

# CUESTA COLLEGE STUDENT FOCUS GROUP HIGHLIGHTS

## Key Findings in the Context of Guided Pathways

### Project Overview

In spring 2018, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) conducted 15 focus groups with a total of 134 Cuesta College students. During these 60-minute sessions, students illuminated critical aspects of their educational experience, including why they chose to attend Cuesta College, which aspects of the college have been most helpful to them in their pursuit of educational and career goals, what obstacles they have encountered, and what suggestions they have for improving the student experience and increasing student success. In order to gather information that would aid the college in facilitating the equitable success of all Cuesta students, the focus groups targeted the following specific populations:

- North County Campus students
- Students enrolled in distance education courses
- First-time students
- Dual enrollment high school students
- Low-income students
- Latino students
- Students in basic skills math courses
- Students on academic probation
- Noncredit English as a Second Language students
- Foster youth
- EOPS and DSPS participants
- Students who had completed 45+ units

### Introduction

As Cuesta College begins to design and implement guided pathways, it is absolutely essential that new systems, structures, policies, and practices are thoroughly informed by an in-depth understanding of the student experience. Armed with a nuanced comprehension of the ways in which Cuesta is effectively promoting student success, the obstacles Cuesta students encounter as they seek to achieve their goals, and student needs that remain unaddressed, the institution's administrators, faculty, and staff will be able to develop and execute strategies that guide all students at Cuesta College along the pathways to their own academic and career success.

To that end, in spring 2018, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) conducted 15 focus groups with more than 100 diverse Cuesta students in order to find out directly from students themselves about what they need most.

### Key Findings

This summary of the RP Group's findings highlights some of the most important insights offered by focus group participants and identifies how responding to these student perspectives can enable Cuesta College to maximize the effectiveness of the four pillars at the heart of guided pathways. For a more detailed analysis of all of the themes that emerged from this endeavor, see the full *Cuesta College Completion by Design & Equity Focus Groups: Student Perspectives Report*.

### Pillar 1: Clarify Paths to Students' End Goals

The focus of Pillar 1 is for community colleges to create coherent and cohesive programs that connect to transfer opportunities and careers. Furthermore, colleges must articulate to students meaningful course sequences, determine and ensure the availability of said course sequences, identify progress milestones, and align core general education coursework with each program of study. While students typically do not have a direct role in the college's work related to Pillar 1, focus group participants offered important insights about why they chose to attend Cuesta College and how they learned about the institution that can nonetheless inform the institution's efforts to clarify the paths to students' end goals.

### Why Students Are Choosing Cuesta College

Across the country, financial concerns are paramount for many community college students, and as such, it is not surprising that **money was cited as a primary consideration in students' selection of Cuesta College**. Focus group participants spoke frequently of the Cuesta Promise, a program that funds

their first year of tuition, as an important factor in their decision to attend Cuesta. A number of students further described how they **combined calculations of cost with other priorities, such as transfer opportunities, the desire to remain close to their families, and educational quality.**

## Engaging Prospective Students

In discussing how they engaged with and learned about Cuesta College, focus group participants emphasized two important roles: that of Cuesta counselors who conducted **outreach and informational sessions at local high schools**, and programs at the high schools themselves that introduced students to Cuesta. Some students noted that while these efforts were usually helpful, the **messages prospective students receive about the college were not always aligned.**

## Pillar 2: Help Students Get on a Pathway

Helping students get on an initial pathway combines many factors, which can comprise first-year experiences that enable students to explore fields of interest and choose a major, and academic supports that are both contextualized and integrated into the classroom experience, particularly for courses that serve as gateways to major areas of study.

## Counseling Needs

Counselors play one of the most important roles at a community college in helping students identify a clear path to their long-term academic and career goals. **Focus group participants overall were deeply appreciative of the high-quality counseling services** the majority of them had received at Cuesta. However, while students' overall view of counseling at Cuesta was strongly positive, focus group participants also clearly indicated a need for improvements in several key areas.

### CONNECTING TO COUNSELORS EARLY AND EASILY

*"Maybe students should be required to go to the counselor's office at least twice a year, you know? Make it a point to show up, ... even if it's a walk-in counseling meeting, which is pretty easy. You just walk up, maybe share what classes you're taking and how they're going and what you plan to do next semester or that summer."*

To begin, **numerous students described wishing they had connected with a well-informed counselor much earlier in their educational journey.** Some of these focus group participants described themselves as wandering aimlessly through the institution until they were able to sit down with a knowledgeable counselor who was able to help them identify their educational goals and begin mapping out a literal pathway of courses that would leave to the achievement of those goals.

In addition, focus group participants were also **vociferous about their need to be able to access counselors in a more timely, efficient, and effective fashion.** Students described long lines for walk-in counseling appointments and noted how challenging it could be when they were unable to see a counselor at key moments in the semester when important actions and decisions take place. Furthermore, while focus group participants were quite willing to take responsibility for their own roles in their academic challenges, they also expressed a desire for Cuesta to **more proactively engage struggling students.** Participants noted that both instructors and counselors could reach out to struggling students to assist them before drastic consequences such as academic probation came to fruition.

*"I was looking into going to Cuesta because of the free year of college to get my general education out of the way, and also because I talked with one of my teachers, and he went to Cuesta and Cal Poly, and he said the teachers were basically the same quality [at both institutions]. So I thought it would just be better if I just got the general education out of the way without paying for it."*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING THE WHOLE STUDENT

*"I met with three counselors before I found one that seemed more helpful to me. Because one of the other counselors told me, 'Oh, take College Success and take this,' ... but I'm a single mom and [deal with issues like] time and transportation. ... I needed someone to listen to me and understand what I was asking for."*

Students across the focus groups also pointed out **the critical importance of counselors seeing the whole student, not just the "Xs and Os" of education plans and course registration.** Participants emphasized that just as they had to consider their educational pursuits in light of the bigger picture of their lives—including work schedules, timelines for completing goals, and family responsibilities—so did counselors in order to be maximally supportive of student success. **Students assigned great value to having a counselor who could help plan their educational journeys in the context of their lives outside the classroom.**

### Increasing Clarity, Efficiency, and Efficacy of Onboarding Processes

Numerous focus group participants highlighted a particular need for Cuesta's onboarding processes—such as the application for enrollment, course registration, and financial aid processes—to be substantially clearer, less time-consuming, and easier to use. **A number of students found simply applying to Cuesta to be difficult and time-consuming,** describing a website and portal that were challenging to navigate and a confusing overlap between the CCCApply and MyCuesta systems. Some even noted that the arduous nature of the application process almost dissuaded them

from applying to Cuesta entirely.

Other students voiced a strong desire for the college to create a course registration system that was simpler, easier for new students to use, and coordinated with other key processes that students are expected to undertake on their own using Cuesta's online systems. Given that these issues likely have the greatest impact on new students who are just beginning their journey at Cuesta, **it is essential that the college remove bureaucratic obstacles that could be extremely detrimental to students who are at a vulnerable stage in their educational journey.**

*"When you see an application to something, you shouldn't be so overwhelmed that you almost don't want to even apply for it to the point where you're like, 'Okay, well, maybe I don't even want to go to this college, if they can't even make the application right.'"*

### Strong Desire for More Career Guidance from Instructors

*"One of my professors now in my major is like, 'Well if you really want to get out and go get a job, you're going to have to do internships.' ... [And] he set me up with an internship."*

**Cuesta focus group participants were quite vocal about their desire for additional career guidance, and many students pointed to instructional faculty as a potential highly valuable source for this information.** A number of students described the ad hoc, unofficial ways in which instructional faculty had already provided them key guidance and encouragement with respect to launching their desired careers, thus indicating the critical role instructors can play in students' futures. At the same time, **students emphasized that they wanted more from their instructors when it came to helping them understand and explore career options, as well as make initial first steps toward connecting with employment.** Students offered several suggestions on how to increase the role of instructional faculty in the career exploration process, such as setting up and hosting job fairs or bringing industry representatives to the classroom. Ultimately, focus group participants made clear that they need faculty to make more direct connections between what happens in the classroom and students' employment in their fields of

interest, integrating these two critical aspects of the community college experience into their core responsibilities as instructional faculty.

## Pillar 3: Help Students Stay on a Path

Pillar 3 focuses on enabling students to continue moving effectively and efficiently down their chosen educational path. Key aspects of Pillar 3 include ongoing and proactive advising, systems that enable students to easily track their progress toward goals, and systems and procedures that identify at-risk students and connect those students to needed supports. Among many Cuesta students, often the difficulties they described in terms of staying on the path brought them to a similar conclusion: a desire for instructional faculty to do more to support their success.

### All Faculty Must Be Fully Versed in Using Canvas

Across the focus groups, students were almost universally positive about their experiences with Canvas, specifically citing the benefits of real-time access to their course grades. Nonetheless, participants' overall enthusiasm about Canvas was tempered by **one consistent observation that not all faculty members were willing or able to use the online system.** Many students expressed frustration with instructors' inconsistent implementation of Canvas; moreover, they called on the college to both mandate its use and ensure that all instructional faculty are adequately trained to effectively implement Canvas in their courses.

*"Half of the teachers refuse to use [Canvas], and I can only keep track of half my classes' grades."*

*"That grade-tracking thing [in Canvas] is so helpful, but not if every teacher doesn't do it."*

### Role of Faculty in Building Community at Cuesta

*"I would say now in my [major] classes there's more potential for me [to make connections with other students]. I'm in my major—I'm done with the ... general ed—and we do a lot of stuff in groups, and we go out and do activities now... . And so we're always working together, and so we always see each other a lot."*

*"Why don't we have clubs [organized around] our majors? Why isn't there a criminal justice club? Where we do things and I can talk and have a conversation with someone that is interested in the same major that I am?"*

Focus group participants clearly placed a high value on peer-to-peer connections, describing the numerous ways in which feeling connected to a community of students at Cuesta provided meaningful benefits, both in and out of the classroom. At the same time, many focus group participants **expressed frustration with the difficulty they encountered in trying to form friendships at Cuesta.** Without the shared schedules of high school, for example, or the sense of unity that often emerges naturally from a shared living situation at many four-year institutions, participants struggled to find ways to form bonds with their peers. Furthermore, the isolated location and commuter culture of Cuesta compounds this difficulty. It is also important to note that due to students' busy schedules/lives, many students may never join a club or be able to hangout after class, therefore, **the classroom is sometimes the only place where they can make connections with other students and foster a sense of belonging at the college.**

Numerous focus group participants reflected on opportunities for the college to step in and become more proactive in helping students connect to one another. **A large number of participants focused on ways that the college could help students who were pursuing similar academic goals find and support one another.** Several nursing students expressed appreciation for the structure of this program that produced a greater sense of community among students. Interestingly, upon hearing about nursing students' experiences, some focus group participants expressed envy and a desire for a similar set-up in their own programs of study.

## Needed Improvements to Course Availability

One of the primary issues that students highlighted was **difficulty accessing the courses, especially advanced classes that were necessary to finish their degrees and/or requirements for transfer**. If students are expected to map out a one- to two-year plan to achieve their academic goals, it is fully reasonable for them to expect in return that **the college not only provides the courses they need to take, but also make those courses available when students need them**. While it is perhaps natural that more advanced courses have fewer sections or more limited offerings, students clearly stated that they still need enrollment options in order for them to continue managing work, family, and many other responsibilities outside of school. For these students who have worked so hard at achieving success thus far to find that their achievements are stalled or their goals must be delayed due to course unavailability can be extremely detrimental to helping them stay on the path and ultimately complete their academic journey.

*“Some of the courses for the AA [in] like management in business, you can go a whole year and not see that course. ... I’m only taking one class a semester right now, because I do work full-time, and because of the availability [issues] with my work hours and [lack of] distance ed [options]... . When you get down to the last few [classes] that you need, they’re just not offered.”*

## Pillar 4: Ensure That Students Are Learning

The guided pathways approach to ensuring student learning contains a variety of components: creation of program-specific learning outcomes; implementation of learning experiences that are project-based, collaborative, and hands-on; improved teaching practices; and systems or procedures that allow both the college and students to track mastery of learning outcomes.

## Expanding Teaching Styles to Meet Student Needs

*“I think [it would be great] if teachers could make like additional things ... like videos and auditory [aids], explaining [the material] so you have all your stimuluses there helping you. If you need visuals, then it’s there; if you need somebody reading it to you or telling you something, it’s there for you. So you have every opportunity to know the material.”*

Focus group participants had a lot to say about their need to be exposed to diverse pedagogical styles within each class in order to ensure that learning is in fact taking place. **Many students enrolled in distance education courses expressed enthusiasm for the ways in which their instructors made course materials accessible to students with a wide range of learning styles**, as well as took advantage of the unique opportunities available in the online format to refine their teaching and maximize its effectiveness. **Several students also noted that instructors in traditional, face-to-face courses could learn from their online faculty peers in order to improve learning across all course types**. Students who were on academic probation were particularly vocal about the importance of instructors’ employing teaching strategies that were effective for students with a wide range of learning styles. Several students expressed frustration with faculty members who did not seem to be invested in making the course material as accessible as possible given the different ways that individual students learn.

*“I’m in a pre-stats class and there’s very little tutors that are available. ... I go to the Tutor Center and people are like, ‘That’s not really my thing.’”*

## Desire for Expanded Tutoring Services

Effective academic support services are also a key aspect of ensuring student learning. Focus group participants offered very positive feedback about the college’s tutoring services, as well as more subject-specific resources, such as the Math Lab. However, when discussing how academic support services could be improved, a number of **students focused on their desire for tutoring to be expanded, a perspective that likely reflects the**

**fact that students who did receive tutoring found it to be quite useful.** Participants observed that some courses/subjects needed to increase the number of tutors, especially to meet the needs of students not able to attend “traditional” tutoring hours, while other subjects currently did not have any associated tutors at all.

## Conclusion

In seeing how the findings from these focus groups align with the four pillars of guided pathways, Cuesta College administrators, faculty, and staff have a great opportunity to truly listen to the voices of their students and use what students say to inform how the implementation of guided pathways continues to evolve at the institution. Some of the most critical takeaways from these focus groups include the following:

- **Cuesta students are passionate in their desire for instructional faculty to do more.** The fact that students see so many opportunities for faculty members to contribute even more to their academic success speaks to the deep appreciation they have for everything instructional faculty already bring to the table and their faith in these individuals’ capacity to do even more.
- **Counseling services need to be easily accessible, proactively engage students at the beginning of and throughout their educational journey, and take into account the whole student when designing an education plan.** Students themselves have recognized the critical role that counseling plays in their educational journey, particularly early on when they are most likely to be confused or lost. More than anything, students expressed an ongoing desire to be listened to and truly heard by counselors.
- **There are a number of opportunities for Cuesta College to improve some its internal systems and structures that are currently slowing down or sometimes even downright standing in the way of student success.** From the college application to the course registration system to the availability of key classes to the college’s website and portal, Cuesta students need the college to remove unnecessary obstacles to enrollment, completion, and everything in between.

Looking at the college through the lens of student experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—can dramatically change one’s understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. To this end, the college has an opportunity to build upon this first step of eliciting student views by **developing a systematic process for regularly engaging students in the planning, design, assessment, and refinement of guided pathways.** If done meaningfully, Cuesta can not only continue leveraging student perspectives to make the case for guided pathways at the college, but also offer students a place of power and influence at the table as it determines how to restructure the student experience to ensure that it both aligns with the guided pathways framework and promotes equitable success for all students.

## Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for *all* students.

### Project Team

Darla Cooper, EdD

Elisa Rassen, MA

[www.rpgroup.org](http://www.rpgroup.org)