

“It’s the Community”

RCC Student Engagement and Success Focus Groups

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Executive Summary

After the results of the 2018 Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) were received and analyzed, RCC leaders determined that focus groups should be held to get detailed student feedback on what RCC was doing well and what needed to be improved for their engagement and success. Four main student needs for engagement and success emerged from the focus groups:

1. Connection and Community
2. Robust Student Orientation
3. Clear Academic Pathway
4. Instructional Support

Connection and Community. Relationships with other students, advisors, and instructors were foundational to student engagement and persistence at each stage of the student experience. They provided a basis of trust and understanding that made students more comfortable asking questions in class, creating study groups, and reaching out for help when they were in crisis. Students came to RCC because of their hope for the future, but they stayed because of their relationships. One unexpected mechanism of community and belonging was the ability to help and support others. See pages 10-11 and 16-18.

“And I think, thanks to the HOLA program we have the Latinx Club because we know that – you are not the only one! You can build a community here and we can support each other like – not only, like, having parties or this kind of stuff – like studying together, or when someone don’t understand, like, something in Biology class or this kind of stuff, we can support each other. That was, like, a really good thing for me because now I have friends and I was alone at first.”

“Networking, coming together, showing me how to rebuild my thinking, how to become what I want to be, instead of sitting back saying, ‘I wish’ – I’m doing... *It’s the community.* It’s what I pretty much desire, is to be back part-of, but now I am. That’s what draws me back. Is because I’m not only wanting to be here, there’s people, like I said, in that class the other day, when that girl came up to me for help – that made me feel a lot better. It invited, it pulled me in closer, because of the – it just goes to show that somebody else needed my help too, just as well as I need their help.”

“She’s also willing to be vulnerable in a way that she’ll share her experiences with you as well, like what she has struggled with when she was a student and things like that. So she makes her lessons like super [relevant], you know, to you and to her and to, just, everybody there. So you feel like you’re not such a, you know, like – [gestures distance with hands] teacher, student, teacher, student, you know? It’s like, ‘No, we’re all here – COMMUNITY.’ So it’s – teachers that kind of build up that vibe in the classroom rather than making it so, ‘Oh, I’m the instructor and you’re the student!’ you know. Like, I don’t like that kind of feel cus I had a problem with, like, “authority” and like, you know, like, that kind of thing, my whole life. So having teachers that just make it feel equal, make it feel like we’re all here together doing this thing, you know, like, I really, I can’t say enough how appreciative I’ve been of that.”

Robust Student Orientation. Students often felt lost and overwhelmed upon entering RCC. They were more at risk of failure because they enrolled in too many classes, or inappropriate classes, and didn’t know how to drop or withdraw. Early setbacks lead students to think that they didn’t belong in college. It was clear that students were more prepared, engaged, and successful when they had a solid, in-person orientation and advising before registration. RCC’s HOLA summer bridge program provided an

exemplary model of an orientation that created community while giving students the information and tools they needed to navigate a foreign world. See pages 6-9 and 19.

“I would definitely say, like, an orientation of some sort that maybe goes over, like, what degree you have and what courses you need to take, and, ‘Hey, these are where those resources are, this is where the Student Success room is and this is where counseling is. I understand that that class is kinda like that, but I just feel like it’s not enough. It needs to be in the beginning, as soon as you walk through the door, like, ‘Hey, this is what this campus is, this is where everything is, this is what we have to offer you, these are the resources we have.’ And I understand, like, that might be a lot to get, but at the same time I think that students would benefit from it so much. And that feeling of overwhelm and all of those things that you get, you know, like, it’s new, it’s crazy, its – *you don’t know where anything is*, you don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know how to do anything – I think that a lot of those feelings would be alleviated with that process, so that would be cool.”

Clear Academic Pathway. Students expressed a desire for clearer, more prescribed course requirements, and the ability to plan their course schedules reliably. Students accumulated empty credits and wasted financial aid dollars because the courses that they needed were unavailable, only available at the same time as other courses they needed, or cancelled at the last minute. Those in the SOHOPE program praised its narrow course options and clear course schedules. They felt cared for by their advisors and relied on them for registration guidance and adjustments. See pages 9-10 and 19.

“One of the biggest things I had trouble with, as far as classes, was figuring out which classes to take when. Cus it seems like there are a lot of classes that are only taught during a certain term, and without actually seeing the posted classes for that term you don’t necessarily know what’s available to take, so it’s hard to put together a plan that says ‘I’m going to take all of these classes over the next two years before transferring or before getting my degree’ if you don’t know when you can take which classes. So you can end up with a schedule where, it’s like, ideally, yeah, I’ll have 12 [credits] each term, but sometimes it will play out to where it’s like, but only 3 classes are available one term, and 5 of the ones you need are available the other term, so sometimes you end up with really heavy or really light terms, and that was something I kind of struggled with, was trying to figure out how to balance that and get all of the credits you needed without completely overwhelming yourself in certain terms while still getting all of the classes.”

Instructional Support. When students had instructors who gave clear course expectations, facilitated in-class connections, got to know students’ strengths and struggles, worked to make course material relatable, gave detailed feedback, and were available for help outside of class, they became engaged with the coursework and passed their classes. Students shared many examples of pedagogically-skilled instructors who could share their knowledge and provide professional development for their peers. See pages 10-15.

“For me, my computer science teacher was doing really good. Because I feel like he enjoyed everything about his job. And when I – I always have questions with the lab part, ‘Ah! I don’t know how I can do this!’ And I was like ‘Uh! I need help!’ and he – ‘Okay! Wait, wait!’ And I think when the teacher is trying to show that you can do this, and you are smart, and encouraging you – That was really good for me because I am not a computer person. I don’t like computers at all, and he was so patient with me! ... And also, he always was like, ‘Oh! Remember that you need to start your final project in this week because it’s a long project.’ Like every step, ‘You need to start now, *now!*’ Remind you to don’t procrastinate. And that was really helpful for me because sometimes we are lost, like with homework and exams and different things for other classes... Also, when we would finish class, he would stay longer to help with homework.”

“I’ve had instructors where they require that you have a meeting with them outside [of class]. And it’s something that they check in with you, like, ‘Hey! So how are you doing? How do you feel about all of this? Do you feel like you’re picking up the content? Do you understand? Is there something that you’re confused about? This is what I noticed on your tests... Are these areas that you feel you struggle with or that you struggled with, but now you understand?’ And I really appreciate that. And even though it wasn’t like I contacted them, it was still, I feel, really important in the knowledge that we gained in that class.”

RCC Student Engagement and Success Focus Groups

Special thanks to the Rogue Community College Foundation for providing the funding that was critical to making this research and its findings possible.

Methodology

Focus group questions were selected from a series of focus group discussion guides created by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, makers of the SENSE survey. These questions were narrowed down and refined with the help of RCC's Student Engagement Team. The focus group discussion was designed to gather information for the following outcomes:

1. To understand what success means to students.
2. To understand how early student experiences, advising, instruction, and co-curricular activities can be used to improve student engagement, persistence, and success.
3. To understand the importance of college resources and relationships in student persistence and success.
4. To understand what the college needs to build upon and improve in order to help students get engaged, persist, and succeed.

A \$20 Amazon gift card was provided by the RCC Foundation as an incentive for each participant. Initially, recruitment emails were sent to a random sample of students, divided by campus of primary attendance, who were taking early math, writing, or CG100 courses. This would be the same population sampled for a SENSE survey. After receiving very few responses to two email campaigns, recruitment was broadened to a purposive sample including students from the SOHOPE program, CG199 courses, members of the Latino Club, and additional students recruited by RVC ASG students.

Fifty-five students participated in one of five focus groups held during May 2019: four on the RVC campus and one at RWC. One focus group was offered at the Grants Pass Boys and Girls Club in order to provide care for parents of young children, but only 1 student signed up for this option and the scheduled focus group had to be cancelled. Participants filled out consent forms and profile sheets prior to the focus group discussion. Each focus group was recorded and had a notetaker present in addition to the facilitator.

Analysis

Notes from each focus group were given to the facilitator, who reviewed them while listening to audio from the respective focus groups. Notes were clarified, corrected, and augmented. Only representative or interesting quotes were transcribed in order to meet analysis and report-writing deadlines. Notes were copied, cut, and arranged into subject areas by date of focus group. Subject areas were then highlighted for common themes and each theme was scored 1 through 5 for the number of focus groups that it was salient within. After all subject areas had been analyzed in this manner, it was clear that the main themes ran across many subject areas and did not fit neatly into any one outcome. These overarching themes are discussed in the executive summary and conclusion.

Participant Demographics

Although 55 students participated in the focus groups, only 53 profile sheets were collected; therefore, all demographics are calculated for a total of 53:

Focus Group Characteristics:		
Gender:	Women	74% (39)
	Men	26% (14)
Age:	Under 18	2% (1)
	18-21	28% (15)
	22-29	19% (10)
	30-39	13% (7)
	40-49	26% (14)
	50-64	11% (6)
Race/Ethnicity*:	White	68% (36)
	Hispanic/Latinx	32% (17)
	Native American	15% (8)
	Other	2% (1)
Veteran Status:	Veteran	2% (1)
	Civilian	98% (52)
Credit Status:	Full-time	66% (35)
	Part-time	34% (18)
Entering Status:	First term	13% (7)
	Have attended previously	87% (46)
Started college at:	RCC	70% (37)
	Elsewhere	30% (15)
Started college right after high school:	Yes	40% (21)
	No	60% (32)
Credit Load:	7-14 credits	74% (39)
	4-6 Credits	15% (8)
	15 or more Credits	9% (5)
	3 or fewer Credits	2% (1)
Highest Degree:	High school diploma or GED	75% (40)
	Vocational or technical credential	15% (8)
	Bachelor's degree	4% (2)
	Masters	2% (1)
	Associate	2% (1)
First Generation:	No diploma/credential	2% (1)
	First in their family to attend college.	35% (18)
Financial Aid Eligibility:	Eligible for financial assistance	77% (41)
	Not eligible	9% (5)
	Don't know	9% (5)
	No response	4% (2)
Financial Assistance:	Received financial assistance	77% (38)
	Applied, but didn't receive Assistance	14% (7)
	Did not apply	8% (4)
Dependents:	Had children/dependents living at home	26% (13)
	Did not	74% (37)
Childcare*: (Of the 13 students who responded that they had dependents living at home)	Have childcare outside of the college	54% (7)
	Finding childcare is a major issue	38% (5)
	Dependent does not require child care	31% (4)
	Child is enrolled in childcare at the college	2% (1)

* Does not total to 100% because categories are not exclusive.

Student Perspectives

Outcome 1: To understand what success means to students.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO COME TO RCC, AND WHAT IS YOUR EDUCATIONAL GOAL?

All five groups gave practical reasons for choosing RCC – it was close to home, it was affordable, they were planning to transfer and wanted to save money on a bachelor’s degree – but they also expressed a more fundamental desire for self-improvement and hope for future economic success. Many nontraditional students saw RCC as their “second chance” at life, an opportunity to regain confidence and take on a new identity. Coming to RCC was deeply meaningful to these students.

“So I said, if I reinvent myself, come get a degree in what I want to do, and then I can be able to be stable anywhere I go, especially if it’s credited. And that’s what made me decide to go here. I want a future, [undiscernible] and a solid retirement.”

“This is my one chance I’ve been waiting my whole life for.”

“I’m hanging on to school. It’s the most amazing opportunity I’ve ever had.”

WHAT DOES SUCCESS MEAN TO YOU AS A STUDENT?

Although passing classes, getting good grades, completing certificates or degrees, or transferring to a university program were mentioned by all five groups, these measurements of success were downplayed by students in favor of being able to master and apply the things they were learning in order to make themselves marketable for gainful employment. All five groups also talked about the link between student success and having a community support system to help them and connect them to resources.

“I like the grade, but sometimes the grade doesn’t really matter, I guess. I know, like with my programming class... She wants you to turn in the projects on time, but it’s okay if they’re late. And what I like about that is that if I’m not understanding it and I get the help from her, and even if it’s a day or two late, it feels better that I actually understood it and was able to get it done, and not just turning it in hoping I got it right kind of thing. I can actually get it done and then understand it so that way I can replicate it later when I need it, too, and still feel confident in being able to reproduce that.”

“Getting good grades, and applying myself, and knowing what I have learned. Sometimes I’m getting good grades and I’m clueless you know, so it’s... I guess I’m a good guesser, but I like it when I know it.”

“I definitely think that when I feel supported it definitely shows academically. Not even so much that, like, when I feel supported I get good grades, but when I feel supported I want to try harder and it makes me more motivated to come to school, and that coming to school, showing up on time, being present, so not just [indiscernible], being engaged and feeling like what I’m learning I can apply to my everyday life.”

“For me, to feel successful is to be supported and to know where my resources are and how to get to them. So, like, being part of the [Student] Success Program – CG199 - It’s like, the first time I really felt like I was a part of the school, just going to that first function with [the play] Hairsparly. And I was like, ‘Oh my gosh! This is what I really get to do when I go to college?!’ Coming from a 30-year-ago high school graduate that was not a successful high school student... to feel supported and to know that I’m not alone in that and, like, starting over and not really sure I know what I’m doing, but I’m just taking that next step, cus having the resources and knowing where to go, the community at the school helps me feel supported and successful.”

Students in every group, especially those who were nontraditional or Latinx, emphasized that success meant doing the best they could every day to improve and overcome barriers. Because they had so

much riding on their success at RCC, their experiences were particularly fraught. For these students, the meaning of success was much more fine-grained and required a lot of bravery. They measured success by little achievements such as waking up and getting to class, asking questions, and continuing to stay enrolled.

“For me, student success is...the little things, you know. Like, just waking up, coming to class, cus sometimes ylou’re depressed, you don’t feel like coming and that’s, to me that’s success.”

“I also ride a bike all the way from Sam’s Valley to here [HEC], so 90% of my time is spent on my bicycle. By the time I get home and sit down for a second, I’m out. I usually take about an hour and a half nap and then get up and fix something to eat. But... its... my desire to be here and try to do the best I possibly can – which I am doing, for my situation – I feel successful with it. Because I’m stepping out, way out of my comfort zone, like I’ve already said, dealing with my anxiety and all that. It’s tough for me. Especially to ask another student... or I’ve done my best to continue to ask my teachers for help, but that anxiety kicks in sometimes and I just walk away...My heart’s been renewed with my desire to follow through with my dream. And by me doing something that I love, it’s changed my entire attitude. That’s why I’m forcing myself to step out like I am.”

“For me, to be successful, like, as a student is to break my barriers. It’s funny because in my psychology class we talk about vulnerability, and how when you are vulnerable you can be creative to, uh, achieve your goals. Like, for example, for me, English is my second language and I am trying to use strategies to have good grades and also to learn better, because sometimes it’s hard to me to understand words, or, sometimes I’ve never seen certain types of words. Like, sometimes it’s hard for me to ask – like, ‘Uh! I don’t know this word! And I don’t want to ask!’, but in my tiny voice inside me, it’s like, ‘No! You need to ask! Ask now!’” Because it’s the only way to learn new things and, like, be brave. Because if we are, like, shy and never ask we don’t have the possibility to learn different and new things.”

“For me, student success is, like, to prove myself – that I can do it despite my barriers, like my language barrier; to demonstrate to my family and the people in the Latino community, we can do it. And there is no barrier or obstacles for us that if we are – to prove - if we graduate from RCC or from university that is a proof to other students that are in high school that they can [Other student, “Si se puede.”] Yeah, that they can do it too. It is not just in school, I think, in general, in life too. We didn’t come to RCC just for taking classes. We are – have relationships with other people too. We can encourage them to keep going and don’t give it up. So, for me, I think success is more than – is to overcome our obstacles.”

Outcome 2: To understand how early student experiences, advising, instruction, and co-curricular activities can be used to improve student engagement, persistence, and success.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH GETTING STARTED AT RCC?

Four out of five groups expressed majority negative entering experiences full of anxiety, confusion, and frustration. Some individuals in these groups discussed the need for a kind of pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality that required students to sleuth for information, hold entire offices hostage, or ask, ask, ask everyone they could find until they were able to get answers to their questions. Even though orientation was not brought up or alluded to in the focus group questions, each of these four groups mentioned a desire for orientation and one-on-one, individual guidance before getting started at RCC. Several students said that they initially felt that they didn’t need any help because they underestimated how complicated navigating community college could be.

“My attitude at that point [before school started] is, ‘I got this’. You could’ve told me you might need some help, ‘Ah, I don’t need help’ *Actually.....*”

“It feels like the success and stress levels beginning is determined on the guidance you got – whether you got fortunate and, like, got someone to walk you through or, just like, ‘Oh, I get the books at the library. Oh, I need this, like, card from the G building’. And you’re like walking around, you’re like, ‘Ah, god, I got lost!’”

“The first time I came here, I was terrified, honestly, and I had no idea what I was doing. I was pretty computer illiterate, so it was very overwhelming for me. I mean, my first experience in the office up there I wouldn’t say was really all that great, but I think I was persistent enough... What I found really useful is to just keep asking questions, even if you ask different people the same question, cus I’ve also found you get different answers. I’ve gotten answers to things through just listening to other people that I’m like, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that, I should probably go take advantage of that opportunity.’ So, keeping my ears open and my eyes open, and then just asking different people. That’s kind of like me taking my own accountability.”

“I’ve never had anybody else that could, like, help me through that. I had to figure it out by, like, poking around online and, like, pestering my advisors and stuff like that. You don’t always get all that information, like, straight out.”

“For me, it was like the first time I’d ever been to an actual college of any kind. So walking in here, I was like brand new, **like a new language**. You know when you kinda do something for a long time it’s repetitive for you so you don’t think people don’t know, so you’re like, ‘Why would you ask such a question?’ You know what I mean? I think that’s something that I came across because it’s like, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing!’ you know, ‘Please help me, please tell me what to do, because I don’t know what the heck is going on, this is overwhelming for me!’ [Emphasis added.]”

“An orientation would be really nice before you have to even start because, I’m like, ‘I don’t even know how to register ... I don’t know what I’m doing!!’ So, that was the only problem I had, with the organization and the, **all the college lingo** and ‘Which this?’ and ‘What’s that?’ and I’m like, ‘I don’t know!!’ [Emphasis added.]”

It’s noteworthy that the entering experience of these four groups was sometimes compared to speaking a foreign language. The one group that had overwhelmingly positive entering experiences was comprised of Latino Club members who were mostly English-language learners. These students began their college experience with the 1-week HOLA summer bridge program where they learned everything they needed to get started and be successful at RCC. Through their participation in the program, students also gained an immediate group of friends - a community that became an important social and academic support for participating students.

“They helped me to register for a full term, thanks to the program, the HOLA program that they do, like, every summer. They help students from high school with their higher – like fulfill the higher education – be ready for RCC. So, when I came to this program, it was a week, I learned more about scholarships, how to apply, how to, like, we go to the three RCC locations and they give us a tour, information about every location, and that’s how I start in community college, because they help me with information and that program helped me a lot to being here now. And to keep with my education. I think everything’s about – just find somebody that can help you with information. And we are happy, like, ***** and ***** is here to help the Latino community with that information. Because, sometimes we’re afraid because we don’t speak English really well, so we don’t want to speak to someone because we are afraid to – that they won’t understand us. But if we speak with someone that **speaks our same language**, sometimes they help more than [other student: “they make it easier”] then, yeah, it’s more easy for us to have the possibility **to have this information in our language**. So that’s my experience. It was a really good experience, for me. [Emphasis added.]”

“I met some people, and then I could keep in contact with them, when I see them I’m like, ‘Oh, hey! We were in HOLA! You can help, we can help each other out when we’re in the same class.’ [Other student, “Um hmm, we have friends.”] Yeah, you meet people and then [laughter] it’s easier to, like, be around with them, I don’t know, to see them.”

It may be that treating incoming students as if they were all foreign-language-learners would improve the entering experience. The HOLA program provides an exemplary model of a student-centered college orientation that is sensitive to language barriers and leaves students feeling empowered and connected.

DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH ADVISING AND CLASS SCHEDULING AT RCC.

Students had mixed experiences with advising. All groups except the Latino Club talked about a lack of advising, having a hard time finding an advisor that worked for them, and taking unnecessary classes due to poor, or absent, advising. For the SOHOPE group, these negative advising experiences were prior to entering the SOHOPE program. The SOHOPE group was the only group who discussed overwhelmingly positive advising experiences. They really appreciated that advisors knew them by name, had individual relationships with them, and were looking out for their success. They had frequent contact with advisors and relied on their guidance for program and elective course choices, and help moderating course load. Students in this group also expressed appreciation for the narrow course options and clear pathway of the SOHOPE program. Students in the other groups had positive experiences when they found, or were referred to, an advisor who was knowledgeable about their program or transfer goals. Advising through the TRiO program was also important to many students.

"I look at him as, like, 'Okay, please tell me what to do next – I'm looking at you to tell me where I'm going next.' I don't know how a regular advisor works, but you know I like to be, 'Okay, this is where you have to go.' Since we're in a program where we know this is A, B, and C and it's not like other programs where 'Oh, well, I can take this class and I can take that class, then I can get to my goal,' you know. I like this because it's straightforward and they know – boom, boom, boom – this is where you're going, you know, cause that's how I think people in college get to stay... continue to stay in college, cus they take wrong classes and they don't get advised well, you know, sometimes. ... They're not graduating cus they're taking classes that they really don't need to take – things like that."

"And [my advisor] always says, 'You know, I don't know if this term you're going to have enough time for this elective,' or, 'You need to know that you're going to be able to manage your time if you take this class, cus it is a lot of extra work,' or whatever. If it's something that's pointless, he'll tell you that."

"And they'll tell you, 'Oh, this is going to take a lot of your energy. This is a big class, you don't want to take so many classes with this class.' The 2-credit class could have way more homework than a 4-credit class, and it has more classroom hours, to a point, too. It depends on the particular instructor, and you won't know until you get the syllabus, and you won't even know until like a couple weeks into term. And a lot of time, by the time you find out what the actual work-load is, it's past the withdraw period."

"It has been amazing, you know, to know that somebody's out there watching over you, making sure you're not taking what you don't need."

"With as many students as they do have per counselor [advisor?] for SOHOPE, they remember everybody by name, which is really nice."

"I've heard about the counselors over there. You don't get an appointment right away, you have to wait some period of time to get an appointment. That's something where funds need to go for you guys, for RCC regular students because that is such an important thing for us as students, is for them to know our name, them to know who we are, *as people.*"

"I went to go talk to an [advisor] the first term and they were like, 'The [advisors] are all booked, sorry, you're good to register, though.' And I was like, 'Okay, cool. I don't know what that means.' And then I go into the financial area and they do the same thing. They're just kind of like, 'Oh, well, you filled out the FAFSA, good job.' And I'm like, first the [advisors]...!"

"With my first counselor, I'd go in to get okayed for signing up for my classes for the term, and he'd help me pick classes that were within my degree, but didn't necessarily lead towards anything, because I didn't know which type of classes would go towards the degree I wanted, it was just, like, filling in blanks. And that did end up eating a lot of credits that I could've used for other, more beneficial classes; whereas, when I was struggling with some stuff, as far as the actual class material goes, TRIO had sent someone out to the different, like, math classes or other classes and said, 'Hey, you know, we're a student opportunity here, we can help out, you just have to come sign up.' And for me

that was kind of a deal-breaker [later clarified to mean, “it’s the thing that probably kept me from dropping out again”] cus it did actually provide you with the advisor that did know about transferring and which classes to sign up for, as well as helping with tutoring.”

The note-taker for one of the focus groups was an IREP student worker, Katie Chamberlain. She made the following observation of her experience as note taker:

“I noticed that the students had a sense of comradery and unity because they were all students. They were eager to gain information from the other students and the other students seem willing to give the information. Little things were shared throughout the group about good teachers and good places to buy books. Other students immediately wrote down this information and asked clarifying questions. Even when I spoke to one of the students after the session, when the participant realized that I was also a student she eagerly began asking questions about how the information gathered would be used and how it would impact, ‘us’, the students. Students seem to trust other students and ask them important questions or for advice on school and even personal topics.”

This observation was representative of student behavior in all five focus groups and was supported by student statements.

“A lot of my information comes from other students.”

“We are really the best advisors for each other.”

All groups except the SOHOPE group discussed frustration with course scheduling. Students didn’t know which term specific courses would be available, so they couldn’t arrange their course schedule appropriately or plan ahead. Many required courses within programs were scheduled for the same days and times, making it impossible for them to accumulate credits in a timely manner, especially if those courses were only available one term in the year. Unanticipated scheduling holes forced students to register, last-minute, for filler credits to meet their financial aid requirements. Scheduling could be especially hard to navigate for students who were working and had limited time available for taking courses.

“One of the biggest things I had trouble with, as far as classes, was figuring out which classes to take when. Cus it seems like there are a lot of classes that are only taught during a certain term, and without actually seeing the posted classes for that term you don’t necessarily know what’s available to take, so it’s hard to put together a plan that says ‘I’m going to take all of these classes over the next two years before transferring or before getting my degree’ if you don’t know when you can take which classes. So you can end up with a schedule where, it’s like, ideally, yeah, I’ll have 12 [credits] each term, but sometimes it will play out to where it’s like, but only 3 classes are available one term, and 5 of the ones you need are available the other term, so sometimes you end up with really heavy or really light terms, and that was something I kind of struggled with, was trying to figure out how to balance that and get all of the credits you needed without completely overwhelming yourself in certain terms while still getting all of the classes.”

“I think it’s hard with, like, Calc 1, just for example, is only offered fall and winter. Bio 211 is only offered fall and spring; like, these classes are consecutive classes, their serieses and their only – nobody is telling us when they’re offered, we’re kind of just having to go off of the previous year. Cus, I took Bio 211 last spring, and I was like, maybe I can take 212 during the summer? No. I had to wait all the way until fall term to take it. And, like, with Calc, it’s only offered those two terms, and it’s like, well cool. It’s just hard to plan your schedule around series classes like that if you don’t start them off in fall. Cus, like next year I’m taking Calc and Chem all in fall term, and it’s like, those are series classes so then it means I can’t, like, if another class is offered for fall term that I need, I have to wait a whole nother year to take it if my schedule’s already full, cus I do work full time. Like, it’s just hard.”

"Yeah, for the classes, the scheduling is really nightmarish cus for some things you have to plan the entire year around it. Like, okay, this has to be here, this has to be here, and then I have to find this prereq, this prereq, this prereq – just doing it a term or two at a time just doesn't work." "[Another student:] You have to know your whole plan."

"And then it gets scary toward the end, cus then sometimes if there aren't 10 people in the class they cancel it and you're like [strangled squeal]!"

"With scheduling, maybe to avoid conflicts, if someone is going for a specific certificate, or this sort of thing, someone kind of lays it out for you, 'K, well, if you start your prerequisites in the fall you're not going to be able to apply for this certificate until next year.' So you're not waiting and just taking filler courses for an entire year, waiting around to get those. And then when you do start it, you can't get the other classes you need because it's conflicting."

"I feel like a lot of the general education requirements conflict with each other, and, like, that's pretty much what we're here for."

"Yeah, so I take Mondays and Wednesday off work to be at school, and then, like, I can only do, you know, it's kinda hard to do Tuesdays and Thursdays for writing, cus I'm at work during that time."

DO INSTRUCTORS HAVE ACTIVITIES TO HELP YOU GET TO KNOW THEM AND OTHER STUDENTS?

Responses to this question ranged from having had get-to-know-you activities in every class (SOHOPE group) to not having had them in any classes (Latino Club group). For the other three groups, whether a teacher had get-to-know-you activities depended more on which instructor was teaching the class than what department the class was in. Activities mentioned included introductions, ice-breakers, group activities, and daily highs and lows. Some instructors had students form work groups, some encouraged students to form their own groups for studying, and some students just started their own groups without being encouraged. The great majority of students said that they really appreciated activities that helped them get to know and interact with other students in their classes. These kinds of activities did a lot to ease their anxiety and discomfort in the classroom environment and helped them establish connections to their classmates. These connections became important resources for answering questions, solidifying knowledge, forming study groups, and feeling a sense of belonging at RCC.

"I would say that the groups and talking with other students was EXTREMELY beneficial. It made it a lot easier to get through things because everyone seems to have a slightly different take on the information given, or you'll have missing points that somebody else will have and, likewise, they'll have missing spots that you'll have the answer to, so getting together in a group, at least in my experience, was highly beneficial."

"Yeah, I definitely agree. I'm generally a pretty good student, so mostly I was helping other people, but even that made it a little bit more – like, teaching other people solidified my own knowledge even more, to where I was not struggling with Chemistry and Biology at all."

"I'm stepping out of my comfort zone with my anxiety. I'm trying to re-integrate myself into being sociable, instead of anti-social thinking, and it's tough. But the classes have actually been quite a bit of help because we all get involved with the class. We all throw our own, like, different ideas out. We discuss and debate political stuff, which is kinda hilarious. Um. In my math class, this last time, a couple of the students got up and we just started helping each other. And my math teacher was sitting back and he goes, "Well, did you guys enjoy helping each other?" And we all said yeah, cus it kind of made everybody relax a little bit better. So it was beneficial."

"I've got some teachers who have, some classes who have; some do not. And I find the ones [who do], I should say, super-duper helpful because it immediately – you have some sort of connection of eye contact or name that, you don't just look down and pass each other, you know that you can actually, you know, say – if you miss something or, you know, 'How did you do...' something. It brings a connection of health for myself, you know. And the classrooms that have not done that – I mean, I still to this very day don't talk to anybody in those classes, or acknowl... I don't know their names. I mean even if I see them around the campus, and I'm around the campus a lot, but. So I find it very interesting that there are teachers who still don't do it, because I think it's *super* helpful and *super* important

and, um, like I said, if they just talked around with other teachers on the campus they would know the impact, even with us as students that it has for us personally. Like I said, so, I would, if anybody ever asked me I'd totally encourage it. Find the ice-breaker right up front and help your students, cus that helps us be successful because it connects us to this sort of thing."

"People that come from a background like mine... I didn't go back to school for almost 10 years before I started coming here, cus I was out running amok and stuff, so to come from the background of addiction and homelessness, to shifting into motherhood, and then school and everything, was just [nervous laugh] polar opposite ends of the spectrum! Having those ice-breaker things when you don't really have many friends when you first get clean and stuff... You're like, 'Who do I talk to, who do I know?' And you have certain places you meet people, like certain programs and stuff, but it's really cool to have that kind of same feeling in school, where you have people that you're meeting, like, you have the ice-breaker and then it doesn't feel like we're all so different, you know. It feels like, 'Hey, we're all students here, we're all trying to do the same thing, accomplish the same things, we all have that end goal in mind, and we're all in this together.' That was huge for me because you feel really solitary coming from that kind of background into this kind of environment. It's really different. So, those kinds of things have made that adjustment a lot easier... When we do those introductory activities and stuff, I get to know a little bit about people and kinda get an idea of themselves, but they also get to get an idea of myself too, which I – I've never really had that opportunity, you know. Like, it wasn't – it wasn't like that. No one cared to understand you out there, you know what I mean? And now you're here where people are like-minded in a lot of ways as far as being a student and stuff. Just those introductory activities in classrooms just make me feel more inclusive as far as – in the group and stuff – and makes me feel like I'm more involved – not just on a student level, but on a community level as well, you know. Which are both extremely important if you want to get through this alive [laughs]. So, yeah, that's – I think that those things are super important for people of a lot of walks of life, but especially people that come from a little more rough background that are trying to change their lives and make really big adjustments, you know. It made a big difference for me, I know that."

"Yeah, cus we got to see how many other recovering addicts were in the same rooms as us, promoting their lives. So the ice-breaker, like, meant a lot to us."

"Yeah, we met other people that were students that were also getting clean too. We would have never known that if it wasn't for those introductory activities. We woulda had no clue that, 'Hey that person over there has a similar story to us.' We can relate to that person, and that's made a huge difference for us. You get a weird stigma when you come from the world of addiction, and people don't understand it so much. They haven't been there, or haven't seen it in their lives, don't really understand it. There's this weird, yucky stigma that comes with it with a lot of people; and so, to know that there are people in the room that are like you- And then we're all not afraid to speak up about it and give other people that understanding that, 'Hey, that stigma isn't necessarily real, you know, that's not how it is for everybody."

"We always think we're the worst, there's something wrong with us, but when you have a room full of people and everybody puts out their diversity on the table, whatever it is – it just makes the comfortability level and the nervousness go down – not 100%, but at least half way... I think that for myself and other students that I've sat next to, young kids that I'd never talk to - I mean, they're way past on all these technologies and stuff and now they're helping me, you know? Or they'll see me [everyone laughs] in the library and in the tutoring center [indiscernible] and we acknowledge each other! I think that's super important, you know. Or sometimes, like I said, if I miss something on homework or if I just didn't do good enough, I just will sit with somebody and say, you know, 'How did you do... and what... how did you figure that out?' Because we're not going to always just get it from the instructor. The knowledge isn't just from that one person. It should be from all around us."

A few students spoke up and said that they actually did not like get-to-know-you activities, either because they wasted instructional time, the student didn't care to get to know their peers, or because their current emotional state made it uncomfortable or impossible for them to participate.

"Sometimes they will [give you the option to pass], though, and I appreciate when they do that. But I think when they do say, 'You can pass,' I'm almost, like, more prone to NOT pass. Because then I feel that I have a choice to be put on the spot or not."

"See in ****'s class, she's real great with that; I didn't even feel like I could even talk one day, and I didn't have to. I didn't even have to say anything, I just did my own thing, and I didn't participate. I didn't have to talk, I just – unplugged. Cus, emotionally, I couldn't handle it that day, for whatever my reason was. I don't

know what it was that day, but it was something and I couldn't plug in. I would've lost it. And I thought, 'Oh my God!' and I'm just like, 'So don't. Just go into your own space capsule and do whatever you're doing and then leave if you have to.' And I got through it, so. But I felt safe, you know?"

WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES OR CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR BEST INSTRUCTORS?

The groups acknowledged that different students often prefer different instructor personalities; passionate, sweet, funny, outgoing, patient, caring, meandering, direct. What all groups agreed on was that the best instructors were those who cared about students' learning and success. These were instructors who took the time to get to know students and provided extra support when students needed it. When students became overwhelmed, these instructors reassured them and showed that they believed in their ability to learn the material and pass the course. They worked to make their content relatable and interesting, even to students who usually disliked their subject. They kept their courses clearly organized, made expectations explicit, and gave detailed, timely feedback on assignments and tests.

"When someone's so enthusiastic about their field, even if you're only taking the class for the credits, they can somehow find a way to make it relate to you and more interesting to what you're learning, even if it's not in their field. The more knowledge they have in the subject the more they are able to make it relatable and interesting, which helps."

"Patience is a big thing. I have had teachers on both sides of the scale. At this college they tend to lean particularly more toward the patient side, but I have had teachers that kind of will snap at you or talk to you in such a way were you almost feel a little bit, like... [Another student: "Intimidated."] ...yeah, intimidated is a good way of putting it. Some teachers, in my past experience, have gone to the extent where it's almost like, 'Why are you here if you don't know what you're doing?' And it's kind of like, 'But I'm a student here because I DON'T know what I'm doing!'"

"I enjoy it when they engage with you, when they want to get to know you, when they're not just there to do their job, they're actually there – they want to be there for you. And that's what makes me feel comfortable being in a classroom. I had a few of those teachers."

"I like it when the teachers have all of their homework in one place, if it's the syllabus or somewhere else. I've had one teacher that has it in 2 to 3 places and then I've had one [online] for economics that it was literally a scavenger hunt for every single homework assignment. Like, I spent over 2 hours trying to find all my homework for the week and I just dropped the class. It's like, 'No, I can't do this.'" ... [About another instructor:] "The one instructor that I'm thinking of, um, has been probably one of the reasons why I'm still here, just because I was so lost, like, going through. I had her online at first, and then I had her in class last term and I have her online again this term, but every week it's like, 'Here's the folder for the week'. It has all the assignments that are due that week in there, and a drop for wherever that's supposed to be, so it's all in one. This is it for the week of the 6th through the 10th or whatever the dates are. And then inside is another folder of anything that you have to turn in. And all of the, so, this one is due on Friday at midnight – it's clearly spelled out – and if this is due on Sunday or Monday it's clearly spelled out."

"I had some really good feedback on my first online class the first term, and then the second term it was like, 'Good job,' what's that? But I missed four, so – and then there's no key for this class, so I have no idea what I freakin' got wrong, I have no idea how to fix it, I don't know how to improve it."

"She's so laid back and just super cool. She's also willing to be vulnerable in a way that she'll share her experiences with you as well, like what she has struggled with when she was a student and things like that. So she makes her lessons like super [relevant], you know, to you and to her and to, just, everybody there. So you feel like you're not such a, you know, like – [gestures distance with hands] teacher, student, teacher, student, you know? It's like, 'No, we're all here – COMMUNITY.' So it's – teachers that kind of build up that vibe in the classroom rather than making it so, 'Oh, I'm the instructor and you're the student!' you know. Like, I don't like that kind of feel cus I had a problem with, like, "authority" and like, you know, like, that kind of thing, my whole life. So having teachers that just make it feel equal, make it feel like we're all here together doing this thing, you know, like, I really, I can't say enough how appreciative I've been of that."

"I didn't know how to write at all, I had no idea. And she took so much time with me, and I love to write now. I actually was able to come out of my shell and put it on paper. And – but she would – hours and hours and hours of her own time that she would spend with me day after day... At home, I would talk to her on the phone, she would email me back and forth. And it was really wonderful to have that."

"This teacher, I think she didn't do her job, to be honest... Your work is teach the students and try [to help them] learn and help them to be success[ful]. That's what I think. But this teacher, uh, we have a group of Latino students there – and in the beginning it was a big class, but it dropped off, I think for the same reason – she didn't help us. All the time when she gets in the classroom she gives you a lot of papers and handouts that we didn't, ah, learn about anything. ... And the first essays she didn't give us... comments? Feedback! They never give you feedback for what you get wrong and we're like, 'We need to know what we get wrong for improving it in the next essay because we need – we want to pass this class! ... I think she was a little bit discriminate with the Latina students and I talked one time with her about that and she say that maybe I was not doing good in her class because of my language. So, when I told her, I get so mad and I contact with ***** about that because I was so upset. Because I know that I didn't speak English, like, really well, but there's no reason that she tell me that, because her work is to help me to be successful in her class and help me with writing. So I think she didn't do her job really good of help me with my writing. So now I'm retaking this class because I didn't pass the class. I tried everything for pass the class, but I didn't pass it. So, now I'm retaking it and the teacher that I have is a really good teacher – totally different than her – she takes a little time with us. The other teacher didn't do that with us. She never had a meeting with us or tell, 'Oh, I can help you! You can do it! The sentence, you can do this, this way,' or, like, anything – no! She just like, 'This is your homework,' and, whatever."

"Because some come in and they're picking up their second check to cover their own bills. And they do, and you can see 'em, and they're ready to leave. They're gonna give you what they need to and say, 'Look it up online.' I've literally been told by multiple instructors, 'Google it.' Ouch!"

"For me, my computer science teacher was doing really good. Because I feel like he enjoyed everything about his job. And when I – I always have questions with the lab part, 'Ah! I don't know how I can do this!' And I was like 'Uh! I need help!' and he – 'Okay! Wait, wait!' And I think when the teacher is trying to show that you can do this, and you are smart, and encouraging you – That was really good for me because I am not a computer person. I don't like computers at all, and he was so patient with me! ... And also, he always was like, 'Oh! Remember that you need to start your final project in this week because it's a long project.' Like every step, 'You need to start now, now!' Remind you to don't procrastinate. And that was really helpful for me because sometimes we are lost, like with homework and exams and different things for other classes... Also, when we would finish class, he would stay longer to help with homework."

"I started at a really low level of math, MTH10 [laughter] to be exact. Cus I was really bad at math! But this teacher, I don't know, made my class fun. And he made me like more ma– well, I still don't like it, but a little bit more. And it was more interesting cus he used different colors, and I'm a visual person, so – Red, blue, green [Laughter] That was like, I don't know, fun to me, the way he explained it. And also, he gave us a problem for each person, so that was like, your homework, and you had to explain it to the class. That motivated me to – when you're explaining others, when you're teaching others, you're learning at the same time, so I think that made me understand a little bit more."

"One of my writing teachers, WR115, I didn't pass that class, but then I took it with a different teacher. She was one of the sweetest people I ever met. She read my stories and everything I wrote. She would give me feedback that said how much she liked my stories and the things I needed to work on. She motivated me. She was really nice and she was trying to help me all the time. I passed that class."

"At OSU, I flunked math in a typical course setting. In the spring I retook it in an auditorium with fifteen TA's. Each TA had five or ten student assigned to them so it was easier to ask questions. Having someone available to explain things was helpful. It's hard when it's a big class and the teacher doesn't have time to help every person. You don't want to be the person who slows the class down. If you have enough people in the classroom to help out, focused help really makes a difference. I went from an F to an A."

"Like, can you give us an example of 'A' work? So that I can have something to shoot for at least? We need – sometimes give you the example! For example, [laughter] I learn by seeing... Actually my writing 90 teacher is like, she sits with me and says, 'Oh, *****, you have to do this one,' and she does it, and then I have to do it. And then I say,

‘Oh my god, okay, that’s more easy! That makes sense!’ But I learn because she gives me examples. Sometimes teachers just, like, they deduce that we’d know the information that they give to us.”

“They expect us to extract information from the syllabus. A = excellent work is not good enough to understand class expectations. There’s a huge learning curve when you don’t know what the teacher’s expectations are, what they expect on homework in terms of depth of response, etc. The first week in BI213, the teacher didn’t mention that we needed to type up a lab report because he assumed I knew it because he assumed I was in BI212. It wasn’t anywhere in the syllabus. What is his version of an ‘A’ lab report? I feel like this is common in many classes.”

HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAVE CONTACT WITH INSTRUCTORS OUTSIDE OF CLASS?

Most students shared that they were aware of instructors’ office hours, or how to contact them if they didn’t have office hours. Students in every group had had instructors that were hard to get in-touch with outside of class, but felt that the majority of instructors were responsive. Students did not specify how often they had contact with instructors, but did say that, unless they had really gotten to know the instructor, their communication was limited to class-related business. Students expressed more frustration and difficulty getting timely responses from instructors of online courses. Working students said that they would appreciate more than one way to contact an instructor, especially if they were not available during the instructor’s office hours. Some students preferred email, some a phone conversation. One student mentioned having instructors who would have individual meetings with students to check in on their progress in the course. This was a very popular idea among students in that group.

“Like they were saying, the online is, for me, horrid. They’ll say, ‘Oh, I have 48 hours to get back to you. I have 72 hours to get back to you,’ and it’s like, why even send a note to this person? Because by that time the assignment’s already due. And if you don’t get what they’re talking about, you just don’t get it.”

“‘Cus they have a 48 hour window where they can reply, so you have to write them by 6pm on a Wednesday or you won’t hear back, even if the assignment’s due at midnight on Sunday. So, yeah, it’s hard.”

“I wish teachers were better at responding to emails more quickly. It’s hard to go to office hours if I work. There needs to be another way to get help if you work and aren’t available during office and tutoring center hours.”

“I’ve had instructors where they require that you have a meeting with them outside [of class]. And it’s something that they check in with you, like, ‘Hey! So how are you doing? How do you feel about all of this? Do you feel like you’re picking up the content? Do you understand? Is there something that you’re confused about? This is what I noticed on your tests... Are these areas that you feel you struggle with or that you struggled with, but now you understand?’ And I really appreciate that. And even though it wasn’t like I contacted them, it was still, I feel, really important in the knowledge that we gained in that class.”

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT HOW YOU CAN BECOME INVOLVED AT THIS COLLEGE?

Due to time constraints, only two groups were asked this question. The majority who had learned about, or become involved in co-curricular activities had learned about those activities through some type of in-person contact; ASG class wraps, stumbling upon events, invitations from friends, and instructor requirements. Nearly as many students said that they had come across events or activities through advertising on the website, the Rogue Connect app, flyers, TV screens on campus, or the Toilet Tissue. Some students in both groups said that they didn’t pay attention to, or ever come across, these sources of advertising.

“For me, it was somebody had done a class wrap that was on student government in one of my classes; and they mentioned that student government was looking for a position for *****”, and that was of interest to

me... I did end up applying for that, and so, I think the biggest way that we've reached students is by directly going to classrooms and talking to them."

It was clear that students who had gotten involved in co-curricular activities felt more ownership of, and belonging at, the college than they had before their involvement.

"It really makes me feel good knowing that this is our school – it belongs to us. We have a place that we belong. There's so much that we can do if we just ask questions."

"So, like, being part of the [Student] Success Program – CG199 - It's like, the first time I really felt like I was a part of the school, just going to that first function with [the play] Hairsparry. And I was like, 'Oh my gosh! This is what I really get to do when I go to college?!'"

"The first year I went here I didn't really know about anything extracurricular. I didn't learn about any of the stuff – I also wasn't interested in it when I first – for the first time. And then I joined ASG, Student Government, and that's when I started to learn about a lot of the stuff, like clubs. I didn't really know that there were clubs until I joined ASG, but, again, I also didn't seek them out."

Outcome 3: To understand the importance of college resources and relationships in student persistence and success.

WHAT HELPS YOU PERSIST THROUGH ACADEMIC OR PERSONAL CHALLENGES?

Many students in these focus groups experienced significant challenges while taking courses; their house burned down, their father died, they had a heart attack, they left an abusive relationship and became homeless, they were taking all of their classes in a new language. When asked what helped them persist through these challenges, the most frequent response was the emotional support, flexibility, and services that came after a student reached out for help. Instructors gave students extra time and met them half-way when life circumstances prevented them from meeting course requirements. Students were connected to resources, often through Disability Services, and sometimes there was collaboration across departments and divisions to get student needs met.

"[My recent medical issue has] been a real challenge for me. It's caused me to start doubting myself... I reached out to our professor and I let her know my concerns and everything, and she's like, 'You're going to be okay.' She said, 'This midterm is only 10% of your grade.' She said, 'Make sure you know what you're doing when the final comes around.' And I was like, 'Okay,' you know? And she said, 'I'm willing to help you. I can work with you on this, and work with you on that.' So, reaching out was the best thing I could do. Because before reaching out, I was like, 'Why am I here? Is this really where I need to be? Is this really what I want to do?' And it really is... but due to life itself and the high stress level that I've been under, I was like, 'Wow.'"

"A bunch of my professors say that – 'Don't freak out! We'll be fine, we'll be fine.' And, actually, I think it works! [Other students: "It does!"] Because it gives you that sense of – It's gonna be okay. You know, like, when you can't find the exit door and you're like [squeal]. ... But I think that when a teacher shows you that they really care by empathizing with this process we're all going through ... if you sense that they can feel your pain, it makes it a lot easier to succeed."

"[After becoming homeless...] They kind of all pulled together [advisor, counselor, and instructor] and helped me rearrange my schedule so all last term I was able to rearrange it to have everything online so that no matter where I was I'd be able to do my assignments because like, I'm hanging on to school. It's the most amazing opportunity I've ever had."

"Without these services that they have here, and me being strong enough to say, 'Hey doctor, I've got something wrong. That was a big step, is *admitting* that I have a problem... And then here, finding out that they do have these [disability] services for us, and they're so helpful with it, and understanding – and then the teachers get understanding – that was just, that right there made me say, 'Alright, cool, I can do this.' I finally got hope again."

"I got in over my head, even though it was only 8 credits for my classes, I still got in over my head. And as soon as I realized that I needed to disenroll in my toughest class, being in SOHOPE and knowing that the [advisors] are there, I went straight to her and said, 'Hey, can we look at this and figure out what is going to be the best route for me to go?' Cus at that point I was just going to drop all my classes, I was just going to withdraw all. And then, you know, we just did one, and I felt really good. And then, just this week I had to go withdraw from another class. And, where before when I was coming, I just quit coming to class altogether and it didn't look very good for me, financially, as far as financial aid. So, this time I was not afraid to go and voice my struggles, because ultimately I do have a goal to get through and make a certificate. I don't want to back myself up by just walking away from stuff that I could get help with. ... The [advisors] were great with, you know, hearing me, hearing what my struggle was – already future-tripping, knowing that this was not going to work out for me and helping me map it, map it out."

"It's really nice to have most instructors understand about what you're going through, and that's the really nice thing about community college."

The Latinx focus group seemed to have a harder time getting the resources and support they needed from instructors; they shared several stories of failing a class with an unhelpful instructor, taking it again with a more engaged, attentive instructor, and passing on the second try. These students needed extra language accommodations, and though there are tools that could help them available through Disability Services, their language barrier did not qualify them for their use.

"In writing 115, you cannot take your essays home. You have an hour to work in class. My first teacher, I asked her if I can use a translator. Like, I'm not gonna translate the whole paragraph – it's just like a word I don't know how to write it. And she's like, 'No, you're not allowed to do that.' And I'm like, 'Okay.' And I didn't pass the class. And I feel like that will help me a lot. And then my second teacher, she told me, 'You're good, you can use your translator if you need it.' So, when I have a question, or something I can use my phone or a little translator and that helped me a lot."

"I think extra time for testing is really helpful for us. And like giving us tools, like she said, the smart pens. Because, we don't have a disability, but we have barriers, and we are *always* out of our comfort zone. Like, all the time. And I think, for me, that would be awesome."

"I asked something, and she literally made me feel stupid, because she said, 'You still don't know that?' She said that phrase – 'You still don't know that?' And I was just like ... I just stayed quiet and I just smiled, but deep down I was like, 'Okay, sorry for asking,' you know? Inside of me, like – It made me feel like my question was worthless or, like, I just felt stupid, you know? And in front of everybody! ... And that's why sometimes I don't feel like asking, cus what if another instructor does that to me?"

"I think my hard, hard one was Biology. And I asked the teacher if I can do the exam in the tutoring center because for me it was really hard to do the test because you need to read, like, super-fast, and sometimes I was reading a question and I was thinking, 'Oh! This question is asking about this certain topic,' and I was wrong because it was asking about another topic and I feel very anxious and I don't have time to read carefully. And I ask my teacher, 'Hey, I have problems with English because it's my second language. Can I do something to take the exam in the testing center?' And he say, 'Oh! It's okay! You can have more time to do that. Also, when I have problems with writing I go to the tutoring center and with math, the same, I go there and they help me. I always try to use my tools here in RCC, but if I feel like, 'Oh, this is impossible for me,' I withdraw. Yeah, it's like the last option."

WHAT ROLE DO RELATIONSHIPS PLAY IN PERSISTENCE?

Relationships with other students, faculty, and staff were all are very important to each of the focus groups. Their relationships gave them someone to turn to when they were confused or in a crisis, helped them get access to resources, and provided the emotional support they needed to continue their education.

"She's there for me and she listened to what my challenges were, and I haven't gotten a chance to go back and talk to her again, but I have high hopes that that will begin a relationship with an advisor that will get me the support that I need... Somebody who knows me who, when I go back and I say, 'Okay, now I've accomplished this and this, and this is what I'm wondering, I have this question, she will be able to answer it for me with a level of understanding."

"We have group chats with our... cause in our MA class we have to have a group project so we need to all be able to communicate. And then, even from starting school, I have gained a lot of relationships from a lot of different classes from a lot of people doing a lot of different programs who, even though they're not in the MA program, they're still taking some of the same courses so you always have that support or help that you need. And then just like having our group chat, like if we need help with homework, if we just need ideas, we just need social support, like not even homework or not even schoolwork – I think it's really important. And then everybody in the class kind of supports each other no matter what."

"We're social beings- you know. It definitely helps knowing that someone else is there with us."

"I think, for me, what's been really helpful is study groups through the class. Cus a lot of people, like when you're taking a harder class, they set up their own study groups, which is really nice because then you can go over to the tutoring center, which is kind of the study area. And if you have questions, you can ask as a group instead of feeling so solely alone. I think it's better to have everyone that you can practice with so you're all just kind of in it together. So, like, starting those relationships early is good, for me at least."

"And also, the library has tiny rooms and they have a whiteboard. And if you are studying in a group, you can explain to your – for example, 'Ah! I don't understand this question!', 'Oh! I know this question!' and someone can explain that and it's good because now you have a different explanation for someone else and maybe you understand better than what happened in the class, because it's always, like, super-fast, for me."

An unexpected, but important aspect of engagement and success for many students in the focus groups was the ability to help other students.

"Because I'm not only wanting to be here, there's people, like I said, in that class the other day, when that girl came up to me for help – that made me feel a lot better. It invited, it pulled me in closer, because of the – it just goes to show that somebody else needed my help too, just as well as I need their help."

"We didn't come to RCC just for taking classes. We are – have relationships with other people too. We can encourage them to keep going and don't give it up. So, for me, I think success is more than – is to overcome our obstacles."

"And I think, thanks to the HOLA program we have the Latinx Club because we know that – you are not the only one! You can build a community here and we can support each other like – not only, like, having parties or this kind of stuff – like studying together, or when someone don't understand, like, something in Biology class or this kind of stuff, we can support each other. That was, like, a really good thing for me because now I have friends and I was alone at first."

In the Latino Club focus group, the importance of relationships across diverse backgrounds became apparent when a non-Latinx student shared how she could relate to the other students' fears of giving class presentations in English:

"Sometimes I don't say anything cus they take it like, 'No, you can speak English, like, you just don't want to – how do you say – get out from your comfort zone.' Yeah, I get that, but it's hard, like..."

"You need to say to them, 'I am doing that! Right now! [Laughter] I'm out of my comfort zone!"

"They honestly don't know how hard it is, like, when you have to do a presentation – being in front of everybody – "

"Oh, no. The worst thing ever. En Espanol, si!"

[Non-Latinx student:] "Yeah! I have - we have to do one in Spanish class next week and I can't, I can't imagine having to go through my whole college experience like they do, when their second language is English, having to worry about trying to do a Biology presentation [Other student: "Exactly."] AND learn how to do it in English. [Cacophony.] I probably wouldn't even be able to function! [Laughter.] My anxiety would be like... [Other non-Latinx student: Seriously, all the time, yeah!]

"Um, do you need help with your presentation? We can help you."

"Now you understand how we feel!"

"I know! Yeah, and I only have one class!"

The fact that these students – who are usually marginalized and overlooked, who struggle just to speak the language of their courses – had the ability to support and be an expert for the learning of another

English-speaking student was incredibly validating for them, and provided an obvious means to an extended community that could, in turn, provide the support that they need in learning English.

Outcome 4: To understand what the college needs to build upon and improve in order to help students get engaged, persist, and succeed.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR THAT KEEPS YOU COMING BACK TO THIS COLLEGE?

Students in two groups said that RCC's affordability and close location kept them coming back to the college. Four groups said that it was their hope for the future; the supportive relationships they'd made with advisors, instructors, and students; or the help of specific classes (CG100, CG199, ESL, ABS), or programs (SOHOPE, TRIO) that kept them coming back.

"A better life."

"The future."

"Getting done, getting to the job that I want to do."

"And I think, too, if it wasn't, um, *working*, we wouldn't come back. But because it's a real healthy environment and there are some really good teachers and faculty that are helping us, Student Success [CG199], forums like this [focus group], and the friends that we meet here, I think is, they're just all encouraging us to go forward."

"Networking, coming together, showing me how to rebuild my thinking, how to become what I want to be, instead of sitting back saying, 'I wish' – I'm doing... *It's the community*. It's what I pretty much desire, is to be back part-of, but now I am. That's what draws me back. Is because I'm not only wanting to be here, there's people, like I said, in that class the other day, when that girl came up to me for help – that made me feel a lot better. It invited, it pulled me in closer, because of the – it just goes to show that somebody else needed my help too, just as well as I need their help."

"*****"[Name of staffperson.] [Laughter. "Awww!"] [After this everyone started talking at once about how ***** supports them.]

"Yeah."

"Her help."

... "She encourage-..."

"Her help and her motivation"

"...advice."

"Don't give it up! You can do it! Sometimes we cry in her office. [Loud laughter]. She's like, 'It's okay, everything is fine! You're doing good! Don't give it up! You can do it!'"

"I always ask for ***** because she's bilingual. I was going to give up on being a nurse and she told me, 'You are not the only one! You can do this. You need to be positive'. She showed me a couple strategies to study better. That was really helpful to me. Sometimes we don't know that we can have support like ***** or ***** , and we are like, 'Uh! Maybe college is not for me; maybe I could have a job at El Tapatio or wherever.' [Loud laughter.] Also, the ESL teachers and ABS teachers are really helpful, especially for me. Because I started with not talking anything in English, like only present tense, and now I feel better. Now I really feel like I am bilingual. And I think that helped me to be confident."

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS THE COLLEGE COULD DO TO HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED?

In response to this final question, students gave a variety of answers including a clearer, updated website; a stable course schedule that was accessible for course planning; better parking at RVC; and dealing with the homeless population on the RVC campus so that women didn't feel unsafe. A major theme among responses was access to more course information and better advising before a student begins taking classes.

“The only thing I would suggest for people who have been out of school for so long, is to set up a mentor program (another student who is really familiar with the school who already knows all the little short cuts) as there is still a lot here I don’t know.”

“Make sure that there is an academic plan, that they know their required courses, when the required courses start, the timeframe, and it’s all laid out for them. If you go to my degree audit, I’ve got like 5 different things on there with, like, 300 different credits that I need because nobody’s helped me with it.”

“Yeah, you should start with a degree audit when you start in here.”

“Right! And I did one for the first time this term.”

“Yeah, that way you can know ahead of time.”

“I would definitely say, like, an orientation of some sort that maybe goes over, like, what degree you have and what courses you need to take, and, ‘Hey, these are where those resources are, this is where the Student Success...

“And this class would be best before this class.” [“Right.” “Yeah.”]

...room is and this is where counseling is. I understand that that class is kinda like that, but I just feel like it’s not enough. It needs to be in the beginning, as soon as you walk through the door, like, ‘Hey, this is what this campus is, this is where everything is, this is what we have to offer you, these are the resources we have.’ And I understand, like, that might be a lot...[“Back to mandatory orientations.”]...to get, but at the same time I think that students would benefit from it so much. And that feeling of overwhelm and all of those things that you get, you know, like, it’s new, it’s crazy, its – *you don’t know where anything is*, you don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know how to do anything – I think that a lot of those feelings would be alleviated with that process, so that would be cool.”

“I think, to have more classwork available for us to look at beforehand, like, would be helpful. So that I can, like, - just because once you fall behind, it’s just, it’s impossible to catch back up. Especially since we don’t get any information about the course until the first day of class, which is super frustrating. Like how are we supposed to”... could do work beforehand, when you have time.”

Conclusion

The focus group findings can be boiled down to the following four main themes, listed with their connections to RCC’s 2017-2020 Strategic Plan:

THEME	STRATEGIC PLAN OBJECTIVE
Connection and Community	3. Collaborative Learning Spaces
	5. Student Engagement Strategies
Robust Student Orientation	1. Access to Educational/Support Systems
	5. Student Engagement Strategies
	6. Decrease Time to Completion
Clear Academic Pathway	1. Access to Educational/Support Systems
	4. Guided Educational Pathways
	5. Student Engagement Strategies
	6. Decrease Time to Completion
Instructional Support	3. Collaborative Learning Spaces
	5. Student Engagement Strategies
	6. Decrease Time to Completion

CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

Findings

- Personal relationships with other students, advisors, and instructors are foundational to student engagement and persistence. They provide a basis of trust and understanding that allow various

types of nontraditional students feel more comfortable asking questions in class, creating study groups, and reaching out for help when they're in crisis.

- Students really cling to other students and often turn to each other for advice, perhaps because fellow students are more accessible and perceived as more approachable than staff or instructors.
- In addition to having people that they can turn to when they need support, students need to be able to help others. This validates their feelings of worth and belonging as a student by showing them that they have something to contribute and that they are useful in an educational environment.
- Community groups - whether learning cohorts, clubs, or study groups - are both social and academic. Socializing increases connection and community and facilitates learning. Social groups provide a support system with a larger impact than a strictly academic study group. If the socializing is associated with RCC, the college becomes a "third place", "a home away from home, in terms of feelings of warmth, intimacy, possession, and belonging"¹.
- Students benefit from a balance of uniformity and diversity in their learning communities. They need to know that there are others like them, but interact with different students too. Students with different knowledge and experiences can fill in knowledge gaps for each other and expand each other's horizons. Uniformity validates the presence of students who might otherwise feel rejected, while diversity helps them learn that people outside of the uniform group are not so different from themselves and acts as a humanizing force. Positive relationships across diversity must start with a base of connection and community; otherwise, diversity can be toxic.

Recommendation

- Establish connections and community early through orientation, advising, and class activities.
- Create a student ambassador/mentor program to support orientation, access to resources, and other entering student experiences.
- Provide opportunities for student groups to get to know and offer support to different student groups, especially in a way that counters the usual direction of support.

ROBUST STUDENT ORIENTATION

Findings

- Students who are not familiar with higher education settings often feel lost and overwhelmed upon entering RCC. They enroll for too many classes, or inappropriate classes, and don't know how to drop or withdraw, or how doing so will affect their financial aid. They are more at risk of failure because they often get into an early downward spiral that leads to academic probation, loss of financial aid, and wasted resources. When unforeseen life circumstances arise, they don't know what their options are and that they can ask for help. Early setbacks can lead a student to think that they don't belong in college and would be better off dropping out.

¹ Going Home: Essays, Articles, and Stories in Honour of the Andersons by Pete Myers, Chapter 3, There's No Home Like Place? by Matthew Sleeman, pg. 37., https://books.google.com/books?id=ja_1AwAAQBAJ&pg=PA37#v=onepage&q&f=false, referenced in Wikipedia page for Third Place.

Recommendation

- Entering students need a robust orientation that covers registration, financial aid/scholarships, student services, tutoring centers, options when things go wrong, campus specialties (massage, nursing, automotive, etc.), advising, special programs (TRIO, VRO, career center, clubs, student government, etc).
- Use the HOLA summer bridge program as a model. Create cohorts of similar students, or tracks aligned with guided pathways majors, that move together through orientation and establish an initial community of peers.

CLEAR ACADEMIC PATHWAY

Findings

- Students accumulate empty credits and waste financial aid dollars because the courses that they need for their program are unavailable, overlap with other courses they need in the same term, or are cancelled.
- Students want streamlined, clear program requirements.
- Students who have found advisors who really help them and know their program, love their advisors and rely on them for scheduling advice and course corrections.
- It's important to students that their advisor knows their name, what program they're in, what they struggle with, etc. They want to be known as a person, not just another student.

Recommendation

- Continue Guided Pathways work to refine program tracks and the course schedule to make needed courses more available.
- Provide frequent access to a dedicated advisor who can help students make appropriate plans/schedules.
- Make it possible for students to plan out their entire course schedule, from start to finish, so there are no surprises involving unavailable courses.
- Use SOHOPE as a model.

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

Findings

- A really great instructor is passionate about their subject and has the ability to make it fun and interesting to students who do not care for it.
- Students want to be able to apply their studies to their lives. They become engaged in learning when instructors make their subject matter relevant to students and find ways to give them hands-on experience.
- Students need instructors who show that they believe in their ability to learn and grow, and don't belittle their lack of knowledge.
- Patience and willingness to repeat concepts over and over in new ways is very important.
- It's good for students to know something about their instructor's background, *but it's more important* that an instructor get to know their students and their challenges and strengths.

- Students need instructors to facilitate early connections among students through introductions and group activities, but also want to have the ability to opt out.
- Students need courses that are very organized with clear expectations, guidelines, and examples. Students feel that many instructors lack Blackboard training or experience and use it ineffectively.
- Students need detailed and timely feedback on their assignments in order to be able to make improvements.
- Students need instructors who are available to help them outside of class through a variety of avenues: one-on-one time, email, phone, TAs.
- Latinx students need extra language support and accommodations from their instructors.

Recommendation

- Instructors cannot engage and support students in a campus community that does not engage and support them as instructors. Faculty need a robust orientation, resources, and community as much as students do. RCC has many knowledgeable and experienced instructors who could provide pedagogical professional development for their peers. See the CCRC Research Brief: Understanding the Needs of Part-Time Faculty at Six Community Colleges².

² <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/understanding-part-time-faculty-community-colleges.html>