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Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Cuesta College
Equity Focus Groups
Student Perspectives Report

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Executive Summary

Project Background and Purpose

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.

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. These 60-minute sessions were designed to enhance the college's understanding of the student experience, from start to finish, and in doing so, inform the implementation of Guided Pathways at the institution. During the focus groups, students illuminated critical aspects of their educational journey, 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.

Research Design and Methodology

One focus of this research was to better understand students' experience at different stages along the entire educational journey. As a result, several focus groups targeted students using the Completion by Design (CBD) [loss/momentum framework](#), which outlines four stages in student journey:

Connection: From interest in college enrollment to application

Entry: Enrollment to completion of first college-level course

Progress: Entry into program of study to 75% of requirement completion

Completion: Complete program of study to credential with labor market value

The other focus of the research was to examine the experience of the following specific student 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

Each focus group was conducted by an RP Group researcher using a foundational protocol that was then customized to address the nuances of the experiences of each group of students. Students were asked to discuss the culture of Cuesta College, the challenges they had encountered as students, the ways in which the college effectively supported their success, barriers to that success at the institution, and suggestions they had for improving the Cuesta educational experience.

At the conclusion of these focus groups, the conversations were transcribed and analyzed in order to identify key themes, both across all students and specific to particular populations. In addition, the RP Group examined these themes in the context of the four pillars of Guided Pathways and student “success factors” derived from extensive previous RP Group research to help ensure that student voices could contribute to the efforts of Cuesta administrators, faculty, and staff to boost equitable achievement among all students in 2018-19 and beyond.

Placing Focus Group Research in the Context of Guided Pathways

As noted above, the findings from focus groups held with Cuesta College students have been examined in the context of Guided Pathways to help educators understand how to promote academic and career achievement throughout the student body. By connecting this research to a larger framework that approaches the community college experience from the student perspective, Cuesta College has the opportunity to both better understand and more effectively make use of the focus group findings, bringing student voices in as a critical aspect of decision-making processes that range from determining institutional policies to setting expectations among faculty and staff to creating and/or revising systems and structures to better meet student needs.

Guided Pathways offer a way of organizing the experience of community college students and, by doing so, helping colleges focus their efforts and target their investments of resources. Guided Pathways are designed not to replace other ongoing college initiatives, such as equity or basic skills, but rather to integrate these efforts in a way that promotes success across the entire student body. The core components of Guided Pathways are known as the “four pillars,” which comprise the following:

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.

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.

Pillar 3: Help students stay on 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 struggling students and connect those students to needed supports.

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.

Key Findings

The 15 focus groups held with Cuesta students yielded numerous important findings, which are described in three main categories: 1) themes that emerged across all focus groups, 2) themes that align with one of the four Guided Pathways pillars, and 3) themes that are specific to a particular student group. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive—for example, a number of the themes described in relation to the four pillars were also prevalent across the focus groups.

The key findings in each of these categories are summarized below.

Themes across Focus Groups

Positive view of Cuesta College. On the whole, focus group participants expressed enthusiasm and positivity about Cuesta College. Students cited in particular their appreciation for the warm and welcoming atmosphere at the institution, the quality of the educational experience, and the care and support they received from Cuesta faculty and staff.

Students struggle to balance responsibilities. The difficulty of managing the responsibilities of school in the midst of competing pressures such as work, family, health, and other life issues, is something that a great many community college students must face. Comments from several

focus group participants indicated that Cuesta students also must wrestle with how to prioritize their time and attention, particularly in the face of significant financial pressures.

Students value and want the college to do more to facilitate peer-to-peer support, as well as cultivate a sense of community. Across the focus groups, participants described the significance of relationships with their peers, noting a variety of positive impacts resulting from strong connections with their fellow students. However, many participants also discussed feeling that they currently lack these critical connections and have a strong desire to develop more of them. These students articulated obstacles they had encountered to building relationships with their Cuesta peers and observed a number of opportunities for the college to facilitate the cultivation of a more robust sense of community in the student body.

The college offers effective resources to support student success. A great deal of discussion across focus groups was devoted to Cuesta's efforts to support student success, including counseling services, academic resources such as tutoring, and programs like Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) and Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS). Overall, participants were enthusiastic about much of the support they received from the college; however, participants also pointed out ways in which these services could be improved to have an even more positive impact on students' educational experiences and academic success.

The use of technology at Cuesta is a mixed bag. One of the major topics that emerged in many of the focus groups was the use of technology at Cuesta, which prompted a range of reactions and comments from participants. By far, the online platform Canvas sparked the most consistent positive feedback among students who greatly appreciated having instant access to their grades at all times. On the other end of the spectrum, however, the Cuesta College website and MyCuesta were cited by many students as being difficult to navigate and not up-to-date with respect to form or function. In contrast, when discussing myCuesta Pathway, students were enthusiastic and appreciative for the help this tool provides related to educational planning and progress tracking.

Themes by Guided Pathway Pillar

Pillar 1 themes: Clarify paths to students' end goals. The first pillar of Guided Pathways primarily relates to activities undertaken by administrators, faculty, and staff that improve institutional systems and structures that function behind the scenes of the student experience. While these operations often do not specifically involve students and were not directly discussed during the focus groups, student participants nonetheless offered critical information that can inform colleges' efforts to design well-defined pathways that enable students to move efficiently from the selection of a particular institution to, ultimately, completion, such as why they chose to attend Cuesta College and how they were initially engaged as prospective students, drawing primarily on the focus groups held with current high school students and students who began at Cuesta last fall.

Pillar 2 themes: Help students get on a pathway. Themes that emerged from the focus groups related to Pillar 2 include conversations about participants' experiences being introduced to Cuesta as new students and navigating the college's onboarding processes; the role that the college and individual faculty members can play in helping students understand and pursue career opportunities; ways in which a dual focus on both degree attainment and transfer is helping many students; and the critical importance of connecting as early as possible with a fully-informed counselor who truly listens to students, sees each one as a whole person, and helps them plan their educational journey accordingly in the context of their lives on and off campus.

Pillar 3 themes: Help students stay on a path. Key themes that emerged from these discussions included the difficulties that students faced in figuring out how long it would take them to achieve their goals; the need for better communication between the institution and the student population about what resources are available to support their success; the importance of each and every faculty member being able to use essential tools, specifically Canvas; obstacles that many students faced when trying to enroll in courses required for their programs of study in a timely fashion; and opportunities for Cuesta, and faculty in particular, to help cultivate student communities that would enable students to better draw on one another for support. 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.

Pillar 4 themes: Ensure that students are learning. Focus group participants discussed the role of academic support services at Cuesta; while many students offered positive feedback regarding academic assistance, a significant number also expressed a strong desire for the college to expand its tutoring services. In addition, a number of students (particularly those who had enrolled in distance education courses) emphasized the importance of faculty being able to use diverse and innovative pedagogical techniques that would meet the learning needs of as many students as possible.

Themes Unique to Particular Student Groups

North County Campus students. Students in this focus group highlighted the benefits associated with being on a smaller campus, but also felt they had fewer opportunities than students on the San Luis Obispo campus. These students also noted their desire for Cuesta to help North County students feel more connected with one another and to the college.

Distance education students. Students in the distance education focus group spoke thoughtfully about the positive and negative aspects of pursuing their educational goals in an entirely (or primarily) online format. Participants emphasized the value of having course resources, such as lecture videos and notes, continually available to them, and they also praised the clear expectations articulated for each course, their ability to proceed through the course at their own pace, and the effective pedagogical techniques employed by instructors. However, participants also identified several challenges related to distance education, including technological obstacles and a confusing waitlist process for online courses.

Students on academic probation. Participants spoke about how they had ended up struggling academically, with many attributing their difficulties to their own lack of motivation or focus. They also conducted an in-depth discussion of how they were seeking to improve their academic status, citing strategies that included a shift in their mindset and reaching out for help. Students further expressed a desire for the instructional and counseling faculty to be more proactive and intrusive in ensuring that students, particularly those who are academically vulnerable, receive the support and guidance they need to succeed, specifically suggesting the college identify students showing signs known to predict academic difficulty and intervening before students find themselves on academic probation.

Noncredit English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Focus group participants cited two interrelated reasons for enrolling in ESL courses. First, students discussed their desire to improve their English skills in order to enhance their ability to communicate in order to equip them better to succeed in a variety of settings, such as in future classes, in the professional world, and in their social lives. In addition, a number of ESL students discussed their need for reliable access to specialized counselors who are attuned to their unique experiences as students and can aid them in figuring out next steps once the ESL course sequence has been completed.

Basic skills math students. Three main themes emerged from the focus groups with students taking basic skills math courses. First, basic skills math students offered extensive positive feedback about the resources available to them for academic assistance, such as the math lab. Second, re-entry students described a perhaps surprisingly widespread consistent trend of enrolling in math courses that were below the level into which they were officially placed. Finally, students shared their uncertainty about the effectiveness of the college's math boot camp called QuickStart.

Latino students. Although Cuesta College is officially designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), focus group participants did not have a lot to say about experiences at Cuesta specific to being a Latino student. This limited discussion in and of itself suggests the lack of a strong Latino presence or community on campus. Themes that did emerge on the topic of the Latino student experience focused on students' desire for more representation among Cuesta faculty and staff, as well as additional opportunities to strengthen Latino identity at the college.

Recommendations

Based on the focus group findings, suggestions from students themselves, and reflection on how Cuesta College can use the information from this research endeavor to improve the implementation of Guided Pathways, the RP Group offers the 14 recommendations described in this section.

Strengthening the Student Community

Recommendation 1: Create opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom for students to connect with peers who have similar academic interests and/or career goals.

Throughout the focus groups, students noted that their peers were a tremendous source of support and called on Cuesta College to help them make connections with one another that would support their success. Having a robust network of support can greatly enhance students' ability to stay on their educational path (Guided Pathway Pillar 3), and there are a range of ways that the college can contribute to the development of strong student communities. Many students expressed a desire to meet others with similar interests and goals, suggesting that they would greatly benefit from being able to connect with other students through clubs or other college-sponsored activities based on programs of study or even meta-majors that group together similar academic departments. Furthermore, a number of students currently enrolled in Cuesta's nursing programs cited the advantages of the cohort model, and a number of non-nursing students expressed a desire to forge the same kind of ongoing connections with other students who were traveling the same educational path.

In addition to the development of more cohort-based academic programs or clubs based on students' programs of study, there are numerous opportunities for faculty members to foster a sense of community at the micro-level. Student relationships can develop in the classroom when faculty use icebreakers that let students get to know one another better, let students work and study in groups, and/or use platforms like Canvas to further encourage connections between students.

Recommendation 2: Expand activities and events that promote student life at the North County Campus.

Students enrolled in courses or programs at the North County Campus are in particular need of activities and events that promote student life and foster a sense of community. Cuesta is an institution that is geographically isolated, and students at the smaller North County Campus perhaps sense this isolation most acutely. By investing additional resources into clubs, sporting events, and/or social activities that draw North Campus students together, the college will help ensure that all its students reap the maximum benefit from the support of their peers and develop a sense of ongoing connection to the institution that together facilitate persistence (Pillar 3) and enhances learning (Pillar 4).

Recommendation 3: Develop a communications strategy that uses multiple modes to inform students about community- and connection-building opportunities and encourage their participation.

Students across a number of focus groups lamented the communication disconnect between Cuesta College and its students, a critical gap that often left students without the information they needed to access resources that would support their academic success. Focus group participants offered a wide range of suggestions regarding how the college could better inform its students about the programs, services, and activities that were available to them, and in

doing so highlighted two important insights: first, that an effective communication strategy cannot be one-size-fits-all, but rather must use a variety of modes in order to reach a substantial portion of Cuesta students, and second, that students themselves are perhaps best positioned to inform the college about how to effectively reach them.

Cuesta could greatly benefit from conducting further research among students to better understand the most effective ways to communicate with the student body and determine what combination of technology-based tools, existing college systems and structures, and new strategies and activities can most effectively ensure clear and effective information-sharing with the student body. Developing a multi-faceted communications strategy that is deeply informed by student perspectives, Cuesta will be able to better ensure that students are making the most of all the college has to offer when it comes to helping them understand their options (Pillar 1), identify their goals (Pillar 2), effectively and efficiently pursue those goals (Pillar 3), and learn as much as possible in the process (Pillar 4).

Supporting Students Throughout Their Journey

Recommendation 4: Create counseling systems/structures to better ensure that students connect early on with counselors who can help students get on the path to their chosen program of study.

Cuesta College students were highly enthusiastic on the whole about the college's counseling services, with many noting the essential roles counselors played in their educational journeys. Indeed, feedback from Cuesta students, supported by a substantial body of research, makes clear that most students need counselors to successfully get on an educational path (Pillar 2). Those students who did not know or were not able to connect with a counselor as early as possible after enrollment often wasted significant time and resources in classes that did not get them any closer to their long-term goals. As such, it is important that Cuesta's counseling systems and structures both clearly communicate to students the benefits of working with a counselor and enable those students to access well-informed counselors as early as possible on their education path.

Recommendation 5: Equip and encourage counselors to take the "whole student" into account when helping students develop educational plans and make decisions about their academic path.

Community college students often lead complicated and difficult lives. Financial pressure is a serious issue for a great many students, and a large percentage struggle to balance the responsibilities of work and family with their desire to earn postsecondary credentials. It is thus particularly important for community college counselors to listen to students' voices and when helping students identify their goals as well as map out a path to achieving those goals, take into account the full picture of their lives. Students whose educational plans are developed in the context of their finances, families, health, and other critical factors are likely to have a greater chance at successfully following and completing those plans (Pillar 3). Cuesta College can facilitate this "whole student" approach by letting counselors know that understanding the

individual context in which each student operates is an essential component of doing their jobs effectively. In addition, the college could provide training and resources that equip counselors to understand as much as possible where their students are coming from and how to customize education planning to the unique needs of each student.

Recommendation 6: Enable and encourage both counseling and instructional faculty to identify students who are struggling and intervene as early and as effectively as possible.

Much as focus group participants emphasized the benefits of engaging with a counselor early in their educational journeys, they further observed that early intervention was critical to overcoming their academic difficulties. Platforms such as Canvas present opportunities for faculty to more easily monitor students' progress and, if necessary, their struggles as well. Counselors are able to alert students when they might be headed toward academic probation, a potentially major setback. The sooner instructors and counselors can alert students to the fact that they are drifting off-track—either separately or in coordination with one another—the sooner those students can get back on-track (Pillar 3).

Recommendation 7: Increase the number of counselors who are equipped to address the specific needs of noncredit ESL students.

The focus group conducted with noncredit ESL students at Cuesta revealed that they face a number of issues and obstacles that are unique to this population. While the college has already taken a positive step by designating a specialized ESL counselor, student feedback made clear that a strong need still exists for more counselors equipped with the expertise necessary to advise and guide ESL students as they seek to understand what paths are available to them given their particular circumstances (Pillar 1) and determine educational goals beyond completion of the noncredit ESL sequence (Pillar 2).

Recommendation 8: Increase students' exposure to career- and industry-related opportunities early and throughout their educational journey.

In several of the focus groups, particularly the one held with students who had already earned at least 45 credits (and thus were either nearing completion or had already achieved it), students expressed a strong desire for the college to help them connect their educational experiences to career pathways. Moreover, students highlighted the powerful role that faculty can play in helping them make this connection by bringing industry speakers to the classroom, offering expertise from their own experiences in a particular field, helping or even just encouraging students to find internship opportunities, and finding other ways to build a career perspective into the curriculum. Finding ways to increase students' exposure to industries that may be of interest to them is an important part of helping students get on an educational path (Pillar 2) and also can deeply enhance the learning experience (Pillar 4) by explicitly connecting what happens in the classroom to the passions and ambitions that inspire many students to attend community college in the first place.

Recommendation 9: Examine enrollment management strategies and course scheduling approaches to better ensure that students are able to access the courses they need, particularly as they near completion.

The limited availability of courses required for students' programs of study presents a major obstacle for students seeking to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year university in a timely and cost-effective manner. Focus group participants described the ways in which the lack of course availability posed a serious threat to the achievement of their educational goals; if even one course in a sequence is unavailable for a semester or a year, a student's entire educational path may be derailed. As such, it is critical that Cuesta examine its enrollment management efforts, perhaps using students' educational plans to predict which courses need to be offered when, and ensure that students have as many options as possible to enroll in the courses needed to complete their programs of study (Pillar 3).

Recommendation 10: Equip and expect faculty to utilize a variety of teaching styles in order to maximize learning among Cuesta's diverse student population.

One of the topics that focus group participants discussed most enthusiastically was the use of multiple pedagogical styles by some instructors of online courses. Students articulated how incredibly helpful it was when faculty taught in a way that, for example, reached both visual and auditory learners, or offered opportunities for students to work at their own pace. This powerful, positive response highlights the need for a multi-pronged instructional approach to be used not only in a handful of online courses, but in classrooms (or online spaces) throughout Cuesta College. Cuesta students across focus groups consistently spoke highly of the quality of the faculty at the institution; this appreciation from students reflects not just that the college is doing well on this front, but also that it has the power to do so much more. By expecting faculty to broaden their pedagogical approaches and integrate innovative, creative strategies into each and every classroom, Cuesta can help ensure that its students get the most robust learning experience possible (Pillar 4) from the institution's highly qualified team of instructors.

Increasing Students' Awareness of Resources

Recommendation 11: Using a wide range of modes and strategies, develop a resource communications plan that informs students early and often about college resources that are critical to their success.

Many focus group participants offered positive feedback about the resources at Cuesta College—those they knew about. Too often, students described stumbling upon important services or supports by accident, or discovering an extremely helpful resource when they were already years into their educational journey. In order to make sure students are as well-informed as possible about where and how to seek resources that will support success and learning (Pillars 3 and 4), the college needs a resource communications plan that takes into account the variety of ways in which students seek information.

As with many of these recommendations, faculty can likely play a critical role in more effectively disseminating information to students about resource availability, such as by

promoting certain programs or services in the classroom, offering extra credit or other incentives for students to seek out resources and report back to their peers, or allowing representatives from the college's support services to visit their classrooms. Students themselves are also likely to be a powerful source of guidance on this topic, as they can offer pragmatic feedback about how they are most likely to both find and share information about institutional resources. Not only do students need to know more about what the college has to offer, but they need to be made aware of these resources as early as possible. Furthermore, the information needs to be provided to them in a way that allows students to easily sort through their options and match themselves with the resources they need.

Improving Technology-Based Resources and Faculty Competency and Usage

Recommendation 12: Re-examine current technologies from the student perspective in order to identify opportunities to reduce confusion and increase ease-of-use with respect to technology-based tools, namely the website and MyCuesta.

Focus group participants were adamant that a number of the college's online tools, particularly the college website and MyCuesta, are extremely confusing and difficult to navigate. Even the tech-savvy students at New Tech High School cited how much trouble they had making use of these systems. As such, it is important that Cuesta College examine the institution's website, MyCuesta, as well as other online systems for application and course enrollment, from the user perspective. Just as students themselves are well-positioned to advise the college on communication strategies, student voices are critically important to updating and streamlining online tools and systems so they facilitate, rather than impede, the educational experience.

Recommendation 13: Provide additional training and other support for faculty to ensure that each and every one is able to effectively and robustly use Canvas.

Focus group participants were almost unanimous in their praise of Canvas, which they cited as an important tool that allowed them to keep track of assignments and upcoming exams, monitor their grades in real time, access course materials, and communicate easily with both instructors and classmates. However, students also made clear that a number of Cuesta faculty members were either unwilling or unable to use Canvas, let alone make the most of it as a tool that provides students with critical information about their progress (Pillar 3). It is essential that the college ensure that all faculty members are equipped to use Canvas and maximize its benefits by providing both training and ongoing technical support to instructors. Moreover, the college must clearly communicate to faculty how their use of Canvas contributes to student success, hopefully motivating them to use Canvas in all of their courses.

Creating a Culture of Continual Learning

Recommendation 14: Create ongoing opportunities to gather student feedback on their experiences at Cuesta and reflect on that feedback to inform the college's Guided Pathways design and implementation efforts.

Student voice is a key element within Guided Pathways in order to ensure that design and implementation efforts are being informed by the student perspective. The focus groups discussed in this report represent a strong starting point for gathering direct student feedback on what is and is not working for them across all aspects of their educational experience. Additionally, focus groups create opportunities for students to meet, share information, and support one another. Continuing to conduct focus groups or creating other similar opportunities for students to reflect on the positives and negatives of life at Cuesta College will not only provide the college with critical information that can be used to guide decision-making, but it will also send a strong message to the college community that student voices are valued by the institution and its leaders.

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.

Introduction

Project Background and Purpose

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.

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. These 60-minute sessions were designed to enhance the college's understanding of the student experience, from start to finish, and in doing so inform the implementation of Guided Pathways at the institution. During the focus groups, students illuminated critical aspects of their educational journey, 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.

Research Design and Methodology

One focus of this research was to better understand students' experience at different stages along the entire educational journey. As a result, several focus groups targeted students using the Completion by Design (CBD) [loss/momentum framework](#), which outlines four stages in student journey:

Connection: From interest in college enrollment to application

Entry: Enrollment to completion of first college-level course

Progress: Entry into program of study to 75% of requirement completion

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The other focus of the research was to examine the experience of the following specific student populations:

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Each focus group was conducted by an RP Group researcher using a foundational protocol that was then customized to address the nuances of the experiences of each group of students. Students were asked to discuss the culture of Cuesta College, the challenges they had encountered as students, the ways in which the college effectively supported their success, barriers to that success at the institution, and suggestions they had for improving the Cuesta educational experience.

At the conclusion of these focus groups, the conversations were transcribed and analyzed in order to identify key themes, both across all students and specific to particular populations. In addition, the RP Group examined these themes in the context of the four pillars of Guided Pathways and student “success factors” derived from extensive previous research so that student voices could contribute to the efforts of Cuesta administrators, faculty, and staff to boost equitable achievement among all students in 2018-19 and beyond.

In This Report

This report presents and discusses findings from the 15 focus groups conducted with more than 130 Cuesta College students and offers insight into how these findings can be understood in relation to Guided Pathways. The first section provides a brief summary of Guided Pathways and its core components. Next, the report reviews key themes that emerged across the focus groups, highlighting observations and concerns that were consistently raised by the diverse populations of students participating in this project. In the following section, the reports looks specifically at topics that relate to each of the four pillars of Guided Pathways, drawing on both themes that cut across student populations and those that were specific to certain student groups. The report then delves into topics that arose among particular students, such as those at the North County Campus or students on academic probation.

Following these discussions, the report moves on to offer a series of recommendations that build upon student feedback and suggestions to assist Cuesta College in enhancing both the educational experience and the eventual success of its students. Lastly, the report offers concluding thoughts on the insights provided by focus group participants and how the college can continue to incorporate student voices in its ongoing efforts to implement Guided Pathways and improve outcomes overall.

Placing Focus Group Findings Research in the Context of Guided Pathways

As noted above, the findings from focus groups held with Cuesta College students have been examined in the context of Guided Pathways to help educators understand how to promote academic and career achievement throughout the student body. By connecting this research to a larger framework that approaches the community college experience from the student perspective, Cuesta College has the opportunity to both better understand and more effectively make use of the focus group findings, bringing student voices in as a critical aspect of decision-making processes that range from determining institutional policies to setting expectations among faculty and staff to creating and/or revising systems and structures to better meet student needs.

Overview of Guided Pathways

Guided Pathways offer a way of organizing the experience of community college students and, by doing so, helping colleges focus their efforts and target their investments of resources. Guided Pathways are designed not to replace other ongoing college initiatives, such as equity or basic skills, but rather to integrate these efforts in a way that promotes success across the entire student body.

The Four Pillars of Guided Pathways

The core components of Guided Pathways are known as the four “pillars,” which comprise the following:

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.

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.

Pillar 3: Help students stay on 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.

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.

Themes across Focus Groups

Throughout the focus groups, a number of key issues emerged that were echoed by participants across student populations. Four primary themes resonated among a great many students, including their overall positive view of Cuesta College, the challenges that students faced in balancing their commitment to education with the many other responsibilities in their lives, the importance of connecting with their peers, and reflections on the wide range of student support services and programs offered by the institution. Each of these four topics are explored in detail in the sections below.

Positive View of Cuesta College

On the whole, focus group participants expressed enthusiasm and positivity about Cuesta College. Students cited in particular their appreciation for the warm and welcoming atmosphere at the institution, the quality of the educational experience, and the care and support they received from Cuesta faculty and staff. As one student succinctly noted, “I love Cuesta.”

A Relaxed and Welcoming Culture

Numerous focus group participants described the culture on Cuesta campuses as welcoming, friendly, and relaxed. Four students’ comments highlight the appreciation expressed by many for this aspect of the institution:

I feel like it’s very welcoming [here]. Like when you go in [to a campus office] you can tell like they want to help you. It’s not like they’re like they have to help you—they want to help you.

I think [Cuesta has] a very relaxed vibe. Very laid back—there isn’t like a whole lot of people that are competing all the time. You’re not always worried about being the best. ... It’s very relaxing. I like going outside, just walking around [because] we have a very pretty campus for a community college. And it just feels like a home away from home for me.

People are very helpful—not just the staff but students.

Everybody here is really nice and friendly. That is, [they] make me feel like comfortable, [like] this is my home.

High-Quality Educational Experience

A great number of students emphasized the overall quality of the educational experience at Cuesta College, noting the excellence of the teaching faculty and the positive experiences they had in their courses. Three students noted:

The teachers and like all the learning facilities are like really good [here], and like all the classes [too].

I'd say that most of the professors are really good at what they're teaching.

The teachers here are awesome.

Caring Faculty and Staff

Across the focus groups, students were particularly enthusiastic about the level of genuine care they felt was provided by Cuesta's faculty and staff. Many participants cited examples of faculty who went out of their way to help students succeed, and they described how important and impactful this support and encouragement was to them. Five students described:

it really changes your life to have somebody in the faculty tell you like, "You can do this, like don't give up, here's how to do it." Like [they] actually sit down in your personal life and break it down and teach you how to be a student versus just how to go to school and do the work at the job.

I had the same math teacher for three semesters, which I love. She's a great teacher. But when I had her, she really explained it all. She was just kind of like, "Hey, I know some of you have work and you have school and you have a life outside of here, [but] ... in order to be as successful as you can, you need at least two hours every day for homework."

Everyone, ... every single one of [the staff], ... goes above and beyond.

I feel ... like the counselors want you to actually do well and make progress, and I have like a lot of friends in the valley who are going to community colleges, where they like intentionally will not enroll you in the right classes. ... So I feel like at least here, if you want to make progress the teachers actually want to help you get there too.

I feel like I am cared for. Just the fact that they have free tutoring, it's all very nice. I think they care for us. I truly feel like they do.

Students' Struggles to Balance Responsibilities

The difficulty of managing the responsibilities of school in the midst of competing pressures such as work, family, health, and other life issues, is something that a great many community

college students must face. Comments from several focus group participants indicated that Cuesta students also must wrestle with how to prioritize their time and attention, particularly in the face of significant financial pressure.

School and Work

Numerous focus group participants cited work as the main competitor for their time, describing the difficulties that come from trying to support themselves financially, while also making progress toward their educational goals. Often students noted that they were not able to successfully take on a full-time course load while also maintaining a full-time work schedule. Four students described:

You're expected to be able to work and have full-time like student life here, and it's just it's so hard.

I was working full-time. And then I got into that LVN program, and so I had to quit working. And my [level of] financial aid was [determined by the income I generated] off those years I was working full-time. So I didn't qualify for anything, and I was not working at all.

For some of us, like returning students or some of us that work, that's why sometimes we probably won't take as many classes as we should because we're trying to balance to see, "Well, am I going to have enough money to be able to take those courses?" [Can I afford] textbooks, and [will I] have the time, and if I don't juggle it the right way, then you know I could fail and then stay even longer. So I need to figure out, plan ahead, make sure that I'll have enough money at the end.

I face challenges between finding a good balance between work and school. I'm like the first kid to go to college from my family, so it's like kind of a challenge because I don't have much support, and then I'm trying to work and go to school and there's no in-between time for myself.

Learning to Scale Back

Participants who discussed the challenges of balancing responsibilities frequently described learning over time to scale back their academic commitments and expectations in order to have the time and energy needed to succeed in their courses. Several students who were currently on academic probation reflected in particular on the ways in which over-reaching with respect to the number of units in which they initially enrolled had negatively impacted their educational success. When considering how to set themselves up for future success, many emphasized the importance of a realistic course load.

Four participants articulated the obstacles that emerged from trying to do too much and described the difficult decisions they had to make:

When I tested in, I started in Calculus. I took it my first semester, but I was balancing 17 units, ... and I was working every single day too. And I still hadn't got it down, so I had like a C in the class, and I think, "No, this is supposed to be my fresh start, I don't want a C on my transcript just yet." So I decided to get a D, because it had been past the [withdrawal] deadline, so that I could retake the class.

From the beginning, I should have lessened my load because ... my dad kind of wanted me to start saving up money and there's going to be a huge financial hole by the summer. So I had gotten a job, and one of the families that I nanny for was just like, "We have an opening as like an intern for our law office and we'll pay you to come in like 10 hours a week." And so I was doing that, and I was taking 19 units, and I don't know why I thought I could do it. And then, of course, I get mono, you know, which adds to [the problem].

[Being in school], ... it's literally another job, and I should have just been ... more careful [with my course load].

I used to just make work a priority, and then everything else pretty much going on first, and then school. So I didn't really take the extra time to like pay attention to studying or doing the effort that was required, even though my teachers always said you need to get off on a running start—I just didn't.

Unnecessary Costs

For students facing financial pressures, as a substantial number of community college students do, the costs of attending college can add up quickly. Among focus group participants, the high cost of textbooks came up as a sticking point—participants were particularly frustrated with being required to invest in textbooks that were not even used in their courses. Two students elaborated:

I think [about] having to buy those stupid CDs separate[ly], or like the [access codes] with the books are \$75. ... And then sometimes the teachers end up not using [the textbook after all], ... but you're required to have it, and then they don't truly really use it, and that's just like an added expense for no reason.

At the beginning of the year when you're getting into classes and everything, [the instructor tells you] the books ... you're going to use in the course. ... And you go instantly to the bookstore or whatever or Amazon and either rent them or buy them, and you end up not using them, and [the books are] just sitting there in your house just gathering dust because the professor's just using notes or anything, not really using the book, ... and I guess that's like, "Oh well, that's money like long gone."

Facilitating Peer-to-Peer Support and Cultivating Community

Across the focus groups, participants described the significance of relationships with their peers, noting a variety of positive impacts resulting from strong connections with their fellow

students. However, many participants also discussed feeling that they currently lack these critical connections and have a strong desire to develop more of them. These students articulated obstacles they had encountered to building relationships with their Cuesta peers and observed a number of opportunities for the college to facilitate the cultivation of a more robust sense of community in the student body.

Please note that additional discussion of how the college can help students build relationships with their peers as part of its work to improve student success is offered later in this report in the section addressing themes related to Guided Pathways' Pillar 3 on page 35.

Importance of Student Relationships

Focus group participants articulated a wide range of benefits that came from peer relationships, often noting the ways in which support from other students facilitated academic success. Several students offered:

We ... motivate each other.

We would try to beat each other on the tests.

We'd do our homework ... together in the library.

[When we worked together], we'd all pass the class.

Friends ... motivate you to be better.

One student described in greater detail the importance of students supporting one another and how that support produced better educational outcomes:

[It's important to know that] you're not really alone in this. I mean, that's how I kind of felt the first year [at Cuesta]—I didn't really get to know anybody, and I was just trying to struggle through it. But it was through actually like getting to know people within the class and maybe forming a study group after class that [helped me]. You not only make a friendship, but you also get to know the material a lot better because they might be struggling with something that you get or you're getting something that they're not.

Difficulty Connecting with Other Students

Despite the high value placed on peer-to-peer connections, many focus group participants expressed frustration with the difficulty of forming friendships at Cuesta. Without the shared schedules of high school, for example, or the sense of community 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.

Five students described the challenge of making friends at Cuesta:

Initially it's hard to make friends like when you first start [out here] ..., because you kind of keep to yourself. It's not like high school anymore. Your friends aren't always there

with you, and so you have to branch out and ask questions and talk to your professor and go explore the library.

I think it just seems like everybody is doing their own thing.

Cuesta has like a decent-sized population, but a lot of ... [students just] get in and get out, and don't like stay after the classes and study on campus. And so ... it could be hard to like make friends unless you're like hanging out here all the time. [There's] not a lot of making friends, just in class.

I've noticed that Cuesta is almost just like a pit-stop where you go to your class and then leave, and obviously you got to go to work or study somewhere else. But that connection between students is not really strong on campus.

It's hard to make friends because everybody is on a different path. So like I'll make a friend and [then] they're leaving that semester. I'll make like a friend over here, and like they're there for a year, and they're gone. So, it is kind of hard to make a community when everybody is kind of like leaving at different times.

Several students linked the challenges described above to the dearth of places on campus for students to spend out-of-class time together in a social way. Five participants explained:

I'm a pretty extroverted guy. I talk a lot, but I've only been able to make one or two good friends. I mean it's just kind of hard because like there's nowhere to go to be like, "Oh, I like doing this. I want to meet other people that do this."

There's no ... social ... place to go to meet people.

There's not a place that a lot of students could go and just relax. I mean there's the cafeteria, but it's so loud in there.

There's the Student Center, but it has two couches.

Efforts to Support Student Success

A great deal of discussion across focus groups was devoted to Cuesta's efforts to support student success, including counseling services, academic resources such as tutoring, and programs like Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) and Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS). Overall, participants were enthusiastic about much of the support they received from the college; however, participants also pointed out ways in which these services could be improved to have an even more positive impact on students' educational experiences and academic success.

Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS)

Many focus group participants described the powerful positive impact of their participation in EOPS, citing a wide range of program components that they found particularly helpful. Three students articulated:

I'm part of a program called EOPS, and we have our success coaches keeping an eye on us and making sure that we're doing our work, keeping up on our grades. Just tomorrow, we're supposed to turn in our grade checks, [where] you write down your instructor [and] your grade, and then go talk to your teacher to have it signed and stuff. ... So I know that's also very helpful.

[EOPS] makes you feel good, it makes you motivated, it makes you feel like you're not lost. And that's a big thing at least for me.

EOPS is a really good program. When I first started here, I just moved out of my house and I was really struggling with food, gas, with paying my rent. Everything. And so they gave me a gift card for gas, [and] when I was hungry like during my classes, I could come get food. If I needed to talk to someone, I'm able to talk to someone. They have like a lot of programs, tutors, everything, the computers, you can print for free. It's great.

Furthermore, a number of students described feeling lost and/or unable to make progress in their educational programs until they began participating in EOPS, which some wished they had been able to do sooner. Two students shared their experiences:

Actually, I wasn't [an] EOPS student until this semester, thank God. It was just so hard to get into the program. The past few semesters I was drowning. I was on academic probation, and it's because I got a few Ws. I didn't really know what I was doing. I didn't know how much I could handle. When I was put into college, I was just thrown into the deep end. ... But it wasn't until this semester when I went to EOPS that I really was able to track it. Otherwise, I don't think I had any progress at all. I'm making a lot of progress this semester though.

I actually think that I could have been [making] a lot more progress. This is my second year—my fourth semester, this is my second spring semester. All those semesters wasted, I could have actually been learning something. But all the W's almost killed me out of the college. ... And so [now that I am in EOPS], like this is the first semester I'm actually making any progress.

Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS)

Focus group participants were also strongly complimentary of DSPS, describing how important the program has been to their success at Cuesta. DSPS participants also echoed their EOPS peers' comments about not being able to get "on track" until they enrolled in the program. Four students described:

The DSPS office had a big meeting before the semester started [to help students] register for classes, and they had like five counselors and they were talking to everybody individually and helping. And that's where I discovered My Cuesta Pathway. And they helped me—like just showed me everything about what classes would be best to take.

My first year at Cuesta was horrid. ... I did not know anything about DSPS. I knew that I had a learning disability, but it's one of those, "Oh you're in college, you're an adult. You're supposed to be able to handle your grownup stuff. Put your big girl panties on and go." ... [I felt like I was] drowning and it was horrible, and then I went on academic suspension. ... And then got back in and they told me look, we think you would benefit from DSPS. First, I was a little hesitant because you know, that pride. "No, no I'll be fine. I'll be fine." But ... I got set up, I got in, did my testing, and aside from my learning disability [that] I knew that I had growing up, they also found hey there's some other stuff that we need to recalibrate here too.

The DSPS department has always been really, really kind to me.

What has helped me [be] successful [is that] I'm [in] DSPS—you know, it's all the good services and everything that DSPS has provided.

Technology at Cuesta: A Mixed Bag

One of the major topics that emerged in many of the focus groups was the use of technology at Cuesta, which prompted a range of positive and negative reactions and comments from participants. By far, the online platform Canvas sparked the most consistent positive feedback among students who greatly appreciated having instant access to their grades at all times. On the other end of the spectrum, however, the Cuesta College website and MyCuesta were cited by many students as being difficult to navigate and not up-to-date with respect to form or function. In contrast, when discussing myCuesta Pathway, students were enthusiastic and appreciative for the help this tool provides related to educational planning and progress tracking.

Please note that further discussion about the ways in which these technology resources are being used by Cuesta faculty and staff, specifically Canvas, can be found on page 35 as part of the section on themes related to Guided Pathways' Pillar 3.

Enthusiasm for Canvas and MyCuesta Pathway

Across the focus groups, students expressed widespread support for several of the college's recently adopted online tools. In particular, students were almost universally positive about their experiences with Canvas, specifically citing the benefits of the increased transparency that Canvas enabled, such as enhancing students' access to their course grades as well as to their instructors and classmates. Five focus group participants enthused:

We have this relatively new program called Canvas that ... [is] really helpful in the sense that you can easily keep track of your grades and plug and play “what if?” grades. Like, “What if I got this score on this? How would that affect my grade?”

[With Canvas], now your grade [being available in] real-time is so much better than having to go into [faculty] office hours and [ask], “Oh what’s my grade? What do I have to get on this?”

My favorite part about Canvas is that you can see your grade ... [and] you can see the calculation.

[With Canvas], you can constantly keep up with your grade.

[With Canvas], I feel like you just have instant access to your teacher or your classmates or anything they want to tell you.

A number of students also described how helpful and useful they found my Cuesta Pathway (also referred to as “MyPathway”) when it came to both educational planning and keeping track of progress. Three students observed:

You have your whole plan setup now [in] MyPathway, which has been fantastic to look at.

[MyPathway], ... it’s almost like a counselor for you. It keeps track of ... your path to whatever you’re trying to [achieve].

MyCuesta Pathway has the classes you need and the progress chart—[it tells you] like, “Oh, you’re 80% done.”

Frustration with MyCuesta and the College Website

While students expressed near-universal appreciation for Canvas and offered positive feedback regarding myCuesta Pathway, discussion of the Cuesta website and MyCuesta instead elicited a sense of frustration from focus group participants. A number of students described both as difficult to navigate, and others had a hard time finding what they needed amidst a seeming avalanche of information. Two participants explained:

Like sometimes my teacher in class will be like, “Write your student ID number like on your test or whatever,” and people literally don’t even know how to find it. That is how confusing it is. It’s your ID number—like, that should be like so easy. ... That’s a very like basic thing, [but] ... you have to do four clicks to figure out what your ID number is.

Yes, the information is there, but I mean I think they should have like quicker links, maybe for the students and like for reentry or first year or people for Zoom and stuff. And like people aren’t going to know what EOPS is—[the] only reason I knew about it was because my friend told me about it. ... It needs to just be a little bit more easy to

navigate I think, [especially] for reentry [students] or for students that aren't coming directly from high school.

Other focus group participants honed in on different aspects of MyCuesta, describing an interface that was not user-friendly and individual processes that were particularly confusing, such as course registration and the waitlist system. Four students commented:

I found that the whole My Cuesta interface, especially the registering process, is not totally user-friendly.

The advanced search option for finding classes is helpful because you can put times, days, campuses (north or south or like online), even like put that stuff in there. But ... then when you hit search, [you get] kind of like an Excel spreadsheet ... [And] as far as like what the classes are, ... it gives kind of a vague title, and then you have to like write down the CRN and then go to a whole [other window].

When I was on the waitlist, they sent me an e-mail, and it sent me a link, and you have to change from "waitlist" to "register"... web register. And then you have to type in the code or something.

The MyCuesta website is kind of antiquated in my opinion. ... It's not super user-friendly.

It looks like it was made in like 2005 and like [hasn't] even been updated since [then], to be honest.

Themes by Guided Pathways Pillar

As described at the beginning of this report, Guided Pathways focuses colleges on four key components of the educational experience in order to provide institutions opportunities to remove key barriers to learning and achievement of academic goals as well as enhance all students' capacity to succeed. This section of the report highlights important focus group findings as they relate to each of these four pillars.

Pillar 1 Themes: Clarify Paths to Students' End Goals

The first pillar of Guided Pathways primarily relates to activities undertaken by administrators, faculty, and staff that improve institutional systems and structures that function behind the scenes of the student experience. While these operations often do not specifically involve students and were not directly discussed during the focus groups, student participants nonetheless offered critical information that can inform colleges' efforts to design well-defined pathways that enable students to move efficiently from the selection of a particular institution to, ultimately, completion.

Why Students Are Choosing Cuesta College

As noted earlier, 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.

Five students explained why they chose Cuesta:

Definitely money. I mean that's why I'm going to community college rather than a university—because I don't want to be in debt after getting out of college.

I'm going to Cuesta because they have a first-year tuition paid [program].

Because it's close to family, [which makes it] easier to have a place to live temporarily. It's cheaper, and also [offers] the Cuesta Promise.

It's cheap and then if you go to like a community college and then transfer to a four-year, you have a higher acceptance rate.

So 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.

Engaging Prospective Students

THE ROLE OF COUNSELORS AND STAFF

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

I think our school counselors help a lot, as well as ... two of the Cuesta counselor ladies [who] came to help us.

Whether you're going for an AA or for transfer, whatever your goal was, I think Cuesta made it pretty [easy] to understand what you needed to do and how you needed to go about doing it. And they worked really well with my high school. ... I graduated from SLO High, and Cuesta and SLO High worked together very closely. ... There were a lot of

opportunities for me to meet with my high school counselor and with representatives from Cuesta to really like figure out this ... whole process.

We got to take a field trip to Cuesta for those of us who knew we wanted to go there. I think that helped a lot because we got to talk to people, see all the different departments, which was really cool for me to see like. "Oh, they have what I want, like that's cool." And then, they can answer all our questions, we can see the campus, and I think that was really helpful.

Some students noted that while these individuals and programs were helpful, the messages they received from and about the college were not always consistent. In the words of one student:

When [the two Cuesta counselors] came, the two ladies who were helping us had different answers for our questions ..., so I was a little bit confused. So, I don't think they were on the same page. And then also, I don't think my school counselor is on the same page as their [college] counselor, so it was just a little bit confusing at the start. So, I think that Cuesta should talk to the [high] school's counselors to inform them about like signing up and teach them so that they can help us better and then also if they were on the same page.

EFFECTIVE HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

A number of focus group participants were enrolled in their high school's Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and dual enrollment programs, which they described as offering helpful opportunities to connect to regional colleges, including Cuesta, as well as "dip their toes" in the overall college experience. Three participants explained:

I'm in AVID, so that's helped a lot because I get to go visit campuses, as well as like research them for parts of class projects.

[I'm in AVID and] we're doing a project right now where we kind of have to make a game plan, so like what we're going to do after college and the exact thing we want to do. ... So we have to research one college. We have to research the dean of the college and all this different contact information just in case we want to [attend that school].

I really like this [dual enrollment] program because you can still be a high school student, but take college classes and get like college credit for it, and it's also free and you're not required to have the book either. ... What I like about it is that it's a good way to experiment in like different fields. Like I took CIS 231 last semester, and that was a pretty cool class and like I know that I want to do something with computers, but psychology was a really cool thing to try out too.

Pillar 2 Themes: Help Students Get on a Pathway

Community colleges' efforts to assist students in getting started on a pathway to a credential or transfer has a wide range of components, many of which are discussed in this section. Themes that emerged from the focus groups related to Pillar 2 include conversations about participants' experiences being introduced to Cuesta as new students and navigating the college's onboarding processes; the role that the college and individual faculty members can play in helping students understand and pursue career opportunities; ways in which a dual focus on both degree attainment and transfer is helping many students; and the critical importance of connecting as early as possible with a fully informed counselor who truly listens to students, sees each one as a whole person, and helps them plan their educational journey accordingly in the context of their lives on and off campus.

Introducing Students to Cuesta

Focus group participants from local high schools described several activities that helped them take their first steps as a Cuesta student. These students identified some of the most useful introductory activities:

A few of us were brought over in a bus the last week of high school. ... And we took our assessment tests.

Yeah, [orientation] helped, as well. Like that one field trip for high school.

[Counselors] set us up with the Cuesta Promise, [and] they helped sign up for our classes.

[They] walked us through the campus.

They also introduced Zoom, at least for my school bus. ... When we [were] in the class, they also talked about Zoom, so that's how I found out about it.

One student summed up the positive impact of these experiences and recommended they be expanded to as many high school students as possible:

I think that if Cuesta was able to get that experience to every high school that has a significant amount of people coming from that high school here, I think it would be ... really great for every student to see that and they would be put immediately on that track of success.

Confusing Application and Enrollment Systems

Focus group participants also reflected on the application and enrollment processes at Cuesta. Many students found these early interactions quite difficult and not particularly user-friendly.

DIFFICULTIES NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

A number of students found applying to Cuesta to be difficult and time-consuming, describing a website that was 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. Four students described:

[The application to Cuesta] looks hideous, and it's horrible to navigate. ... The navigation is super confusing, and it's really kind of muddled and thrown together, so unfortunately, when you want to find out something about your classes or what you're taking, which I wanted to do last week, you have to go through all of these loops and back flips just to find it... . It's really muddled together and the links aren't clearly defined or explained, unfortunately.

I find the application process really confusing because you have to apply on CCCApply or something like that, ... and then you have to circle back to MyCuesta, and then you have to fill out a sheet, and then you have to wait three days to be able to add the class, and then it's really hard to find the class and your class materials aren't listed very easily. You can't find stuff, and it's really difficult to find what you need to find.

I had someone help me with my application because like everything was so confusing... . I was watching her do it, and I was like, "I would not be able to do this by myself."

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."

FURTHER CHALLENGES WITH CUESTA'S ONLINE SYSTEMS

Students across the focus groups highlighted issues with the intricacies of the course registration and financial aid processes, and the impact of these challenges. Some further pointed out that if students at a tech-focused high school like themselves were struggling with the Cuesta's online systems, the problems with those systems were likely pretty significant.

Four students explained the difficulties they encountered in this critical early stage:

I'd like to mention most of us here [at New Tech High School] ... do work on tech all day. We know how to navigate web pages, and we struggle with [Cuesta's online systems].

Along with having difficulties applying, when I applied for this [dual enrollment] class, I wasn't registered, so I had to go back into my application and double-check [that] everything was clear. And it was all good, but I had to re-register to get in.

It's really hard to know how to sign up for a class. [The website] doesn't say like, "Oh, steps to finding out how to sign up." It doesn't say steps or anything. It just has links that you're trying to figure out which one is the right one, so it's very confusing.

If it was just the application process, I would kind of suck it up and live with it. But my biggest issue is that I'm getting enrolled in their Cuesta Promise here and it's really difficult for me to find any [information about] ... my financial status after I've applied to things. It's really difficult for me to find out the status on some of the things I've tried to complete or submitted to them because it's just so hectic that I don't know where to look.

Connecting Students to Careers

Focus group participants conducted robust conversations about making connections to their careers of choice, which included discussing how their educational achievements would translate into desired careers, the role that instructional faculty played in helping them understand their career options, and their desire for the college to provide more opportunities for them to gain exposure to jobs and industry.

UNDERSTANDING THE REALITIES OF THE JOB MARKET

Many students seemed to have a clear and practical understanding of the role that educational attainment plays in opening doors in the workforce. Three participants described their thinking about the connection between college and careers:

Nowadays, it seems like the bachelor's degree is the new norm. Seems like the AA is slowly becoming the new high school degree, at least from my observation. So I just wanted to get the AAT and be on the fast track towards my bachelor's degree.

[Before coming to Cuesta], I got lucky and fell into a job for a long time. But then [when I started] going to look for something else, I didn't have that AA. ... I had the qualifications from experience, but now people don't look at your resume first—it's all online, and you get an automatic rejection if you don't meet [certain] criteria. So I actually ended up coming back [to school], and I actually got my AA the same semester my daughter got her bachelor's [degree].

[In] a previous job that I had before I came back to school, they had a position open for photography and design and this is stuff I already knew how to do. But there's no way they would let me move from a grunt on the factory floor to that because I didn't have a degree. I said ..., "I'm qualified to do it, I know how to do it," [but they told me], "Doesn't matter. You need the degree."

THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY IN PROVIDING CAREER GUIDANCE

A number of students detailed the ad hoc, unofficial ways in which instructional faculty had provided them key guidance and encouragement with respect to launching their desired careers, thus indicating the critical role instructors can play in students' futures. Three focus group participants recounted:

This semester, my professor was talking about like, “Are you guys ready?” Like she actually was talking to us about [getting] internships. Go test it out. Go do trial and error, because that’s how you know like how you’re able to get a job after you graduate. You’re not just going to get out and graduate be like, “Oh I’m ready.” Like you need to practice and prepare yourself. So that was actually some good advice I felt like from her, because I don’t really hear that [very] often from the professors, or even counselors.

I feel like my professors have all been very helpful... . I go to their office hours and I talk to them about their classes and what kind of job I could get with that kind of class. And they’ll usually provide me with really good advice. And [other] help, like, “Oh at this university you can expect this. And in this field you can expect this type of job.” And I feel like that has been very helpful.

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.

DESIRE FOR GREATER EXPOSURE TO JOBS AND INDUSTRY

Focus group participants also expressed a desire for even greater exposure to jobs and industry, encouraging the college to expand opportunities for students to become more familiar with career options. Two students shared:

[I would like] more job fairs.

I would [like to] have a college version of a job fair where you have people come in here and say, “Hey, this is what my job looks like.” ... We did that in high school ... and it was really useful, so I think that should be more enforced in college, as well.

A Dual Focus on Degree Attainment *and* Transfer

One of the challenges that many community colleges face is that often students who have earned enough credits to attain an associate’s degree decline to officially do so, instead moving directly on to either a four-year college or the workforce. In fact, in a recent RP Group study looking at transfer, 69% of California Community College students who recently transferred to a university did so without any credential, degree or certificate.¹ However, findings from the focus groups suggest that a number of Cuesta students are committed to both degree attainment and transfer, understanding the value of each. Some participants specifically cited their pursuit of an associate’s degree for transfer (ADT), while others spoke more generally about the importance of having a back-up plan and the role that a degree or credential could play in providing them additional security in the workforce.

¹ More information about the *Through the Gate* study can be found at <http://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleView/articleId/180/Through-the-Gate-Transfer-Study>.

Four students reflected:

[I've] worked for this long for something, ... [and] I need ... something that I can actually hold onto.

You want [to come away from Cuesta with] something tangible, some evidence to show for your time that you spent.

[The] reason why I chose to get an associate's degrees [was] because I was trying to think of degrees I could get from Cuesta that I could do something with. And with [an Early Childhood Education credential], you can just be a preschool teacher. I was like, "Okay, if all else fails, I'll just do that for a career." So it's kind of like a backup plan. It's a good backup.

My degrees were basically just a by-product of the class I had to take. It's my fourth year in school, so at this point, all the classes that I have taken or was going to take lined up with the degrees already. So it was kind of just like, "Okay, take a sheet of paper, let's add two degrees to my name. Why not?"

Counseling Services

Across all focus groups, perhaps the most widely and robustly discussed topic related to helping students get on a path was the essential role of counselors in this process. Overall, participants had much positive feedback to offer regarding their experiences with counseling at Cuesta. However, they also emphasized strongly that connecting with a well-informed counselor who was equipped to view their educational journeys in the context of their lives as a whole was critical. Too often, students who were not able to access this much-needed resource described having wasted significant amounts of time taking courses that did not contribute to the achievement of their long-term academic or career goals.

AN OVERALL POSITIVE VIEW OF COUNSELING

Community college students' relationships with the college's counseling services can be a thorny one—while the guidance of a caring and well-informed counselor can crack open the door to student success, erroneous or conflicting information delivered by a series of counselors who are overwhelmed and pressed for time can make students feel like that door has been slammed shut in their faces. As such, it is particularly noteworthy that focus group participants expressed a high level of appreciation for Cuesta counselors, whom they frequently described as helpful and supportive.

Six participants offered enthusiastic descriptions of their interactions with counselors and the ways in which those interactions have helped them navigate their educational experiences effectively:

[The counselors are] just super. ... I thought mine was super good.

I went in for a walk-in [appointment] and [the counselor] did the whole pathways [plan] and everything—like she knocked it out. She did everything, and then ... because I wanted to transfer, she did the CSU transfer [plan too]. And then ... I was [thinking], “Well, what if I were to get a degree here?” So then she knocked out another [plan] for if I were to get an associate’s [degree].

I’ve been [to the counseling department] twice, both for walk-ins, and ... I found that whoever I got then was really available and really thorough and really good... . I found both of the times that I’ve gone was just very, very helpful.

I think my counselor really helped me, because I’ve changed my major twice, and I would keep going to her to like get advice on what classes I should take. I kept telling her like, “Okay, well, I’m not really happy in this field or whatever. Like I don’t really like the classes I’m taking.” And she’s like, “Okay, what are you interested in? Maybe try this class, try that class.” And I did, and I found what I liked.

I feel pretty good with my progress and I think it’s a lot of it is due to the counselors as well because she was able to map out a good idea and kind of help prepare me.

I have like one counselor that’s really super positive. ... She maps out everything [and makes it] pretty easy for me, but she seems really upbeat and [has a] good memory, because she sees a lot of people, but she still remembers where I’m at and stuff.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FINDING THE RIGHT COUNSELOR

While participants overall had a very positive view of counseling at Cuesta, students nonetheless also indicated that finding the “right” counselor was critically important. Many found themselves wandering and off-track until they connected with an effective counselor and often expressed frustration at the time and money they wasted taking the wrong courses simply because they did not receive the guidance they needed from a counselor earlier in their educational experiences.

A number of students described time-consuming attempts to find a counselor with whom they could connect and develop an ongoing relationship because they trusted this counselor to provide accurate guidance. Four students explained:

[The college does] kind of make it difficult as far as getting in to see a counselor, and I heard that some of the counselors are better and know what they’re doing.

Scheduling my first counseling appointment was really difficult, just through the website, and just trying to find the right people. Trying to figure out the name of the counselor, what that title was that I was trying to search for. And so, I think it would have been really helpful to have like a sort of resource or a sort of place where someone could just go and have it all laid out.

The first [counselor] I waited to see, and it took like a 30 [to] 40-minute wait. And didn’t really feel too connected with that [person]. And then the second one—I loved her, and

now she's on sabbatical, and she's only coming in one day a week, and she's not taking appointments, so she only has two slots available. ... I just wanted to ... keep that connection with one person, and I feel I really haven't gotten that thus far.

Yeah, now I have to start my story all over again [to a new counselor]. ... I need to know what to do for fall, ... and for summer, because when you get towards the end [of your program of study], ... there isn't so many class options because it's a smaller school at times, you know? So it's like I don't want to have to wait two semesters [to take the classes I need], you know?

Participants further emphasized that receiving incorrect information, or trying to work with a counselor who was not well versed in the issues related to a student's specific goals or areas of interest, could be quite detrimental to their academic progress and/or success. Four students described:

I saw [one counselor] the first two times, and he didn't even like put my major as nursing, and I didn't know that I could do that myself. So when it came to registering for classes, I didn't have priority because nursing majors usually have second priority, so I had to register really late for all my classes. And now my schedule is kind of bad. But after that I knew to go to [a different counselor]. ... He's not the best for nursing majors.

Unfortunately, we have a handful of counselors here who have to manage hundreds of students with bunches of different majors. And none of them really specialize. So that makes things complicated, [and] then you have to start calling the counselors at the [university] campuses that you're applying to, and getting their input as well. And they're not flawless either, so you end up sometimes missing a thing or two that you thought you had already.

I could have gone to a different [counselor], but once you find the right counselor that actually knows who you are, and what you're going for, not just going through a bunch of different loops that this other person thinks you need to go through.

Counselors [came] to my high school to help ... pick my first classes, [and] everyone who went with their advice ... said that they got kind of screwed. Because they were like, "Oh, only take three classes. You're coming out of high school, get used to [college]." And then two of the classes I took didn't even end up helping, so that probably added an extra semester [of] time here. So that kind of sucked, and it was part of the free semester for local students. So I kind of burned my first semester along with not getting the classes I needed. So that was kind of brutal.

Focus group participants also noted how difficult it was to sort through conflicting information given by different counselors—a situation that many of them had encountered. One student described trying to figure out whose guidance to follow and the questions that he asked himself:

Should I go ask the dean? How do I know to trust this third person when I've been told by two other counselors [something entirely different]? ... I don't know who to believe anymore. And that wasn't to be like ornerly, I'm not trying to cause conflict. But I literally was like ..., "How do I get the right information?"

DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING COUNSELING

In addition to pointing out the ways in which negative counseling experiences have impacted them, focus group participants were also vociferous about the difficulties they had encountered simply trying to access counselors. 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 took place. Five students shared:

I don't think there's enough counselors to go around. Because it's like a 13,000-student enrollment and there's like a small [number] of counselors, ... But it's always jam-packed in there when people are trying to get their stuff figured out.

[The counseling office is] just always jam-packed. ... Like you always have to make an appointment, and like it's usually a week or two out, ... or a month sometimes, especially at the beginning of the semester or the end.

The most helpful counselor that I've had, after three [other] counselors, ... she's always just totally booked up. It's almost impossible to see her now.

The first time I tried going to see a counselor, I tried drop-in hours, and they were filled up, so I couldn't go. So I made an appointment that took two weeks—it was beginning of the semester [so] it takes a while.

I feel like maybe they're under-staffed. And under-informed in some fashion.

THE NEED TO VIEW THE WHOLE STUDENT

Students across the focus groups also pointed out the critical importance of counselors seeing the whole student, not just the logistical requirements 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 further expressed the sense that counselors did not always listen to them when it came to putting their educational plans in the context of their lives as a whole.

Three participants explained:

They didn't take [things like work or childcare responsibilities] into consideration.

I think there was a disconnect with the counselor as far as understanding what was my life schedule and my life responsibility. ... They did like a student ed plan, but they kind of stacked up my schedule to where I was [taking] more than 12 units. And that really didn't make a lot of sense to me, and ... at the time I felt overwhelmed. I felt like this is too much to take on. I'm a reentry student. I haven't been to school in over five years. As a single mom, it's just didn't make any sense to me, and I kind of tried to relay that to [my counselor]. And, you know, she just was like, "Oh, you can do [it]."

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," which are helpful. But I'm a single mom and [deal with issues like] time and transportation. ... I just want to take the classes that I need, and it seemed like the other counselors [would tell me], "Oh you need typing skills, you need this," but they're not really credited classes or, they're just to help you." And which is nice and all, but I needed someone to listen to me and understand what I was asking for.

Pillar 3 Themes: Help Students Stay on a Path

Focus group participants discussed a number of issues that relate to how Cuesta can most effectively assist students in staying on their chosen educational path. Key themes that emerged from these discussions included the difficulties that students faced in figuring out how long it would take them to achieve their goals; the need for better communication between the institution and the student population about what resources are available to support their success; the importance of each and every faculty member being able to use essential tools, specifically Canvas; obstacles that many students faced when trying to enroll in courses required for their programs of study in a timely fashion; and opportunities for Cuesta, and faculty in particular, to help cultivate student communities that would enable students to better draw on one another for support.

Difficulties in Assessing Time to Completion

A key aspect of Pillar 3 is students' ability to know where they stand in relation to completing their goals. Specifically, students want to understand from the beginning of their journey how long it will take them to reach their chosen outcomes. Several focus group participants noted the difficulties they had encountered in estimating their own timeline to completion. In the words of three students:

We know that [an] AA is supposed to take two years. But... I mean it's a "two-year program," quote, unquote. ... That's what they say, [and sometimes] you have nothing to judge that against. ... we don't have anything to gauge that against. So like if it takes me four years, am I doing horrible? Or am I like right on target?

There's people that have like two jobs or something, so they only can take one class per semester or two. So it's going to take them longer. ... So it just depends how [many

classes] you take—you could probably finish it sooner than two years if you just like take a whole load, but then you might end up crashing and not getting good grades.

I heard [a] student in my class [say], “I’m at 15 and a half units.” And then I’m like, “Oh yeah, you live at home with your parents. Okay.” Like if I lived at home with my parents, I might be able to accomplish that. ... But I do aim to someday be like that—if I could quit my job, I would totally love to just [focus on] school and bang it out as quick as possible. But that’s insane.

Need for Improved Communication about Resources

While focus group participants enthusiastically described the benefits of Cuesta’s supportive resources, they also emphasized that there were serious gaps when it came to the college effectively communicating with students about the availability of these resources. Many students noted that their lack of awareness about what assistance was available to them at the college resulted in unnecessarily prolonging their struggles and delayed their access to support that ultimately made a substantial contribution to their success. Other students talked about how their peers were being disadvantaged due to not knowing about certain resources.

Six students described:

The Student Success Center Lab is very useful for math and English—the only problem is I feel like the whole campus like doesn’t [know about it].

I only found out [about the Student Success Center Lab] because I had friends that were going there.

There’s some students that’d be like in the library or like just outside, like right here doing homework, and they’re like confused, and they don’t even know that ... they can get help in that lab.

I didn’t even know about the Promise Program [for a long time], and I wish I would have. ... I mean it’s cool that they’re paying me to go to school or whatever, but it would have been nice to know that I could [have held] off and saved [that money] for a more expensive school.

I work as a tutor, and I didn’t even know there’s a Student Success Center before I started working as a tutor. So I think if more people knew about the resources we had, or which programs or benefits they could apply for [that] would benefit them, if they knew, I think they’d take more advantage, better advantage of that.

[During my] first year, I wasn’t exactly aware of how many things that were in place like to help you advance further, like counseling. ... After the first year, I went to counseling, and that helped me out so much, develop a plan for how I was going to take these classes further down the road. ... I’m definitely doing a lot more counseling this year and stuff and it’s helping me out.

In fact, the focus groups themselves were quite informative for some students who had not previously been aware of a number of the resources that their peers discussed. As one student's comment effectively summarizes:

Those sound like some great services, and I don't think I've ever heard of them before. I don't know how you guys heard of them.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

This discussion about lack of awareness of critical resources led a number of focus group participants to reflect on the importance of Cuesta effectively reaching students to equip them with the information they need to make the most of what the college has to offer. During several focus groups, students began brainstorming about how the college could improve on this front. The diversity of students' suggestions highlights the fact that no one single approach will reach across the entire student population; rather, to connect with as many students as possible, the college likely needs to employ a range of communication strategies.

Four students offered their thoughts on improving resource awareness at Cuesta:

I think a good emphasis in the advertising [about available resources at the college] would be not just more advertising—like sending you more e-mails and putting more posters up—but good advertising. Like they [should] get [a] marketing agency from New York over here, and like really design some nice posters, like spread the word ... so that it will grow and like reach the whole college.

I think that [the college] should be advertising [its] services a lot more, because ... for a community college, like it has a lot of stuff. They have DSPS, they have the tutoring, they have all these different services [like] mental health counselors that are free. ... When I first came here, it was so hard to navigate the website, there was no one I was able to just talk to.

The more effective strategy [is putting up] big old signs.

At my old community college, they had someone come in from [a particular program or office] for like five minutes right before class started. And they would talk about [their services], and then they have your complete attention.

The Demand for All Faculty to Use Canvas Effectively and Consistently

As noted earlier, students expressed great appreciation for the opportunity Canvas provides to track their course grades throughout the semester and access course materials. However, this overall enthusiasm about Canvas was tempered by one consistent observation that not all faculty members were willing or able to use the new 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 faculty are fully trained to use it in their courses.

Seven students commented:

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

I have one professor right now where she doesn't know how to post the assignments, doesn't know how to put in the grades, and [that] makes [the class more] stressful because you're not even sure what you need to do for the week. And then, it's due. And it's like, "Wait, I never even saw [the assignment]."

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

My math teacher has sworn [Canvas] off and ... he refuses [to use it].

I find it hard when teachers don't like get onboard with Canvas. It becomes really hard throughout the semester. So I've had classes where you don't ever find out your grade 'til the very end.

[Instructors] should get better training [in using Canvas].

I would tell the school to get every teacher onboard with [Canvas].

The feelings that the majority of focus group participants expressed about Canvas are perhaps best encapsulated by this brief exchange between two students:

Student 1: Yeah, Canvas is very user friendly.

Student 2: If the teacher knows how to use it.

Difficulties Accessing Key Courses

One of the primary challenges that students who were near completion highlighted was accessing the courses, especially advanced classes, necessary to finish their degrees and/or requirements for transfer. This issue also emerged in other focus groups, but it was particularly salient and impactful for students who were close to the end of their educational experience at Cuesta. Four students described:

It seems like a lot of the courses that are being offered every semester ... are kind of going more toward the ADT, the guaranteed transfer degrees. And so 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] you know 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.

If [the classes you need] are offered, it's only one specific class and a specific time, and if that doesn't work for your schedule, it's a bummer. And like Spanish 4 is only offered

once a year, in the spring [on] Monday mornings. And it's like there's no other option. So that's kind of frustrating.

There was a class that Cal Poly would have really liked to see for the major I'm going for, and it seems that [the college hasn't] offered it in the last two years. ... I just don't know where that class went. And then there was another one that [Cal Poly] would have liked to have seen, that isn't offered this semester, and it's my last semester, and it didn't work out with my schedule the previous semester... . I mean, it'd be really nice if classes were offered more often.

[Course availability is] especially [important] with like two-part classes, like [an] A and B class where you need the A to move on. I can understand only having the A in the fall. But if you're trying to get it and get out of here, it's not offered in the spring and you need it. You have to wait a whole year like 'til fall again to take it, and then you have to take the B class in spring.

Desire for Faculty to Help Create Student Communities

Several students observed that the community college setting, as opposed to those of four-year colleges or universities, lack some of the components of student life that make it easier to develop meaningful or steady peer relationships. Two students explained:

Part of the problem is that people don't live here on the campus. And at universities people live on the campus. So it's easier to make friends because you're seeing the people who you are roommates with. And I feel like that was definitely something I have noticed compared to when I visit friends who go to bigger colleges.

In a four-year [college], where I see a lot of the people that graduated high school with me, ... they have sororities, they have clubs. Everyone is kind of in the same place. You have so many different resources to connect with people on the same path as you. But here, it's a little smaller, [and] everyone is so different age-wise, major-wise.

Given the unavailability of many of the informal settings that bring four-year college students together, like dormitories, numerous focus group participants reflected on opportunities for the college to step in and become more proactive in helping students connect to one another. Several participants felt that increasing the college's emphasis of and investment in clubs was a key way that Cuesta could help students develop the relationships with each other that would boost student success.

Five students described:

The clubs need to be really emphasized.

There is community here—not as much as anyone would like, but it does exist here, and I think [it's important to talk] about clubs. I don't think people take advantage of the clubs

here, because there's not that same benefit and funding pumped into them that you get at university.

I think a way of connecting students would be really nice, particularly students who have similar goals, maybe the same majors? Whether it's online, whether it's more like a club, doesn't really matter. I think one of the best ways, the easiest ways to get through college when you're struggling is with a support group. It is just the best way. And so when people are struggling with that, they're going to struggle in almost every single other place. Whether it's their classes, their grades, their job. So I think connecting students together would be best. And maybe being more vocal about the clubs.

I think something that could be more helpful to students would be having more clubs. Creating more places for students could interact. Meet with professionals or just to be involved in some sort of club. There's just not many options. I think that would be nice personally.

You have to like meet people like you with the same interests. ... I'm on the softball team here, and I feel very connected [through that] ..., but I didn't really meet anyone outside of that, you know? So I don't know, I think that's just the main issue is clubs.

At the same time, it is important to note that many students may not have sufficient free time to participate in clubs, and as such faculty have an important role to play in building a sense of community within the classroom itself. Indeed, participants highlighted the ways that the college could help students who were pursuing similar academic goals find and support one another. Several students who were enrolled in Cuesta nursing programs expressed appreciation for the structure of these programs that produced a greater sense of community and facilitated student relationship-building. Moreover, non-nursing students described feeling envious of the benefits produced by the cohort structure used in the college's nursing programs. As noted earlier, participants' observations about the ways in which programs of study could be utilized to bring students together and help them help each other is well-aligned with the Guided Pathways approach that Cuesta will be implementing.

Five students elaborated on why it makes sense to them to bring students together around their academic interests and programs of study:

I think once you kind of get into your program, like your technical program, you're with people that are ... on the same track, and you guys are going towards the same goal. Like I did the LVN Program here, and we're all together all the time. So it's like you bond so much with those people.

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.

I've taken CNA and phlebotomy classes, and those are ... six-hour classes [in which students] really work together and communicate and practice on each other. ... It's a lot easier to meet people through programs like that.

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?

If you meet someone [and] you are both like trying to do the [same] major, you're going to stay in touch. You're going to talk ... and get involved in [things together]—you're even probably going to talk to them once you transfer from Cuesta, because you guys are going the same route. And we don't have that here.

Pillar 4 Themes: Ensure That Students Are Learning

A number of themes that emerged across focus groups connect to Guided Pathways' Pillar 4, which focuses on making certain that all students are provided a robust and meaningful learning experience. Focus group participants discussed the role of academic support services at Cuesta; while many students offered positive feedback regarding academic assistance, a significant number also expressed a strong desire for the college to expand its tutoring services. In addition, a number of students (particularly those who had enrolled in distance education courses) emphasized the importance of faculty being able to use diverse and innovative pedagogical techniques that would meet the learning needs of as many students as possible.

Academic Assistance Services

Similar to the discussion regarding counseling, focus group participants expressed an overall positive feeling about the helpfulness of Cuesta's academic support services, including tutoring, the writing lab, and the math lab. At the same time, participants also pointed out ways in which these services could be improved. In particular, the desire for expanded tutoring services was most prominent in the conversation.

OVERALL HELPFULNESS OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Participants highlighted several components of Cuesta's suite of academic support services as extremely helpful. Three students described:

[I really like] the fact that there's like an entire floor of the library just dedicated to like math tutoring.

The writing lab ... just helps because I can take like an essay before I turn it in and have someone proofread it and like get like hands-on [advice on] how to better structure a sentence, just because like from my background, like coming from high school, they didn't really teach me shit.

A lot of classes also have embedded tutors, which is really nice—you just go individually to them and just see them for the specific class, and they're usually there for your entire class, which is fantastic. I really like having them embedded, especially for like chemistry, calculus, physics, and all those science classes... . So it really does help a lot to have the tutoring and the extra help.

DESIRE FOR EXPANDED TUTORING SERVICES

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 available, especially to meet the needs of students not able to attend during “traditional” tutoring hours, while other courses/subjects currently did not have any associated tutors at all. Five students shared:

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.”

I was kind of wishing there was either another tutor in the anatomy lab or [the current tutors] had more time there.

Last semester, I went to the Spanish tutor here, which was really helpful, but one thing she was saying was that she was the only one at Cuesta that did Spanish tutoring. So she felt pretty overwhelmed by that.

I wish that they had dedicated tutors for things like music theory, the same way that they have for math and stuff like that. I mean I understand teaching someone how to play an instrument is a little bit more complicated, and they have a class for that. But like theory is like a really big part of music, and I feel there should be more support for people who want to learn theory in college.

[For Math 128], we have to go to like two very specific tutors, ... but their hours are like after I get out of class, [which is when] I go straight to work. ... So we definitely need more tutors for [Math] 128.

The Importance of Using Diverse, Innovative, and Effective Pedagogical Strategies

Lastly, a number of students discussed the innovative instructional strategies employed by many faculty members in their online courses. Focus group participants 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. While this topic was primarily discussed among distance education students, their feedback about the impact of instructors' use of diverse pedagogical techniques is important to consider for all types of courses.

Three students described:

The teacher, he would go back and edit ... the lectures to make them better. ... If your teacher's normally lecturing, he might forget something that's useful, [but] if it's online, he can just edit what he's posted.

I really like when the instructor records their lecture with a PowerPoint because ... I like to slow it down and pause or like take breaks. Where[as] here if I'm in a lecture and we're following a PowerPoint and it's like a three-hour lecture and people start asking questions, and it's like I'm out at that point. ... It would be so nice ... not have to come in for lecture and maybe come in for like discussion or exercise or group activity or something like that versus having to sit through a lecture for that long where I could just do it at home.

Some of the assignments when they post and they're so much going on, especially if you have more than one online class, it probably gets lost in the shuffle. But I have one teacher that will like send everyone a message on email and be like, "Oh, just [to] let you guys know, ... the quiz or the test [is coming up]." So that's like an extra heads-up I guess.

Themes Unique to Particular Student Groups

In addition to themes that emerged across the diverse set of focus groups that were conducted, a number of issues were identified that were specific to particular student groups. In this section, key themes that reflect the experiences of students at Cuesta's North County Campus, those pursuing their education through online courses, students who were placed on academic probation, students enrolled in the college's noncredit English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, students in basic skills math courses, and Latino students are identified and explored.

North County Campus Students

North County Campus (North Campus) students both offered positive feedback about studying at Cuesta's North Campus and identified ways in which their educational experience could be improved. In particular, students in this focus group highlighted the benefits associated with being on a smaller campus, but also felt they had fewer opportunities than students on the San Luis Obispo campus. These students also noted their desire for Cuesta to help North County students feel more connected with one another and to the college

Advantages of a Small Campus

A number of focus group participants expressed appreciation for the atmosphere of the North Campus, which they described as not only smaller than the college's primary site, the San Luis Obispo (SLO) Campus, but also more intimate and relaxed. Participants also observed that the smaller student population allowed both students and faculty to get to know each other more easily.

Three students shared:

This campus is smaller, so it's a little more intimate versus the [SLO Campus], where it's huge, so there's always people there.

Compared to SLO, I'd say [this campus is] a lot more laid-back. Slower pace[d]. SLO feels like it's a bit more of a frenzy, there's a lot more going on. There isn't as much social events or you know freebies being passed out here. But most people you talk to, you'll be in the same classes as them, [and] if you take a few semesters here, you start to know a lot of people. Most people ... are generally helpful.

Faculty here, they're good with remembering everybody... in the Admissions Office, they know everybody that goes in there.

Desire to Enhance Student Life at the North Campus

At the same time, focus group participants felt that given the larger size of SLO, the college had invested more time and resources into creating opportunities for students to connect with one another outside of the classroom. A number of participants expressed the desire for spaces and activities that would promote student life at the North Campus, a goal that some hoped the new building on campus would achieve. Participants explained:

I feel that because ... there are so many students at SLO, [the college is] more on it in SLO I don't want to say they don't care here more than there, but I heard that there is like better technology, [and] they even got like a game area, I think.

Maybe let's get a foosball table going on. ... A little game room.

A social lounge would be actually nice—not like something you're required to go to because not everyone is going to do it, but just ... somewhere to chill and talk, and then they'll be more in school instead of like just trying to leave [right after class].

A cafeteria would work too.

We still don't have all the nice stuff that [is available at SLO] ..., like events and [people] involved with their student government... . It's not that we don't have it, it's that it's kind of hard for students to get involved or know about what's going on on the campus, especially the younger ones and maybe some older ones. So this campus kind of lacks that communication, because we're far away and, again, we're small. And so it's kind of ... sad here versus over there [at SLO].

Distance Education Students

Students in the distance education focus group spoke thoughtfully about the positive and negative aspects of pursuing their educational goals in an entirely (or primarily) online format. Participants emphasized the value of having course resources, such as lecture videos and notes, continually available to them, and they also praised the clear expectations articulated for each

course, their ability to proceed through the course at their own pace, and the effective pedagogical techniques employed by instructors. However, participants also identified several challenges related to distance education, including technological obstacles and a confusing waitlist process for online courses.

Positive Aspects of Online Courses

Among these focus group participants, several features unique to the distance education experience were identified as advantageous and beneficial to their success as students.

CONTINUOUS AVAILABILITY OF COURSE RESOURCES

A number of distance education students cited the ongoing availability of course resources, such as lectures, videos, and notes, as valuable assets that are not usually available to them in traditional face-to-face courses. Three students shared:

Usually, my [face-to-face] teachers just lecture and kind of expect you to have it memorized instantly, whereas online teachers have [their] lectures posted [so I can look at them at any time].

I have like a computer applications class, so like the teacher will post like a video of her doing the assignment, ... and like talking through it and stuff. ... That's like the "lecture." But if it was an in-person [class], we wouldn't get that, so like we couldn't go back and go, "Oh, wait. I missed this," and then go back [and] watch the video again.

The [online] class was actually a lot easier because all the teacher's notes were posted [on the course site]. And you could just listen to his lecture again and again if you wanted to catch everything that you might have normally missed.

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Students also observed that their online course instructors provided clearer expectations at the outset than they had experienced in their face-to-face classes. Focus group participants described how much they appreciated having key information about the class given to them upfront, such as the amount of time they would need to invest in order to pass the class successfully. Four students articulated:

I think that the expectations are very clear [in online classes] ... it is like, "This is what you need to do. Here's when it's due. Here's like the lecture notes. Here's the video."

[The course website will] say like in bold letters like, "Please read this to know what you're getting yourself into."

I really like those welcome letters [from online instructors] because it said, "You're going to spend 8-12 hours on this class every week." That's what it said on all my welcome letters.

When you're signing up, ... [the class] actually has ... their syllabus [posted], and there's a welcome letter like telling you what to expect. So you can almost read like their syllabus before the course starts, which is kind of cool.

ABILITY TO PROGRESS AT ONE'S OWN PACE

Many distance education students further highlighted the benefits of being able to learn at their own pace. Some students described themselves as frequently being ahead of the rest of the class, while others identified themselves as slower learners, but they all agreed that the opportunity that online courses provide for students to customize the learning experience based on their own ideal pace of study was an important benefit.

Three students explained:

I also found that sometimes for [face-to-face] classes I'll be sitting in there and ... it just seems like the class is going on and on and I might already know the information. So for someone that just gets the information a lot faster than other students, [online courses] can speed up how much time you put into a class.

I'm a slower learner. ... I have a learning disability, and I like that ... I can take as long as I need to, to get information. ... I can usually figure it out on my own, ... [but with online classes], I feel like I have a lot more time.

I am kind of a slower learner, [and] I actually prefer online [classes] anyway... . I just love the flexibility of online [learning] ... and the fact that I could do it at my own pace, which has worked out really well for me.

Challenges of Distance Education

Alongside the numerous benefits to distance education described by focus group participants are also several drawbacks. Specifically, students described running into technological obstacles, such as not having the software or applications necessary to complete the required coursework. In addition, distance education students identified Cuesta's confusing waitlist process for online classes as problematic.

TECHNOLOGICAL OBSTACLES

One of the primary difficulties identified by distance education students was the necessity of having specific software or computer applications in order to function effectively in some online courses. For some students, not having the right computer set-up at home meant they had to use campus computers to do their coursework, a situation that defeated some of the purpose of taking an online class in the first place.

Three students described some of the technological obstacles they had encountered:

I have a Mac, and then all [of the] computer programs that we're learning like Word and Excel and all that [are] designed for a PC. So a lot of my homework I would have to do

[on campus], and I didn't realize that, and no one told me that. So I'm taking online classes, but the whole point of was it for me to do it at home, [and] then I had to do [all the work] here.

I'm not going to pay \$500 to buy those programs ... on my [own] Mac laptop, so I have to do [all the work] here, which is fine, but ... then it takes hours.

I bought that application and it has all those programs, but it doesn't have access [to what I need], and [there's also] a database that you have to know. Mac doesn't have databases. So then I was like, "What? Are you kidding me?" ... So every single step is what you do on the computer, ... [and] you're trying to do [your work] on the Mac, but the [text]book is written for the PC. ... It is the same, but it's not, and ... I can troubleshoot and like navigate around the program to find [what I need], but I couldn't always. So that ... was like really frustrating for me.

CONFUSING WAITLIST PROCESS

Distance education students face unique challenges when it comes to navigating the waitlist process since they cannot simply "crash" the course on the first day as they can in a face-to-face course. Several students discussed the extra level of effort required of them to get into an online class after being waitlisted and additional bureaucratic hurdles they had experienced.

Five students described:

If you're waitlisted on an online course, this could be a little more of a hassle because you can't actually [just] show up. You have to actually contact the instructor ... and try to get into that course.

[If you are waitlisted], you have to really, really get on it and try to get to the teacher. ... It's like you just have to cyberstalk them [to get into the class].

I've never been contacted [after being waitlisted with anything] saying like, "Hey, your spot's open," or something after the course has started. ... And so yeah, you have to ... be really proactive with contacting the instructor.

Sometimes [in face-to-face courses] students don't show up for [the] first day of [class], and then they'll give ... that spot away. But that's not as clear in online courses.

[With] in-person classes, it's kind of different. They don't just like drop you unless you don't show [up on] the first day. But then usually [in] online courses, you're in one week, [and] if you haven't done the first assignment, then you're going to [get dropped]. So like just the requirements of like whether you're going to stay in the class are a little different.

Students on Academic Probation

During the focus group with students on academic probation, participants spoke about how they had ended up struggling academically, with many attributing their difficulties to their own lack of motivation or focus. They also conducted an in-depth discussion of how they were seeking to improve their academic status, citing strategies that included a shift in their mindset and reaching out for help. Students further expressed a desire for the college to be more proactive in ensuring that students, particularly those who are academically vulnerable, receive the support and guidance they needed to succeed.

Factors Contributing to Academic Probationary Status

In reflecting on how they had come to be placed on academic probation, several students pointed to internal causes, citing a lack of motivation, clarity, and/or commitment. Three students explained:

I just had a lack of motivation, but this year I'm actually paying for [my classes myself], and I'm doing like so much better.

I think [I did poorly in my classes] just because I wasn't taking it as serious[ly] [as I needed to].

I just really didn't have a set idea of what I wanted my major to be, so when I kind of got into my classes last semester, I was just not feeling it, [which] made me work less hard.

How Students on Probation Are Planning to Succeed

Many focus group participants had already put substantial thought into how they were going to improve their academic standing. Just as a number of students saw their own flawed mindset as a key cause of their difficulties, several had honed in on internal adjustments as critical to improving academic outcomes. Additionally, several students cited the importance of asking for help—through tutoring, study groups, or contact with instructors—as an essential component of their future success.

Four students articulated:

I just [started taking my schoolwork] more serious[ly]. ... I'm getting tutoring if I need help on like my sciences. I'm not letting myself fall behind—I go to my physiology study groups all the time now to make sure [I] stay ahead. I'm just really trying to learn from how bad it went in chemistry, which I ended up retaking and passing.

[It's tough] juggling work and school. It's kind of hard to study for something ...it's really hard to find time. You just have to really keep organized, like, "Oh, I'm going to study for this test on this day in advance," instead of procrastinating, which was what I was also doing like last year, and procrastinating for like everything. ... This year, it's so much

better not doing that and doing something way ahead of time then not having to worry about it.

I kind of just learned to stay focused, at least try to stay focused.

I just go over to the ... little study group, ... and I go to that and ask them [my] question, and they actually hands-on show you exactly [what to do] instead of generalizing it in front of the class ... and you not understanding. ... It just helps overall understanding, like I always kind of felt like they just had like over 100 students so they don't really have time to like explain processes to you, but it's been like the opposite, where they like really want you to actually know the information and are more than willing to help you [and] make sure you know it, or send you in a direction to help [find] additional information if you don't know it, and I think it's just made a huge difference.

Desire for More Proactive Assistance

While focus group participants were quite willing to take responsibility for their own roles in their academic challenges, they also expressed a desire for the college to more proactively engage students, especially those who are on the verge of academic probation or are trying to climb out of it. Participants noted that counselors, as well as instructional faculty could intervene early with struggling students and perhaps help them avoid the negative impacts of ending up on academic probation.

ENSURING PROBATIONARY STUDENTS CONNECT WITH COUNSELORS

Several focus group participants thought that mandatory counseling appointments could be helpful to keeping students more on track to academic success, both in terms of developing strategies that would improve students' outcomes and simply letting those students know that someone was aware of and cared about their difficulties.

Two students explored this idea:

I think [the college recommends you meet with a counselor in] the e-mail [students are sent], but they say it's optional. ... I don't think it's like, "Okay, this is your scheduled time. Please call if you need to change it, but we need to meet with you." I think that would be a great idea. ... Maybe I should have sat down with the counselor to just be like, "Are you all right? You know, your transcript really did drop as of recently. ... Are you doing too much? Maybe ... let's review the class courses you intend on taking next semester," and [the counselor would] let me let you know that this class is very vigorous, [for example].

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.

INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY REACHING OUT TO STRUGGLING STUDENTS

Focus group participants also encouraged instructional faculty to seek out students who were having a hard time in their classes rather than relying on students, who might be intimidated, to ask for help. Again, these interactions were framed as beneficial on two fronts: first, by creating an opportunity to identify obstacles and figure out how to address them, and second, by communicating to students that someone cares about them and wants them to succeed.

Three students explained:

I mean if maybe a student is struggling in a class it sometimes doesn't come out of the student to say, "Hey, what could I be doing better?" ... I guess it would kind of help for those students maybe to have like the teacher come up and just say, "Hey, have you considered going to my study group or anything," or "If you want, I can help you through some of these problems after the class ends" or something like that. ... Some kids ... might be kind of intimidated by ... asking the teacher what I can be doing to get out of what grade I have right now and get a better grade.

Probably [it would be helpful] if [instructors] could do like quarterly reports of your academic progress just so you know. ... I feel like [it would have helped] if I knew I wasn't doing well, like when I took chem[istry], if ... my teacher was like, "Hey, this is where you're at, likely you're probably not going to pass, here's your options, so drop, get out." But I just kind of just sat quietly. I'm sure [the instructor is] like aware of the kids who aren't doing well.

There isn't like real outreach from your teachers sometimes when you're not doing well, but ... [maybe it would help] if you'd get like an email[telling you that] drop times are coming soon, or this is coming soon, so check where you're at [and] make an initiative to do something about it.

ADJUSTING TEACHING STYLES TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS

Lastly, students from the academic probation focus group described 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.

Three participants described:

Some of my teachers, they just take pictures of the textbook literally and word for word. So they'll have you read the textbook first, these exact same things, and then [during] that class period, they'll just go over what you read, and it's like word for word, and I'm not really learning anything, it's not interesting—it's sort of a waste of time.

I think if teachers could make like additional things [and] put them on Canvas, 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.

Maybe teachers could take more responsibility [sometimes] instead of blaming the students for lack of good grades. Like we're always consistently getting 70s; I think our class average is like a 76 or a 77, and [the instructor is] always on us, like, "You guys need to be doing this or that." But it's obviously at this point, maybe we're struggling with the way the information is coming to us.

English as a Second Language Students

The focus group comprising students in Cuesta's noncredit advanced ESL course yielded several important themes with respect to participants' reasons for enrolling in ESL courses. In addition, a number of ESL students discussed their need for reliable access to specialized counselors who are attuned to their unique experiences as students and can aid them in figuring out next steps once the ESL course sequence has been completed.

Reasons for Enrolling

Focus group participants cited two interrelated reasons for enrolling in ESL courses. First, students discussed their desire to improve their English skills in order to enhance their ability to communicate in order to equip them better to succeed in a variety of settings, such as in future classes, in the professional world, and in their social lives. Five students described:

I decided to take this class to improve my English, but now that I'm learning a little bit more, I see that I can take a few regular classes.

I want to improve my English because before I came to Cuesta, my English is kind of confused when I spoke before. Like past tense and [the] future [tense]—it's confused. So after two years that I took the class, here [my English skills] improved a lot.

So my goal is to improve my English and then to use it in the real world. To be able to communicate in the correct [way], you know?

I'm taking this class because I want to improve my skills in English speaking and writing and have a better communication with other people. And I'm thinking about next to learn more about business.

I'm from Venezuela; I came here three years ago. I'm taking this class because I need to improve my English, and for communicate with my family [who] ... all speak English, but no Spanish.

Second, participants made an explicit connection between taking ESL courses and improving their career opportunities. Several students noted that while they already had advanced

degrees from their home countries, they nonetheless still had to secure basic credentials in the U.S., a situation they found frustrating. Two students explained:

I'm taking ESL program because I want to improve my English, and later on in the future I can take the career class.

We came from another country, and some of us already have degree[s]. And I went to counselor to ask them if I can transfer [my degree] from my country to here, and [I was told that] some college or university able to do it, but some did not.

ESL Students' Unique Counseling Needs

While many ESL students described a clear understanding of how improving their English language skills could help improve their academic and career experiences, students in this focus group also discussed the importance of having access to counselors who understood their particular needs, such as the nuances of what credentials from other countries would be accepted by both Cuesta and potential transfer schools, and could guide them in identifying and pursuing their educational goals. While participants were enthused about the introduction of an ESL-specific counselor to the institution, they also described numerous frustrating experiences with counselors, which indicates more needs to be done to ensure that these students get timely and proper guidance.

One student described:

There's one special counselor, [and people] refer you to that one, and when I went, when I ... asked questions, she ... goes, "Okay you might want to see this paper and see the other paper." ... [I said], "Okay, but this is what I want to do. Can you help me?" [The counselor says], ... "Well, we have some information, [but] we don't have all the information that you want." So ... why am I seeing a counselor then, if he or she is not going to help me?

Another student added:

[It] happened to me the same. I went to see the counselor, and I talk to her about ... what I wanted to do and the questions that I had, and she wasn't quite clear on her answers—she was like, "Well, I think so. I'm not sure about that." And I ... just [kept] asking, and I wouldn't get a straight answer of what I wanted it. I wanted to ask like [about] different careers, ... and she wasn't quite helpful to me either.

Basic Skills Math Students

Three main themes emerged from the focus groups with students taking basic skills math courses. First, basic skills math students offered extensive positive feedback about the resources available to them for academic assistance, such as the math lab. Second, re-entry students described a perhaps surprisingly consistent trend of enrolling in math courses that

were below the level into which they were officially placed. Finally, students shared their uncertainty about the effectiveness of the college's math boot camp, Quickstart.

Appreciation for Math Resources

Focus group participants expressed enthusiasm about the effectiveness of math resources, especially the math lab. Three students explained why the math lab was so critical to their success:

I mean there is the math lab, where you have a bunch of tutors there that you can kind of just sit there and wait for somebody to help you. ... And like that really helps you a lot because you're there for homework between school and work and you need to get it done.

Well math is work for me. I mean I get out of it what I put into it. And if I didn't have things like the math lab that has the floating tutors, I would have been done a long time ago. I would have chucked it. It would have been one of those things I wish I would have been able to do. But now I'm succeeding. And so it's actually bolstering me and what I intend to do with my career path.

Math lab is great [I love] the variety of tutors that are there for different learning styles, because there's a couple tutors that they're really good but they just talk too fast for me.

Gap between Placement and Enrollment

A number of re-entry students had a similar story about the gap between the level of math class indicated by the college's assessment and placement processes and the course level into which they chose to enroll. Many of these students expressed a desire to play it safe in light of uncertainty around whether assessment tests accurately reflected how much math they really understood and the level at which they were likely to succeed.

Three students elaborated:

When I got my [assessment test] results, I actually didn't go with what they said. [Instead] I went down [one level] because I was a reentry student, and I just kind of knew I had been out of math for so long, [so] I didn't want to jump right into [Math] 127. ... Even taking the assessment, ... it was kind of multiple choice, so it's easier to deduce the right answer. And then [the assessments are] not like [the tests] in most math classes—they're not checking for step work, they're just checking for an answer. So I could get to an answer, but not really know how or why I got there. ... And that for me was the real reason why I was like, "I don't feel comfortable with going into this class."

[College staff] were giving me stuff to be like, "Okay, you can like study for [the assessment test] to get like a high score." And when I took [the test], ... like the guy there was like, "You didn't do too bad. ... If you study, you can retake it." ... But I was like, "You

know what? I think I'm just going to go ahead and go with Math 7," because ... I wanted to get that really good foundation to figure out like all the basics of math and master that before I like go onto anything higher. It's just for the betterment of myself.

So I actually assessed into [Math] 123 and just felt like didn't have enough of a foundation to go into that class. So I chose to start at [Math] 7.

Skepticism about Quickstart

A number of students questioned the effectiveness of Quickstart, Cuesta's math "boot camp," an intensive two-week program in which students could participate to refresh their math skills and then take (or re-take) math placement tests. Focus group participants who had worked as tutors leading these math boot camps and others who had participated expressed skepticism about whether this type of program was truly helpful.

One tutor observed:

[The way the process is] designed right now is you assess, and then if you don't like where you assess, you go through this two week "boot camp," where it's just us tutors [providing the instruction]. So first off, faculty is not involved, so we [tutors] only know what we know and what we've seen and what we've been taught. And then they give you the opportunity at the end of those two weeks to reassess. ... I don't think that's helpful, because then I think someone can come in there, and maybe test [into Math] 123. [Then] we put them through this boot camp, we teach them so much information, just enough for them to reassess [into Math] 127. And we've set them up for more harm.

Other students who had participated in the boot camp offered a similar assessment of the potential downside to the approach:

[The boot camp] is supporting a cramming style, and you're trying to shove down 18 weeks of material in two weeks.

It's advertised as like, "You don't like where you assessed? Come to the student boot camp, we'll teach you what you need to know you can reassess again and assess higher."

The sense of [the boot camp] is that it's going to teach you real quick.

Latino Students

Although Cuesta College is officially designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), focus group participants did not have a lot to say about experiences at Cuesta specific to being a Latino student. This limited discussion in and of itself suggests the lack of a strong Latino presence or community on campus. Themes that did emerge on the topic of the Latino student experience focused on students' desire for more representation among Cuesta faculty and staff as well as additional opportunities to strengthen Latino identity at the college.

With respect to Latino representation among college personnel, one student summarized:

I would say that there's a few departments that could use a little bit more diversity.

Another student commented on the absence of a strong Latino student community at Cuesta:

They have a few clubs for Latinos, but it's not very clear what they do, or why.

A third student noted a lack of Latino-focused resources at the college and described being sent to DSPS simply because she did not speak English as a first language:

I feel ... they don't have too much resources for the Latina [student here]. ... Spanish is my first language, and I have to go to the DSPS program to get help. I don't have any disability, and just because Spanish is my first language, I have to get DSPS. I feel like, "What??"

Implications and Recommendations

This section draws from the focus group findings and considers them in light of Guided Pathways in order to identify the key implications of this project. These implications are then translated into 14 recommendations that are designed to help the college facilitate the success of all students and integrate student voices into institutional decision-making processes and the development of strategies to improve student outcomes.

Strengthening the Student Community

Recommendation 1: Create opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom for students to connect with peers who have similar academic interests and/or career goals.

Throughout the focus groups, students noted that their peers were a tremendous source of support and called on Cuesta College to help them make connections with one another that would support their success. Having a robust network of support can greatly enhance students' ability to stay on their educational path (Guided Pathway Pillar 3), and there are a range of ways that the college can contribute to the development of strong student communities. Many students expressed a desire to meet others with similar interests and goals, suggesting that they would greatly benefit from being able to connect with other students through clubs or other college-sponsored activities based on programs of study or even meta-majors that group together similar academic departments. Furthermore, a number of students currently enrolled in Cuesta's nursing programs cited the advantages of the cohort model, and a number of non-nursing students expressed a desire to forge the same kind of ongoing connections with other students who were traveling the same educational path.

In addition to the development of more cohort-based academic programs or clubs based on students' programs of study, there are numerous opportunities for faculty members to foster a sense of community at the micro-level. Student relationships can develop in the classroom when faculty use icebreakers that let students get to know one another better, let students

work and study in groups, and/or use platforms like Canvas to further encourage connections between students.

Recommendation 2: Expand activities and events that promote student life at the North County Campus.

Students enrolled in courses or programs at the North County Campus are in particular need of activities and events that promote student life and foster a sense of community. Cuesta is an institution that is geographically isolated, and students at the smaller North County Campus perhaps sense this isolation most acutely. By investing additional resources into clubs, sporting events, and/or social activities that draw North Campus students together, the college will help ensure that all its students reap the maximum benefit from the support of their peers and develop a sense of ongoing connection to the institution that together facilitate persistence (Pillar 3) and enhances learning (Pillar 4).

Recommendation 3: Develop a communications strategy that uses multiple modes to inform students about community- and connection-building opportunities and encourage their participation.

Students across a number of focus groups lamented the communication disconnect between Cuesta College and its students, a critical gap that often left students without the information they needed to access resources that would support their academic success. Focus group participants offered a wide range of suggestions regarding how the college could better inform its students about the programs, services, and activities that were available to them, and in doing so highlighted two important insights: first, that an effective communication strategy cannot be one-size-fits-all, but rather must use a variety of modes in order to reach a substantial portion of Cuesta students, and second, that students themselves are perhaps best positioned to inform the college about how to effectively reach them.

Cuesta could greatly benefit from conducting further research among students to better understand the most effective ways to communicate with the student body and determine what combination of technology-based tools, existing college systems and structures, and new strategies and activities can most effectively ensure clear and effective information-sharing with the student body. Developing a multi-faceted communications strategy that is deeply informed by student perspectives, Cuesta will be able to better ensure that students are making the most of all the college has to offer when it comes to helping them understand their options (Pillar 1), identify their goals (Pillar 2), effectively and efficiently pursue those goals (Pillar 3), and learn as much as possible in the process (Pillar 4).

Supporting Students Throughout Their Journey

Recommendation 4: Create counseling systems/structures to better ensure that students connect early on with counselors who can help students get on the path to their chosen program of study.

Cuesta College students were highly enthusiastic on the whole about the college's counseling services, with many noting the essential roles counselors played in their educational journeys. Indeed, feedback from Cuesta students, supported by a substantial body of research, makes clear that most students need counselors to successfully get on an educational path (Pillar 2). Those students who did not know or were not able to connect with a counselor as early as possible after enrollment often wasted significant time and resources in classes that did not get them any closer to their long-term goals. As such, it is important that Cuesta's counseling systems and structures both clearly communicate to students the benefits of working with a counselor and enable those students to access well-informed counselors as early as possible on their education path.

Recommendation 5: Equip and encourage counselors to take the “whole student” into account when helping students develop educational plans and make decisions about their academic path.

Community college students often lead complicated and difficult lives. Financial pressure is a serious issue for a great many students, and a large percentage struggle to balance the responsibilities of work and family with their desire to earn postsecondary credentials. It is thus particularly important for community college counselors to listen to students' voices and when helping students identify their goals as well as map out a path to achieving those goals, take into account the full picture of their lives. Students whose educational plans are developed in the context of their finances, families, health, and other critical factors are likely to have a greater chance at successfully following and completing those plans (Pillar 3). Cuesta College can facilitate this “whole student” approach by letting counselors know that understanding the individual context in which each student operates is an essential component of doing their jobs effectively. In addition, the college could provide training and resources that equip counselors to understand as much as possible where their students are coming from and how to customize education planning to the unique needs of each student.

Recommendation 6: Enable and encourage both counseling and instructional faculty to identify students who are struggling and intervene as early and as effectively as possible.

Much as focus group participants emphasized the benefits of engaging with a counselor early in their educational journeys, they further observed that early intervention was critical to overcoming their academic difficulties. Platforms such as Canvas present opportunities for faculty to more easily monitor students' progress and, if necessary, their struggles as well. Counselors are able to alert students when they might be headed toward academic probation, a potentially major setback. The sooner instructors and counselors can alert students to the fact that they are drifting off-track—either separately or in coordination with one another—the sooner those students can get back on-track (Pillar 3).

Recommendation 7: Increase the number of counselors who are equipped to address the specific needs of noncredit ESL students.

The focus group conducted with noncredit ESL students at Cuesta revealed that they face a number of issues and obstacles that are unique to this population. While the college has

already taken a positive step by designating a specialized ESL counselor, student feedback made clear that a strong need still exists for more counselors equipped with the expertise necessary to advise and guide ESL students as they seek to understand what paths are available to them given their particular circumstances (Pillar 1) and determine educational goals beyond completion of the noncredit ESL sequence (Pillar 2).

Recommendation 8: Increase students' exposure to career- and industry-related opportunities early and throughout their educational journey.

In several of the focus groups, particularly the one held with students who had already earned at least 45 credits (and thus were either nearing completion or had already achieved it), students expressed a strong desire for the college to help them connect their educational experiences to career pathways. Moreover, students highlighted the powerful role that faculty can play in helping them make this connection by bringing industry speakers to the classroom, offering expertise from their own experiences in a particular field, helping or even just encouraging students to find internship opportunities, and finding other ways to build a career perspective into the curriculum. Finding ways to increase students' exposure to industries that may be of interest to them is an important part of helping students get on an educational path (Pillar 2) and also can deeply enhance the learning experience (Pillar 4) by explicitly connecting what happens in the classroom to the passions and ambitions that inspire many students to attend community college in the first place.

Recommendation 9: Examine enrollment management strategies and course scheduling approaches to better ensure that students are able to access the courses they need, particularly as they near completion.

The limited availability of courses required for students' programs of study presents a major obstacle for students seeking to earn a credential or transfer to a four-year university in a timely and cost-effective manner. Focus group participants described the ways in which the lack of course availability posed a serious threat to the achievement of their educational goals; if even one course in a sequence is unavailable for a semester or a year, a student's entire educational path may be derailed. As such, it is critical that Cuesta examine its enrollment management efforts, perhaps using students' educational plans to predict which courses need to be offered when, and ensure that students have as many options as possible to enroll in the courses needed to complete their programs of study (Pillar 3).

Recommendation 10: Equip and expect faculty to utilize a variety of teaching styles in order to maximize learning among Cuesta's diverse student population.

One of the topics that focus group participants discussed most enthusiastically was the use of multiple pedagogical styles by some instructors of online courses. Students articulated how incredibly helpful it was when faculty taught in a way that, for example, reached both visual and auditory learners, or offered opportunities for students to work at their own pace. This powerful, positive response highlights the need for a multi-pronged instructional approach to be used not only in a handful of online courses, but in classrooms (or online spaces) throughout Cuesta College. Cuesta students across focus groups consistently spoke highly of the quality of

the faculty at the institution; this appreciation from students reflects not just that the college is doing well on this front, but also that it has the power to do so much more. By expecting faculty to broaden their pedagogical approaches and integrate innovative, creative strategies into each and every classroom, Cuesta can help ensure that its students get the most robust learning experience possible (Pillar 4) from the institution's highly qualified team of instructors.

Increasing Students' Awareness of Resources

Recommendation 11: Using a wide range of modes and strategies, develop a resource communications plan that informs students early and often about college resources that are critical to their success.

Many focus group participants offered positive feedback about the resources at Cuesta College—those they knew about. Too often, students described stumbling upon important services or supports by accident, or discovering an extremely helpful resource when they were already years into their educational journey. In order to make sure students are as well-informed as possible about where and how to seek resources that will support success and learning (Pillars 3 and 4), the college needs a resource communications plan that takes into account the variety of ways in which students seek information.

As with many of these recommendations, faculty can likely play a critical role in more effectively disseminating information to students about resource availability, such as by promoting certain programs or services in the classroom, offering extra credit or other incentives for students to seek out resources and report back to their peers, or allowing representatives from the college's support services to visit their classrooms. Students themselves are also likely to be a powerful source of guidance on this topic, as they can offer pragmatic feedback about how they are most likely to both find and share information about institutional resources. Not only do students need to know more about what the college has to offer, but they need to be made aware of these resources as early as possible. Furthermore, the information needs to be provided to them in a way that allows students to easily sort through their options and match themselves with the resources they need.

Improving Technology-Based Resources and Faculty Competency and Usage

Recommendation 12: Re-examine current technologies from the student perspective in order to identify opportunities to reduce confusion and increase ease-of-use with respect to technology-based tools, namely the website and MyCuesta.

Focus group participants were adamant that a number of the college's online tools, particularly the college website and MyCuesta, are extremely confusing and difficult to navigate. Even the tech-savvy students at New Tech High School cited how much trouble they had making use of these systems. As such, it is important that Cuesta College examine the institution's website, MyCuesta, as well as other online systems for application and course enrollment, from the user

perspective. Just as students themselves are well-positioned to advise the college on communication strategies, student voices are critically important to updating and streamlining online tools and systems so they facilitate, rather than impede, the educational experience.

Recommendation 13: Provide additional training and other support for faculty to ensure that each and every one is able to effectively and robustly use Canvas.

Focus group participants were almost unanimous in their praise of Canvas, which they cited as an important tool that allowed them to keep track of assignments and upcoming exams, monitor their grades in real time, access course materials, and communicate easily with both instructors and classmates. However, students also made clear that a number of Cuesta faculty members were either unwilling or unable to use Canvas, let alone make the most of it as a tool that provides students with critical information about their progress (Pillar 3). It is essential that the college ensure that all faculty members are equipped to use Canvas and maximize its benefits by providing both training and ongoing technical support to instructors. Moreover, the college must clearly communicate to faculty how their use of Canvas contributes to student success, hopefully motivating them to use Canvas in all of their courses.

Creating a Culture of Continual Learning

Recommendation 14: Create ongoing opportunities to gather student feedback on their experiences at Cuesta and reflect on that feedback to inform the college's Guided Pathways design and implementation efforts.

Student voice is a key element within Guided Pathways in order to ensure that design and implementation efforts are being informed by the student perspective. The focus groups discussed in this report represent a strong starting point for gathering direct student feedback on what is and is not working for them across all aspects of their educational experience. Additionally, focus groups create opportunities for students to meet, share information, and support one another. Continuing to conduct focus groups or creating other similar opportunities for students to reflect on the positives and negatives of life at Cuesta College will not only provide the college with critical information that can be used to guide decision-making, but it will also send a strong message to the college community that student voices are valued by the institution and its leaders.

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.

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