability to see multiple points of view, all while maintaining vision and forward momentum. It involves feeling the urgency and imperative to support students and to see firsthand the impact of broken policies and practices. Too many of our most excellent student support leaders are feeling drained.

So we asked the leaders: What advice would you give to other leaders who might feel like they’re struggling right now? Imagine you could sit down with them, grab a drink, a coffee, a cup of tea in a rare moment of pause. What would you say?

“Stay connected to your ‘why.’ What drives you to do this work? For me, it’s the students. I asked for allocated time to do direct work with students. It re-charges me. I remember that I’m out here for my community. I’m out here for my own sons, two Black boys who will grow into Black men, and I’m out here making this the community I’d want it to be for them.”

“Remind yourself this is a marathon not a sprint. You have to pace yourself. Don’t try to spin all the plates at once. In fact, two plates is better than three, and one is better than two. As much as you can, try one thing at a time.”

“Know that you won’t know everything, but knowing everything isn’t a prerequisite to starting the work. You can do this. **We all learn. Every day.**”

“You have to know these things are messy. You have to pick what comes first. How? It’s like a housing remodel. As you tear out the kitchen and you get in to see where the problems are. You start to learn what needs to get fixed. Then, when you start meeting with people, you start realizing what’s possible and what’s not. Start with what’s possible, even if it’s small.”

“Advocate for your people, advocate for yourself. Ask for the things you need to feel supported. Set boundaries. You have a right to speak up, and you can’t move mountains running on fumes.”

“Know that people will get mad and there will be barriers, and that’s okay—to do big change, it’s going to ruffle feathers.”

“Know that it will take a long time. Change takes time. And sometimes it feels so frustrating. Don’t let that get to you. Have patience. It will take time.”

“Be okay with messing up. Seriously. You are human. So don’t be afraid of being human. I’m a perfectionist, and I want to do so much for my students, so that one was hard for me. But tape it on your mirror if you have to. Be okay with messing up. It’s going to happen. So be kind to yourself.”

Resource Recommendations from Student Support Leaders

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About Our Student Artists



MORGAN LIU

Hello! My name is Morgan Liu and I am honored to share my work with you! To me art is a form of expression in one of its rawest forms. Drawings help me to convey ideas when words fail, which happens quite frequently due to how cluttered my brain is! I am inspired by dandelions, and rats, and small bugs, and all the little lifeforms in the world. They are tiny, and seemingly insignificant on their own, but they fight to survive with an unparalleled vibrance and passion. They do not care how big the world is, or if they are viewed as pests. They grow through the cracks in the pavement, and live in the forgotten places, strong and beautiful.



ISA SALDIVAR

I am Isa Saldivar (she/they), a Yoeme and Raramuri femme with Chumash family, as well as an artist and indigenous activist based in Syuxtun, Santa Barbara. I am working towards a bachelor's degree in Ethnic Studies with the intention of re-indigenizing education. My experience as a land defender, former foster youth, and community leader nurtures my studies of Traditional Plant Medicine and Danza Mexicayotl. I create art because of my agency for a better future, to move people to act, and recognize those who are.



RYAN DEVERA

I was born and raised in the South Bay, and my city is also known as 'The City of Destiny'. Although it's a small city it holds ideas, artists and dreams willing to grow. I grew up in a Filipino household where my family always taught me to respect everyone. I've had this saying I've kept with me for years: I say "ONE LOVE". To me it means to not only love together, but to love each other and respect who we are. Art means so much to me, especially photography. What I view from my camera is how I perceive the world. Whenever I click the shutter button, I just remember the moment only happens once. Being able to create something that can last forever means the world to me! If you happen to be in my next photo, thank you for your moment in time! One love!



**Thank you to all of
our Holistic Student
Support Leaders.**