

**Washington State Bridges to Opportunity Planning Grant  
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**Student Focus Groups Summary  
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*“I want the skills to be able to do jobs that you really like—not factory work. I want to have the skills that would allow me to move away from this town—to have an option.”*

### **Project Background**

As part of the Ford Foundation Bridges to Opportunity project to identify barriers to the success of low-income students in using community and technical colleges to achieve sustainable, living wages, the State Board for Community & Technical Colleges (SBCTC) conducted a series of student focus groups in March and April, 2003. All students attended community colleges in Washington State.

The focus group participants were asked eight questions to elicit students' experiences in accessing and attending college programs. The questions also sought information about areas the Bridges project had previously identified as potentially in need of improvement, such as approaches to instruction and student support, the ability of staff to coordinate across multiple instructional programs and service functions and transitioning from one program to another. (See study process and interview questions in Appendix A; participant profile in Appendix B.)

### **Summary of Findings**

*“College has exposed me to other ways of life as well as dreams for my children.”*

The picture that emerged from this study was that managing the financial and time constraints of going to college is a significant challenge for low-income students, but it is a challenge that they believe has significant payoffs for them. For many of these students, attending college has opened up job and life opportunities they had not imagined before. Students reported that the chief impacts of going to college were financial concerns about where they could get the money to sustain themselves and their family, and the loss of time with children. These students expressed determination to complete their studies despite the obstacles.

Students were largely positive about their instructors. Their chief request was that instructors use a greater variety of teaching techniques. They preferred instructors they saw as open, helpful and positive. They wanted colleges to ensure that teachers know how to teach and to provide regular instructor evaluation that seriously considers student input.

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Students generally found their colleges to be places where they felt well treated and welcome. They described less consistency in obtaining good information, finding that some staff and faculty provided helpful information but others knew little about areas outside their own program. They reported significant frustration and lost time because of staff that did not have useful information or know where to refer them, most frequently related to cross-functional services (for example, instructional programs referring students to various parts of student services, or referrals from one administrative unit to another). Based on two student groups that had only positive comments, both from colleges where we interviewed a second group that had mixed comments, it appeared that the departmental staff were the key factor, not the type of program, institution, or the size of college.

The kinds of support most requested by students were financial aid and better information. They expressed a need for greater levels of financial aid, sufficient to provide support for both educational and living expenses (assuming part-time work), and also for broader eligibility for aid. Students also wanted better information about financial aid and better information about how to navigate institutional processes. They wanted both types of information early in their connection with the college. ESL students wanted this type of information delivered in their native language at the outset of their studies, to allow them access to these services prior to developing fuller language skills.

Students also described needs for more affordable childcare, assistance in finding part-time jobs to help support them while in college, and an expanded and reliable level of tutoring support.

## **Research Results**

### Impact of College on Life and Goals

When asked about the impact going to college has had on their life and family, students mentioned a number of stresses but even more positive impacts. They recognized that the stresses were temporary, with a long-term improved future and anticipated that most of the negatives would disappear once college was finished.

*“I am convinced that these hardships are going to be worth it, because I want the better future that will come from this sacrifice.”*

The most frequently mentioned impact was that the combined pressures of work, school and household left too little time to spend with their children. Both single mothers and parents with spouses reported concerns about the loss of time to be with their children and to supervise their studies and activities.

*“I have two small children. I attend school and I also still need to go to work every day. That leaves very little time for me to be with my children, and then I don't have much energy left.”*

Additional concerns cited by the students were money and coordinating work and class schedules. Students commented on the overall tightness of resources experienced while they were attending college. They also reported worries about where funds would come from for continuing their studies and for childcare. They reported challenges in

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coordinating their work and college schedules, which caused some to lose work time or to forego taking a class.

*“Attending college has been financially stressful.”  
“It is hard to coordinate class time with work, and sometimes I have lost some work hours.”*

These students were clear that the positive benefits of attending college outweighed the negative impacts. The most general benefit students described was a more positive outlook about the future and an overall sense of confidence. Students reported both an increased sense of optimism about their personal future, and a more specific belief that their job prospects would improve through their education.

*“I’ve realized a long-delayed chance to go to college. I’m trying to rebuild my educational background. I’ve gained confidence from attending classes here.”*

Most students indicated that their goals had changed in some way since beginning college. These students indicated that attending college classes helped them discover new options for jobs, careers and further education. The most frequent type of goal change students reported was shifting their career goal to an option that they felt would better fit them or their current circumstances. Other students had developed goals for the first time, clarified their goals, or set higher educational goals than they had on entering. A small number of students reported that their goals had not changed.

*“When I first came I needed to get my GED and I wasn’t really thinking beyond that. Once I was here and saw the possibilities I decided I could have a goal and a dream.”*

Students also reported that attending college had gained them respect in their families. Parents mentioned that through being in school they had become a positive role model for their children and were able to establish better relations with them. Some mentioned specific impacts such as a child returning to finish high school or becoming more serious about their studies. Second language students indicated they were more able to help their children with homework and that their work circumstances had improved due to their increased English language skills.

*“I’m the 2<sup>nd</sup> in my family to go to college. I have seen my children grow academically. College is broadening my view and theirs.”*

These students expressed a lot of determination. Now that they had gained more confidence and seen what could be possible with more education, they were committed to reaching their new goals despite the obstacles in their path.

*“I started out on TANF. I’ve been told that I won’t get funded after a year and am worried about that. I intend to maintain my educational goals no matter what.”*

### Instruction

When students were asked about the instruction they had received, the greatest number of comments was about teaching techniques. Students clearly preferred instructors who

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have a variety of approaches to teaching. They wanted instructors to include visual materials and “hands-on” activities, and disliked frequent or lengthy straight lectures. They also liked structures that provided them regular feedback on their performance, mentioning tests, workbooks and computers as mechanisms to provide that feedback.

*“Teachers should be flexible with their teaching skills, be able to do things more than one way (visual as well as talk.)”*

Students noted that the instructor’s attitude has a significant impact on them, indicating a preference for instructors who are open, helpful, and positive. They also appreciate instructors who don’t act superior to students.

*“I like it when the teacher talks with students and not to students.”*

These students were largely positive about their instructors and at the same time concerned that sometimes they encounter instructors who don’t know how to teach. They stated that colleges should ensure that instructors know how to teach, using training and assessment to reach that goal. Students also asked that colleges take student complaints about teachers seriously, reporting instances where they felt their feedback had been ignored.

*“The college should review teacher performance. How do they teach? How well do they teach? Do something with the feedback about teachers.”*

### Student Interactions with Colleges

We were interested in the general atmosphere students found at their colleges, and more specifically in how well college staff appeared to coordinate information and assistance across broad institutional functions and to support transitions from one program to another.

When asked about the general atmosphere at college, the consensus from these students was that their colleges were places where they felt well treated and welcomed by both teachers and staff. Despite the frustrations they expressed about specific aspects of their college experience, their overall feeling about the colleges was very positive. Many had recommended the college to family members and friends.

*“I tell my mom every day that I like this school. If I were anywhere else, I might not finish.”*

*“It is scary when you come as an older person, but lots of people are helpful.”*

When asked more specifically about how well staff coordinated information across programs, student comments were nearly equally distributed between positive and negative. On the positive side, students found many faculty and staff helpful and supportive. They cited specific instances where faculty had gone beyond their classroom duties to link them to other programs and services in the college. They described staff that provided useful information and helped them navigate the institutional system.

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*“I think the staff are doing pretty good. The (non-ESL) staff had good information for us and provided us with good materials.”*

Students also reported negative experiences in the same colleges where positive experiences were described, such as faculty who knew little about other services in the college and staff who referred students from office to office. One student described the resulting experience as “a lot of little silos.” The most frequent negative experiences reported by students were receiving poor information, encountering people who were not helpful or supportive, and inadequate coordination of the content in sequential courses such as ESL, English and math. The primary impacts of these experiences were the loss of valuable time in going from office to office for information and inadequate preparation for higher-level courses in the sequence. Students reported that they received better advice about program requirements from program faculty than from general advisors or counselors, although some students also reported getting good assistance from a general advisor.

*“They gave out the wrong information about pre-requisite courses....and this resulted in wasted time.”*

Most student focus groups reported a mixture of positive and negative comments. There were two groups that made only positive comments, which caused us to look more closely at the data by college, college size and type of program. College size did not appear to be a key difference in this study, with mixtures of positive and negative comments at all six colleges we visited. Type of program also did not appear to be a key difference, since the all-positive comments came from students enrolled at ESL in one college and in GED programs at a second college. In these limited data, it was the specific program (or more precisely, its staff) that made the difference. At both colleges that had a group with all-positive comments, the second group at that college, with students enrolled in different programs from the first group, reported the more usual mixture of positive and negative experiences.

*“Staff and faculty within a specific program can pull together well, but outside of a program you struggle.”*

Not many students had transitioned from one instructional program to another. The transitions in this group of students included ESL to GED or AA, GED to credit level courses, Running Start to full college-level work, occupational to transfer programs and the reverse, and preparation for transfer to a baccalaureate institution. With the exception of one group of students who had experienced problems in getting accurate information about transferring to baccalaureate programs, the transition experiences were generally positive.

*“I made the transition from ESL to an AA program. My teacher encouraged me to go even though I didn’t think I was ready. The teacher was right. And when I didn’t have money, the teachers helped me find aid money.”*

Based on the students in this study, ESL and GED students benefit greatly from facilitation by instructors and staff in making the transition into higher-level programs. Examples mentioned by students included introducing them to staff resources in another part of the college, identification of courses that they would be ready for, advice about

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the total load they should attempt, and assistance in navigating the registration process. As happens at one college, it could involve designing an entry-level program such as GED to allow students to take other courses simultaneously and assisting in working out time conflicts and funding issues.

*“The teachers here....make it easier by making sure you understand what the courses and programs are about. They also know the students and their lives and advise them about what they can handle.” (GED student)*

Students moving from one credit program to another or transferring to a four-year college also benefit from assistance, but appear to need less in the way of support. Their primary need is good information, for example information about exactly what is needed for the new program, which already-completed courses will transfer, and the financial aid implications of their decision.

*“I have found that there is a lack of clear information about transferring into a 4-year degree program.” (AA student)*

#### College and Community Support for Students

To learn which types of support were most helpful and which were the most significant for students, we asked them what the college and organizations outside the college could do to help them meet their educational goals.

The two most significant needs reported by students were financial aid and better information. In financial aid, students requested greater levels of support to help them meet the costs of daycare and living expenses. They indicated a need for aid to be available to a broader range of low-income students, for example, students working and attending part-time. Several students reported concerns about how they would finance their college attendance once they were not eligible for TANF.

*“I would like to see better resources and assistance for those of us who cannot qualify for the scholarships or other financial assistance that other students receive. We work in low wage jobs, but our families need the money that we earn. If we leave work to attend school, we need to replace that money we could have earned.”*

Students' primary information need was related to sources of financial aid, including scholarships, and how financial aid works. Students also wanted better information about how to navigate college processes such as registration and accessing support services. Students reported that they wanted both financial aid and college process information early in their connection with the college. ESL students wanted this information delivered first in their native language, so that they could understand and use college services even before their language proficiency improved.

*“We are afraid to seek assistance and to inquire about available services because of language. Maybe we are really more ashamed than fearful, but sometimes we will just go home instead of researching something we have heard about indirectly or casually.”*

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The next most frequently reported need was for daycare, with campus daycare mentioned more often than community daycare. The cost of daycare is a continuing worry for these parents, so their needs in daycare are both for adequate numbers of spaces in daycare facilities and for financial assistance to cover the costs.

*“If you work part-time and are taking college classes, there is no TANF. You’re really working to pay for daycare. But then you have to live and pay college expenses and gas for transportation. Daycare costs are big—about \$100 per child per week.”*

Students indicated they would like assistance from the college in finding jobs, primarily part-time jobs while in school. They mentioned such strategies as partnering with area employers to post jobs, publicizing WorkSource and providing more work-study positions on campus.

*“We need help with jobs. I’m talking about off-campus student jobs, and also placement in permanent jobs.”*

The remaining support needs mentioned by students included tutoring, disabled student support and computers. Students reported that tutoring services were very important resources for them. They requested more of these services and also expressed concern about reports that these services might be cut. They indicated a need for greater levels of support for disabled students and for more access to computers.

*“It had been a long time since I took math, so it was hard. Tutoring helped, but we need more tutors and space for tutoring.”*

Students provided far fewer comments about the support that could be provided outside the college. The primary areas mentioned were jobs and childcare, both also mentioned in the context of college support.

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## Appendix A – Group Process

A total of 85 low-income students were interviewed in ten focus groups. The focus groups were held at six colleges in different parts of the state, including urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Six of the focus groups were conducted only in English. To ensure that language skills were not a barrier to inclusion, three focus groups were conducted in Spanish and one was conducted in a combination of English, Spanish and Russian. All sessions were scheduled for one and a half hours.

To obtain students for the groups, project staff contacted a college representative (generally someone in student services, who coordinated the identification process for that campus) and asked them to identify currently enrolled low-income students, with a combination of basic skills students (largely pre-college English-as-a-Second Language) and students from other programs. Each student was paid a \$20 stipend to encourage participation. The largest group had nine students; the smallest had six. Four colleges provided two groups of students; at three of those colleges, one group was conducted in English and the other in Spanish or a combination of languages. We held a pilot focus group to refine the questions, and because the final set of questions corresponded to what evolved during the pilot session, that group's data was included in the analysis.

### Student Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself. How long you have attended this college, what kind of classes you have taken and what are your educational goals?
  2. How does taking classes at this college affect your life and the life of your family?
  3. Has your experience at the college affected your goals for the future? How?
  4. Have you participated in more than one program of the college? Was it easy to move from one program to another? What were the problems you encountered? Or, what helped the transition go smoothly?
  5. What kinds of things can the college do to help you fulfill your goals? What kinds of things can the community do to help you fulfill your goals?
  6. When you interact with college instructors or staff members, do they seem to be working together (in a coordinated fashion) and for the same general purposes? Does it appear to you that the college instructors and staff talk to each other about what they are doing?
  7. Do you feel welcome at this college? Why? Why not? If you were talking to a younger person in your family, or to a friend, would you recommend that they think about taking classes at the college? Why? Why not?
  8. Thinking about the classes you have taken, what was covered and how the material was presented, what was most helpful and enjoyable for you? What would you change?
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### Appendix B – Student Focus Group Participant Profile

*“I am a new student. I want self-determination and the chance to make something of myself. I want to earn my GED and to build a better future for my children.”*

*Semi-urban college, interview in Spanish*

*I am in my second quarter in Office Business Technology. I want to complete a certificate at a minimum. If I can afford it, I want to complete my AA. I am retraining from a former profession that I can’t do anymore.”*

*Rural college, interview in English*

*“This is my third quarter at this college. I want to earn the AAS and transfer to a four- year college to study radiology.”*

*Urban college, interview in English*

*“I have been attending now for two months. I am taking ESL classes. I have a beautician’s license from Mexico and would like to practice that profession in this country, but I will need to learn English well so that I can pass the licensing exam here.”*

*Rural college, interview in Spanish*

The student profile information is based on self-reported data. Of the 85 students, 20% of the students were in their first quarter of study, and another 31% were in their 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, so just about half were in their first year of experience at a community college. Another 27% were in their second year of study, and 20% had attended for three or more years (sometimes off and on over a period of years). The length of study could not be identified for two students (2%).

**Table 1. Student length of study at their current community college**

<b>Length of study</b>	<b>No. of students</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> quarter	17	20%
2 <sup>nd</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> quarter	26	31%
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	23	27%
3+ years	17	20%
Unknown	2	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100%</b>

The focus group students represented a good cross-section of community college program enrollments. Just over a third of the students were currently enrolled in ESL classes (38%). Slightly less than a third were enrolled in transfer (27%) and occupational (26%) programs. The remaining students were in GED (6%), and certificate programs (4%), with one student for whom a program could not be identified.

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One student who was concurrently enrolled in ESL and an occupational course was counted as an ESL student.

When asked about their ultimate goal for attending college, one-third (33%) of the students indicated a baccalaureate degree. Most of those were students already enrolled in the transfer program, but a few students in ESL, GED and occupational programs also indicated that goal. There was a slight tendency for students with more educational experience to have higher goals. Of the 13 students in their first quarter of ESL, about half wanted only ESL and half indicated a goal beyond ESL. Of the 17 students who were in their second quarter or beyond, 11 (65%) had goals beyond ESL. Student comments during the sessions gave more evidence of this trend, with several indicating that they had started ESL classes with only that as their goal, but as they discovered other possibilities at the college (often with staff guidance and encouragement) their goals expanded, usually first to a GED, then to a certificate or degree.

Of the students interviewed, 37 were either in ESL or indicated they had previously been in ESL. Of the second language speakers, four were Russian-speaking and the remainder Spanish-speaking.

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