



Advancing Equity Through Guided Pathways Series Discussion Guide #11:

Integrating Non-Academic Supports into the Student Journey



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SERIES OVERVIEW



The Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways series aims to foster critical campus conversations about how to close persistent gaps for historically marginalized students. Developed by the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement for the California Guided Pathways Project, the series was generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, and the Foundation for California Community Colleges.



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Integrating Non-Academic Supports into the Student Journey

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By Linda García, Center for Community College Student Engagement & Priyadarshini Chaplot, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement

Introduction

Meet James. James was a community college student who was excited to begin his college journey at the start of a fall semester. James participated in a Center for Community College Student Engagement (Center) focus group three times during a fall semester to share his student experience.ⁱ Here are excerpts from these different touch points.

August (1st Interview) *“I like to push myself mentally. I like to listen in and learn new things. I know that’s what college is all about. They teach me things that high school won’t. I’m all about learning different things. I love education.”*

September (2nd Interview) *“I have to admit I was nervous as an incoming freshman. You have to see it as another day at school. You just adapt to it. I did. It’s easy. It’s a lot of homework. I don’t like homework.”*

November (3rd Interview) *“School is alright. I like it, but it’s not for everybody. I guess I’m one of those people it’s not for. Maybe some time later on in life I may pick it up again. It is what it is.”*

By the third interview, James no longer sat confidently when interviewed. James withdrew from college at the end of his first term. He went from believing and saying, “I love education,” to “I’m one of those people it’s not for.” How did that shift happen?

Can you identify students like James who were hopeful and excited at the beginning of their academic journey, but for some reason, their optimism and confidence diminished through time? Were there missed opportunities to know

How to Use this Guide...

The *Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways* series aims to foster critical campus conversations about increasing student equity under a Guided Pathways umbrella. Institutional redesign teams can...

- Read the introductory framing on creating student connection and belonging upon college entry
- Use the discussion questions to facilitate conversations related to planning and action
- Conduct the research tasks to help better understand your students’ experience of this topic

Some guides, including this resource, address issues in the student experience aligned to the stages of the [Completion by Design Loss/Momentum Framework](#), while others address issues of culture and leadership. Across all guides, authors bring their own unique perspectives on and approach to the issue. No guide is intended as the definitive word on its topic.

For related content, discussion questions, and research tasks, review *Creating Student Connection and Belonging upon Entry* (Guide 6) and *Taking an Asset-Based Approach to Student Onboarding* (Guide 7).

For all guides and additional information on the series, visit <http://www.ncii-improve.com/>.

those students, learn their struggles, and connect them to supports that may have prevented them from withdrawing from college?

Role of Non-Academic Supports

In addition to redesigning programs and courses to build college-level academic skills, supporting all students throughout their educational journey will also require colleges to embed intentional non-academic supports, defined as “activities and programs that are designed to encourage academic success but do not deal directly with academic content.”ⁱⁱ Studies reveal that many students withdraw because they do not feel connected to the college, lack the confidence to academically succeed, and experience basic needs insecurities such as food, housing, and transportation that take priority over college and learning.ⁱⁱⁱ Other non-academic supports can include student success courses, strategies for navigating the college, financial assistance, student life, and advising. Of the suite of non-academic supports, this discussion guide specifically focuses on supporting students’ (1) sense of belonging, (2) academic mindset, and (3) basic needs security.

Sense of Belonging. When asked if they ever have considered dropping out of college, many students say they have. When they are asked what helped them stay in college, students’ answers consistently refer to relationships. Those relationships (a formal or informal network on campus that can include peers, instructors, advisors and/or mentors) made them feel connected to the college community, fostering a sense of belonging.^{iv v}

According to students who responded to the 2018 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), 89% agree they felt welcome and respected and 81% agree they have good relationships with others at this college. While the majority of students feel a sense of belonging, it is noteworthy to consider the percentage of students who responded with disagree (3%) or neutral (16%)—nearly one-fifth. When those data points, including disaggregated data, are reviewed, colleges can have deeper discussions with faculty and staff on how to embed activities within the non-academic support areas so all students feel a sense of belonging at the college.

Even though having good relationships is important for all students, these connections are more critical for students from marginalized communities, including students of color, first-generation students, and students with low socioeconomic status. In a previous Center national report, students of color talked about how seeing faculty and staff who looked like them strengthened their sense of belonging.^{vi} These students, who connected with those faculty and staff with similar cultural understandings and values, felt understood and less isolated.

Academic Mindset. Many students who walk through the doors of community colleges have already been told or are being told they are not college material. Or, they have had experiences that led them to believe they are not good at taking tests or they do not write well. These messages are especially strong when students—particularly those from historically marginalized communities—are placed in the lowest level of developmental education courses.

In a focus group conducted by the Center, a faculty member shared how the beliefs students have about themselves can impact their academic confidence, stating, “Over and over, we see the students say, ‘Oh, I didn't think I was good at math. In third grade, my teacher told me I couldn't do math. My mom can't do math. My dad can't do math. I can't do math.’”

The 2018 *CCSSE* survey included an academic mindset module. According to the findings, 55% of student respondents agree that they can change their intelligence a lot in math. The remaining respondents either disagree or feel neutral. Also, no matter the subject matter, only 68% of respondents agree they can change their intelligence a lot. Students who have convinced themselves that they do not have the ability to learn are more likely to “stop trying” when confronted with a challenge.

To help students move away from looking at themselves and being looked at with deficits, colleges can introduce and regularly schedule activities that foster a “growth mindset” with students during tutoring sessions, orientation, advising, test-taking skills sessions, and so on. These conversations can encourage students to attribute setbacks, such as a bad grade on a test, to temporary causes rather than a permanent inability to learn.

Basic Needs Security. “I still have rent, bills, electricity, water, and stuff like that. But my main focus is helping my grandmother pay for her medical bills right now, and so that brings a lot of stress,” said a student during a Center focus group. “I have a second job on top of the work-study. I usually work 50 to 60 hours on top of going to school. I’ve just gone continuously. I haven’t stopped yet, but it’s come close.”

The full cost of attending community college is a concern for many students, and a lack of finances is an issue that can heavily contribute to their withdrawal. Making sure students can pay for college—and afford reliable and adequate housing, food, and other basic needs while in college—plays an integral role in student success. Many community college students, some of whom live near or below the poverty line, struggle to finance their education while meeting their basic needs. Pell Grants are one standard indication of financial need, and students of color, women, and students age 25-39 are most likely to receive a Pell Grant.

According to responses to the 2016 *CCSSE* financial health module, 63% of students were living paycheck to paycheck; 41% struggled from time to time to keep with bills; and 49% ran out of money and had to rely on outside resources (e.g., loans, friends/family, charitable organizations, etc.) within the past 12 months. When students struggle to meet basic needs, their student experience and academic performance will be impacted.

Supporting students’ basic needs is an important part of improving student outcomes. This work begins with having open conversations about students’ financial circumstances and connecting students to community and financial resources such as scholarships and public assistance benefits for nutrition, transportation, childcare, and healthcare (including mental health services).

Supporting Conversations at Your College. When you and your colleagues take a closer look at your college’s non-academic supports and identify how to embed intentional and deliberate actions to promote a sense of belonging, an academic mindset, and basic needs security, students like James will feel more supported to persist in their academic journey. Your college is most likely already providing these intentional supports to certain students through specific programs. Given this, your team might be able to learn from and leverage these excellent practices to enable more students to benefit from them.

How to Get Started...

Campuses can use the following Discussion Questions and Research Tasks to integrate non-academic supports into the student journey through Guided Pathways implementation.

Discussion Questions

1. How do staff and faculty members currently build relationships with students to help them feel like they matter and they belong? How can your college promote a sense of welcoming and respect both inside and outside the classroom?
2. How do current practices and policies affect how a student's mindset (i.e., their capability and ability to succeed), both positively and negatively? Where do opportunities exist to revise approaches to foster a growth mindset (e.g., skills lab staff supporting students with regard to test-taking and math)?
3. What professional development is currently available or can be offered to support staff and faculty members in facilitating students' growth mindsets?
4. What basic needs are most critical for students at your college, and what supports are currently available both on- and off-campus to address those needs? Do all staff and faculty know where to direct students who are having basic needs challenges?

Research Tasks

1. Determine what percentage of your students (disaggregated by race and ethnicity, gender identification, age, and enrollment status) say their relationships at the college help them feel connected and valued.
2. Identify what percentage of your students believe they have the ability to significantly change their intelligence in subjects like math and English.
3. Assess which basic needs (e.g., food, housing, transportation, childcare, healthcare) are most critical for your students.
4. Determine each student's unmet financial need (total cost of attendance minus available financial assistance).

Endnotes

ⁱ Center for Community College Student Engagement Focus Group Videos
<https://utexas.box.com/s/j784gnzpa0i7jqyx7ig7mdkgtsns26xp>

ⁱⁱ Community College Research Center. (2013). *What we know about nonacademic student supports*.
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/what-we-know-about-nonacademic-student-supports.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, J., Rochkind, J., Ott, A., & DuPont, S. (2009). *With their whole lives ahead of them: Myths and realities about why so many students fail to finish college*. Brooklyn, NY: Public Agenda.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED507432.pdf>

^{iv} Strayhorn, T. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York, NY: Routledge. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328109869_College_Students'_Sense_of_Belonging

^v Cole, D., Newman, C., & Wheaton, M. (2017, April 27-May 1). *Learning communities and students' sense of belonging to their university: First results from a longitudinal study*. [Paper Presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Antonio, TX, United States. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED593292>

^{vi} Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2014). *Aspirations to achievement: Men of color and community colleges (A special report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Program in Higher Education Leadership.