Celebrating Student Achievement

Transforming Lives Awards

Washington’s Community and Technical Colleges
January 2018

Theresa
Edmonds Community College

Vanessa Primer
Highline College

Josh Daley
Olympic College

Omar Osman
Seattle Central College

Tracy Fejeran
Spokane Falls Community College
Transforming Lives

The Association of College Trustees (ACT) Transforming Lives awards recognize current and former students whose lives were transformed by attending a Washington state community or technical college. Each of the college district’s boards of trustees selected an awardee from among its current and former student body. From among the 35 students chosen, the ACT Awards Committee selected five awardees to serve as keynote speakers at the January 22, 2018, Transforming Lives awards dinner.

Awards criteria

Boards of trustees could nominate current or former Washington community and technical college students who completed or made significant progress toward completing a degree or certificate that helped them prepare for, or be successful in, a competitive workforce occupation.

Each awardee overcame significant barriers to achieve his or her higher education goals. The awardees’ experiences demonstrate how Washington community and technical colleges help transform lives through education and student support.

The 2018 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- **Josh Daley**
  Olympic College

- **Tracy Fejeran**
  Spokane Falls Community College

- **Omar Osman**
  Seattle Central College

- **Vanessa Primer**
  Highline College

- **Theresa**
  Edmonds Community College

While just five students were selected to serve as keynote speakers, committee members found compelling stories of determination and success among each of the 35 awardees. All of their stories are shared in their own words on the following pages. Stories were edited for length.

In these times of economic uncertainty, much attention is focused on the struggles and difficulties students endure. For now, we wish to offer our thanks and gratitude to the many community and technical college stakeholders whose vision and dedication have helped make these stories possible.
Autumn Arnestad  
*Bates Technical College*

Growing up, I had countless unfortunate situations and my childhood experiences were hard to process. My father was an addict and a dealer. Sexual, physical, emotional abuse; you name it, it happened to me. My dad gave me my first line of meth when I was 12. Then I began participating in criminal activity.

As I grew up, a sense of shame followed me everywhere. I learned to hide it well, and pretend my life was perfect. I took martial arts, tap and jazz classes, just like a normal child. I even earned A’s in my classes.

As a teenager, I moved in with my mom in the city. It was an adjustment, because suddenly, there were rules. Unfortunately, my outlet was physical aggression. At age 21, I landed my first prison sentence and spent 10 years incarcerated, with a chance to change. Upon release, I went back to the same life, serving 20 pounds of meth a week like McDonalds serves cheeseburgers.

Every time I was caught, I bailed out because I had the money. Then, I landed my second prison term in 2012. This time, I received 90 months with Drug Offenders Sentence Alternative (DOSA).

In 2016, I got out and started working honest jobs. That’s when I met my future husband. We struggled at first and I resisted returning to street life. Then, my friend Amber told me about the Bates Technical College Digital Media program. I was drawn to this program because I always dreamed of working in marketing, but hadn’t touched a computer in 15 years. Amber convinced me we would help each other if we did this together.

I was always good in school, but never expected Digital Media to be so challenging. But I worked hard, with long hours in front of a computer. I was dedicated to learning the new programs. I started doing it for myself, not for anyone else. I even stayed later, after everyone else had left, just to finish the work that took me more time to do. A few days into my first quarter, I gave birth to my son. I also got a serious infection and was on bed rest for five weeks. I thought for sure I was going to fail, but my classmates and my instructor, Brian Parke, stood up and helped me in every way they could. We even shot commercials in my living room!

Around the same time, Josh Clearman, Campus Dean for Advanced Technology, and his wife had a baby, so he was someone I felt I could talk to. He wrote a letter of recommendation for me to run for an Associated Student Government position.

I couldn’t believe it. These people were coming into my life, and they weren’t motivated by what I could do for them. They just wanted me to succeed! I wanted to give back to the college that had already given me so much. Ultimately, I will earn a bachelor’s degree and open an advertising firm within five years.

When I look in the mirror, I think about what my life used to be and how far I have come. I acknowledge the struggles of my past and look forward to my vibrant future. One piece of advice I can offer is that we make choices every day and those choices affect our future. Why not choose college for a chance at a successful future?
Victor Ramirez
Bellevue College

I chose Bellevue College because it has support and opportunities for my art/animation and the autism spectrum. I knew Bellevue College would have some classes that would be difficult to learn or to understand, so my mother connected me with the Disability Resource Center (DRC) and the Autism Spectrum Navigators (ASN).

The DRC has provided the testing rooms (small silent rooms) so I can focus on my tests without any distractions. There are also animators that are teachers than can help me to know about animation, as well.

To get through many barriers, I need to understand life skills. Life skills help me to get myself ready for life. For example, every time I go to downtown Seattle, there are a bunch of people with different personalities that are too risky to interact with in an environment that is not safe.

So, I had to mind my own business and avoid dangerous situations. Another barrier I must manage is my emotional intelligence. Whenever someone makes a complex argument that really bothers me, I should manage the way how I feel and just try to deal with the situation or just to ignore it.

My mother, Rosa, helped me to achieve my goals and know everything that I have to do in college.

My mom has spent years trying to have me succeed in college so I can get a career and have better things in life. She wants me to gain success being independent, knowing what to do in life-related situations, being responsible for everything I do, and having a great career with lots of support from friends and family.

My mother has spoken with teachers and advisors to know what they can do to help me succeed in academia. Also, the ASN helped me go through mentors — especially the tutors of the Academic Success Center — to help me on difficult assignments.

The classes that are part of the ASN have changed my life upon knowing what to do in my life as a human being.

What’s next for me is that I'll be planning to improve my art and animation skills. For my goals in the future, I wish to work in the animation industry and hopefully help in the creation of cartoons. If I ever think about the way I draw and wondering if I’ll ever improve my skills upon drawing difficult things, I could just try to participate in art/animation workshops to draw things that I can be good at later.

My advice for all the students who are wondering if college is the right choice to attend, here is my answer: Yes. College is there to expand your opportunities and possibilities. It provides higher education windows to further your goals and dreams. People can be whatever they want with college — such as a scientist, educator, athlete, lawyer, or like myself, a cartoonist — in pursuit of those dreams or to find the dream you’re looking for.
Amanda Pennell  
*Bellingham Technical College*  

I truly believe we all have different journeys during our lives, with most them being unplanned. My most special journey began as a surprise, when a doctor said to me, “Oops, you’re pregnant.” Since kids weren’t in the plan, I was suddenly a single mom on a whole new adventure.

My priority became my boys and providing them the best life I could offer. I wanted to give them opportunities to grow and see the world, despite being raised by a single parent. My own education was put on hold, and even though I worked full-time, I volunteered in their classrooms one day a week. I was the parent for their team sports, PTA and school trips.

Oftentimes, this meant working graveyard shifts so I didn’t miss an event. Recently, when my youngest son presented his autobiography, I was reminded that not only did they notice, but it also meant everything to them.

At 19, I started working at a grocery store and continued successfully for 28 years. I advanced through many promotions and advancement opportunities. I was a department manager and regional area trainer for 16 years. I attended, and eventually taught, the Career Advanced Placement Training Program. When the company closed the location suddenly in May 2016, I became a displaced worker. I realized this was my opportunity to return to school and fulfill my dreams.

I had always wanted a career in the medical field. When my son began playing lacrosse— and x-rays became a regular occurrence — I started learning about radiologic technology. After personally having a CT scan, I understood the importance of qualified technologists.

In fall 2016, I was accepted into the Radiologic Technology program at Bellingham Technical College. I have been very successful, maintaining a 4.0 GPA and being active in the Associated Students of Bellingham Technical College (ASBTC). I was chosen as the student representative for the Rad Tech advisory committee, student leadership delegate by American Society for Radiologic Technologists, and attended their conference in Orlando. I was chosen to serve as Sergeant at Arms for the 2018 ASRT House of Delegates as well as member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

The staff and faculty at BTC truly care about their students. The nomination asks if one person stands out and the truth is, “they all do.” Without them I would not be here. I was unsure how I could accomplish this journey. I have always been very self-motivated and was willing to work hard and had positive reinforcement every step.

If I had one piece of advice, it would be “go for it.” You can do anything you set your mind to. You are never too old to stop learning. You are the only person standing in the way of achieving your dreams.
Unfortunately, there were many barriers that originally prevented me from attending a community college. My mom had me and my twin sister when she was 17 and my dad was not part of our lives. My mom tried having a father figure for us, but it just caused more loss than gain.

When my mom met my step-dad, my twin sister and I thought we might have a stable life, but that all changed when one night my dad came home drunk from work claiming he quit his job. My mom was in her room drugged out on heroine so she didn’t hear my sister’s screams as my dad grabbed her and dragged her across the living room down to the basement where he preceded to hit her and throw her until she blacked out from the pain.

I called the police and, as a six year old, didn’t know how to explain what was going on other than to tell the operator, “It got worse. This isn’t what normally happens.”

That night, my step-dad went to jail and mom was sent to rehab. The next thing I remember, my sister and I were sitting in my grandparent’s house. Thankfully, my home life started to stabilize, but there was very little guidance when it came to school and preparing for college.

During my sophomore year, I learned that some of my friends were taking placement tests to qualify for Running-Start. I did not want to miss the opportunity, so I did, too. And in the fall of 2014, I enrolled in college.

I was soon pointed in the direction of TRiO Upward Bound by a friend and that is where I met Anita De Leon who forever transformed my life. Both the program and Anita herself made me who I am today and I owe both my deepest gratitude. The moment I walked into her office, I was surrounded by unconditional love and support. She listened to me and turned my self-doubts into confidence and my goals into reality. Within one year of attending BBCC I was happier, healthier and was beginning to see my life transform. With the amazing support from TRiO, I started taking career assessments, discussing majors, and filling out college applications.

I am currently in my second year at Eastern Washington University and am studying elementary education. I will use my degree to help children find their passion and build their confidence in everything they do.

One advice I will give to students who are unsure about their ability to attend a community college or technical school is to surround yourself with people who you aspire to be. When you surround yourself with others who are passionate, strong and confident, you, too, will become those things.
LaShanata Sealy  
_Cascadia College_

I was born to two very young parents that did not finish high school. My mom had a 7th grade education and my father made it to 10th grade. I lived with them for a few years, but drugs were a big problem for both of them.

When I was about 5-years-old, my dad went to prison and I went to live with my grandmother. We had a difficult relationship. She was an angry alcoholic and eventually became abusive. I swore I would not follow the same path as my parents or grandmother. No one in my family went to college, but I knew I was going to go and dreamed of attending Vanderbilt University.

I made very good grades in school and was above average on state testing. But at age 14, I started smoking marijuana on a regular basis and began drinking. By 15, I was doing cocaine at least every weekend. Drugs and alcohol made me feel comfortable in my skin as I was very maladjusted to the reality of my life at that point. Eventually this led to my decision to drop out of school as a senior.

Shortly after, I decided to move across the country with a hippy guy from Washington and moved to Seattle in 1996.

Circumstances changed shortly after I moved here and I started using cocaine and drinking heavily again.

On December 24, 1999 I welcomed the biggest love of my whole life: my son. I did not drink or use during my pregnancy, but my partner did. This proved to a difficult situation as I was a young mother, alone with a new baby and minimal support. When my son was six-months old, he and I went to live with a friend I met at work and her husband. I was so overwhelmed by grief, fear, and a very low opinion of myself.

I would get glimpses of my dreams to do something with my life. I would see people at the bus stop next to Cascadia College who were going to school and creating a better life, and my drive for education would kick in.

I went to treatment in 2012 and have been taking one step at a time. Those steps got me into Cascadia College. I took the adult basic education (ABE) classes and earned my GED in 2015.

On my journey, several people have impacted my education in a huge way. I would not be where I am if it were not for their support and guidance; I am beyond grateful. My next step is to attend UW Bothell for health studies where I will move towards helping people. I am so very excited to continue my journey and hope I can help others along the way, just as I have been helped.

If I could share something for other prospective or current students it would be just start. Somewhere. Anywhere. You are worth it and there is more than one way to get where you want to go. Starting this process was very scary, but has been nothing short of life-changing for me. I still struggle some days, but then I realize how much I have done for MY life.
Yuki Takayama  
*Centralia College*

Not having a stable home was a major obstacle that prevented me from attending any college. I moved into a motorhome with my sisters and four cats – away from mom. We went from having two to three meals a day to “almost” one. Winters were very cold; freezing even. The couch I slept on had a metal bar in the middle of it and cleanliness was a luxury.

One of my sisters went into the Job Corps program, while another sister left for California. I was left alone with just one sister. A friend of the family helped us find an apartment and things got better.

After graduating high school, I realized I needed to get out of the situation I was in. I had a few jobs in mind that interested me: becoming an herbalist, a pastry chef, or a massage therapist.

I was discouraged from pursuing those interests due to being blind, so I decided to go to school to get my general education. I enrolled at South Puget Sound Community College. SPSCC was in the area and it was a bus ride away. At this point, I was semi-independent. After completing the application, my test scores had me starting with two remedial English classes.

There were many difficulties with the work and expectations of the professors, but with the help of my sister, I finished. I completed English 101 at SPSCC, but felt I needed a change at that point. I felt I needed more direction.

I considered enrolling at Centralia College because it was the next closest college and I had heard great things about Centralia, including that they had people there ready to help, especially with people that have disabilities; people like myself who are legally blind.

At Centralia College, I started with the general associate degree with the intent to transfer into the new Bachelors of Applied Science (BAS) degree in Information Technology. Being legally blind, I have dealt with technology and accessibility issues for years. These difficulties have motivated me to find different alternatives that allowed me to use technology as equitably as possible. After years of trying to get through college, I finally found a group of extraordinary people who helped guide me into an area where I can draw from my diverse and challenging experiences to help others struggling with technology and accessibility. Disability Services, eLearning, IT, counseling, instruction and administration all worked together to provide me with an opportunity to transform my life.

I am graduating soon (either this spring or summer) and will pursue the BAS program in IT at Centralia College in the fall. Once I am done with that milestone, I would like to come back to Centralia College and work to help students in fields I am familiar with (technology, language, social and physical sciences).

If I had to give one piece of advice for other students or anyone thinking about attending a community or technical college, it would be: “A thought is the first step; the only failure is not trying.”
Nicholas Freese  
Clark College

I spent nearly 10 years as a struggling drug addict. Working at restaurants, stealing from my family, and finding ever-creative ways to slowly kill myself. My father was a violent, abusive alcoholic and I could see firsthand how his self-worth was affected by the fact he hadn’t graduated high school.

I fell into the same vicious cycle, following in his footsteps, because I had no better example to follow. I had run out of options and my family had disowned me. I was isolated, depressed, hated myself, and my PTSD was completely untreated and getting worse. I had hit my rock-bottom when I realized pursuing a degree was something I always wanted and had to prove to myself I was capable and willing to finish a long-term goal like earning a degree.

Clark College was a beacon of hope; a lifeline I grabbed onto with both hands. Higher education has given me a life, brought my daughter and family back to my life, helped me to love myself, and has shown me a world I didn’t think was possible for me. I owe everything to Clark College and intend to show my appreciation the rest of my life. I was on a horrible path and everything about this college has transformed my life.

Since I first started attending Clark College two-and-a-half years ago, I have thrown myself “head first” into everything academic. My academic efforts are closely linked with my self-worth. I spend most of my time on my studies and feel fulfilled that my hard work, grit and dedication to my studies have paid off in scholarships and awards attained, as well as earning a high GPA.

I have made the Vice President’s Honor Roll list four times in six quarters. I have attained letters of recommendation from multiple teachers and subjects, and gotten “A” grades in almost all my classes. I try to make it to every workshop the school provides on campus, and have utilized services like the free dental check-ups, as well as mental health services.

I try my best to help students in my classes and on campus because it creates positive connections with my community and also helps me learn the material when I teach it to others. I plan to continue to participate as much as possible and to be very active as a Clark College alumnus. I have even been asked to speak on a panel for College 101 success strategies while at Clark. I know am well on my way to a degree and a future.

The only thing I prioritize more than my education is my daughter. I don’t ever use illicit substances or party, and am active daily in my daughter’s life. I am the father to her that I never had. We play and laugh daily. She is my best friend. I know I give her the security and dependability I never knew as a child.

Clark helped bring me this all. I never thought a community college could change my life so drastically. One day, when my law office is full of degrees from different schools, my Clark College associates degree, and my letter saying I won the Val Ogden Presidential Scholarship, will be front and center so everyone that steps into my office knows that Clark College transformed my life and it’s the most important degree on that wall.
Michael Clarke
Clover Park Technical College

I am a counselor with the Thurston County Superior Court DUI-Drug Court Program. We serve a population that has an opportunity for a fresh start by completing a program that will dismiss their pending charges. I take great pride serving people society might call "criminal," because I know their journey all too well.

Growing up, I had a lot of freedom, spending most of my time with my grandma, who did her best to give me what I didn’t get at home. I was the oldest of six and my mother did the best she could with the resources available.

I dropped out of school at 15. At 16, I became a regular user of ecstasy. By 17, I was dealing ecstasy and introduced to crystal meth. Over the next six years, I became criminally involved and used substances daily. I developed “using behaviors,” became angry at the world, and had no coping skills to manage my emotions. My life had spiraled. I was lost.

At 23, I was convicted of several felonies. I was a first-time offender, but the sophistication and extent of my crimes led to a four-and-a-half year prison sentence. I chose to turn prison into an opportunity. I was finally free of life as a user and made a plan that would lead to success and respect. I avoided prison violence, politics, and stayed focused on my goals. I completed my GED while incarcerated and, upon release, left Spokane to avoid my past influences.

My grandma helped me find a place to live, and within two months of being released from prison, I was enrolled in college. I wanted to become a drug counselor to help those suffering. In the Human Services program, I felt challenged and engaged for the first time in a long time. I earned my Chemical Dependency Professional-Trainee license while working, with the help of instructor, Irene Hauzinger, who guided me through the rigorous process and continues to be a great mentor. I am grateful for the advice, friendship and words of wisdom of Cal Erwin, Director of Student Involvement, and his desire to see me succeed in my journey of self-discovery.

In 2016, as the student council Legislative Officer, I worked tirelessly advocating for students, reaching out to legislators at the state and national level. I planned a letter-writing campaign and hand-delivered several hundred signatures to our legislators in support of CPTC’s new building. I testified in front of committees advocating for a corrections education policy bill to make it possible for inmates to earn a degree while incarcerated. That bill was personal to me.

I can't take back the mistakes I've made in life, but am able to give something back as I advocate for vulnerable populations. I will complete my associate's degree in March and take the Chemical Dependency licensure exam in the summer. I’ve begun the enrollment process at Indiana Wesleyan University to earn a bachelor in counseling with an emphasis in addiction. I plan to earn a master's degree in education. It is my long-term goal to teach chemical dependency at CPTC, educating future counselors and helping the investment of education at CPTC grow. Education transformed my life. My advice to others in my situation is clear: don't allow your past to determine your future.
Jeremy Burnham  
*Columbia Basin College*

I am a proud graduate of Columbia Basin College.

Before CBC, I had never had any schooling experience of any kind. I did not attend grade school or high school. Officially, I was homeschooled, but I didn’t receive a diploma of any kind. I worked in the fast food industry for 13 years. I started as a crew person and moved up to management in less than a year.

If there was one thing I learned during this chapter of my life, it was that I did not want to work in fast food anymore, but I felt like I did not have a choice. I had moved up in rank and was making just enough money to support myself.

With no education, I saw no way I could move into something else.

In 2014, I met someone whose advice would change my life. Another manager where I worked was also a full-time student at CBC, who was only a few months away from graduating. She told me about the financial aid she received and about the job she was going to start right after graduation. Money was always a major barrier to education, so I didn’t believe I would ever be able to afford school. However, I found I qualified for a lot of help. Still, there was a roadblock: I had not graduated high school. Earning a GED became my first step in my new dream, which I completed in about six months.

The next two years were the most amazing years in my life. I put together a class schedule that exposed me to subjects I found interesting. Although I started out in the criminal justice program, I ended up changing to a transfer degree instead. In my first English class, I discovered I wanted to be a writer. After being exposed to different writing, and to a whole range of different subjects, I further narrowed that goal down and discovered I wanted to study journalism.

After my first year in school, my path was already very different. I saw a light at the end of the fast food tunnel. During my sophomore year of school, I was more involved on campus than I ever imagined being. I had joined the Phi Theta Kappa honor society, and was elected vice president of public relations for the CBC chapter. I also got a job with the Associated Students of Columbia Basin College as a service and activities officer. This job changed my life. I worked as part of a team with amazing young people who inspired me in my pursuit of education. I became interested in issues I had not been involved in before. I was the lead in ASCBC’s sustainability week efforts, and helped put on many event on campus.

By exploring abilities I never knew I had, I learned so much about myself at CBC. I graduated in June of 2017. I had the honor of being the commencement speaker at graduation. That was a moment I will never forget.

I am now a junior at Eastern Washington University in Cheney. I am majoring in journalism, with a minor in political science. Because of the high GPA I earned at CBC, and because I graduated with honors, I got accepted into EWU’s honors program. I am also writing for EWU’s student newspaper as a paid staff writer. Writing for the paper has further confirmed my belief that journalism is what I am supposed to be doing.

Just two-and-a-half years ago, I was feeling hopeless, stuck in a job I hated. Now, I am truly living a new life. This would never have been possible without Columbia Basin College. To other people out there feeling lost, I would tell them, GO TO SCHOOL. Go to fasfa.ed.gov and see what kind of help you can get. You don’t need to know what you want to do in your first quarter in school. Take classes that interest you and don’t be afraid to try new things. Your path will show itself. It did for me.
Theresa

*Edmonds Community College*

In 2014, I fled Nigeria and sought asylum in the U.S. for myself and my children. I was pregnant and decided to leave my abusive husband and my home to begin a new life, free from abuse. In Nigeria, it’s hard for women to speak up about abuse, and when they do, most people turn a blind eye. Despite the pressure and insults from some family members for me to stay and work it out, I chose my health and safety and that of my three kids.

My goal to provide for my family on my own.

When I first came to the U.S., I received basic assistance for food and housing from the state, but I knew that education would be key. Knowing my goal, my caseworker at the Department of Social and Human Services (DSHS) helped me connect to Edmonds Community College. Due to my immigration status, there were limits to the amount of education funding I could receive.

During this time, I was also dealing with the residual trauma of domestic violence and emotional abuse, separation from my family and rejection by certain family members, and caring for my newborn. This is also the time when I was introduced to Edmonds CC’s I-CATCH program and advisor/retention specialist, Christie Santos. Christie made a way where there seemed to be no way. When one door was shut, she’d try another. If that one was shut, she’d find a window and squeeze in. Despite the obstacles, I was succeeding and my kids were doing well.

But then my father — my support and backbone — was tragically murdered back home in Nigeria.

It was a struggle to stay in school. I might have dropped out without Christie’s support. She made sure I saw a counselor and checked to make sure I went. With Christie’s support and that of my close friend and sister, I found the strength to stay in school.

I completed the Patient Care Technician and Clinical Lab Assistant certificates and externships at Virginia Mason and Swedish Edmonds.

In addition to a part-time job, I currently work full-time at DSHS — the same agency that supported me when it was down to nothing. I’ve been with the DSHS Developmental Disabilities Administration for two years. I started as a direct caregiver, moved into a nursing assistant position, and am now teaching as an adult training specialist. It’s a beautiful place where I’m able to make an impact each day.

It feels good that I can provide for my kids, and I am not on assistance anymore apart from childcare. It feels good knowing that I’m doing it, and I can take care of my family.

I plan to enroll in Edmond’s pre-nursing program in fall 2018. Taking care of people gives me peace and joy, and although it can be challenging, there’s a joy that comes from making an impact in someone’s life and seeing them light up. I have a goal of earning a master’s degree in public health and epidemiology and then going on to nurse practitioner school.

It’s a lot for the state and the college to take on someone like me, but I’m going to give 1,000 percent back. My advice: Don’t stop pursuing your goal. Some people will try to give you reasons why you won’t succeed, but do not listen to them. Seek out people who will support you and believe in your success!
Hajer Al-Faham  
*Everett Community College*

As a former Iraqi refugee, I consider myself an incredibly fortunate person. The opportunity to live and grow up in the United States meant the difference between life and death for my family, who left everything behind in Iraq to escape war and religious persecution.

Growing up in the United States was not without its challenges: my family was poor, we spoke little English, and common misperceptions of our Arab and Muslim background meant prejudice and discrimination would be a familiar aspect of our daily lives.

Reflecting on these experiences, I never could have predicted nor imagined that I would one day attend college and pursue a career as a Ph.D. at an Ivy League institution.

My education journey when I was a sophomore in high school, enrolled in honors coursework. My high school mentor, Barbara McPherson, encouraged me to participate in the Running Start program where I could earn dual credit and benefit from rigorous college courses. She explained that at college, I would have the opportunity to be surrounded by peers who shared my passion for learning. That year, I became a student at Everett Community College.

When I arrived at Everett CC, I was nervous and full of doubts. Was I smart enough? Would I fail my college courses? Would anyone take me seriously as a high school student? Each of these doubts dissipated as I learned to navigate college and met multiple staff and faculty who guided me through the experience. Among the many inspiring and remarkable people at Everett Community College, who supported my journey, four individuals stand out: Moira O'Toole, Ann Harrington, Laura Hedges, and Karena Hooks.

Moira worked at the Tutoring Center where she patiently helped me master essential math and science courses. Ann, my first college instructor, recruited me to work at the Writing Center where I met some of my best friends and refined my English writing and speaking skills through tutoring others. Laura welcomed me to the Women's Center where I had the opportunity to volunteer and gain experience leading and organizing campus events that raised awareness of diversity and inclusion. Karena advised me on how to meet all the degree requirements for my associate degree and how to transfer to a four-year university. With their support, I not only graduated from Everett CC with honors, I also went on to graduate from Seattle University.

Since completing my studies at Everett, I have begun my Ph.D. in political science. Today, I am a third-year doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania where I specialize in American and Comparative politics. After completing my dissertation on Muslim Americans, my goal is to become a political science researcher and professor at the university level. I see myself teaching the next generation of students who will further our understanding of Muslims in Western democracies. I am eager to teach innovative courses on politics, mentor students, and use my fluency in Arabic and English to present my scholarship to international audiences and collaborate with researchers across the world.

I would advise students to make the most of their time at college. Get to know your teachers because they'll be vital sources of support, be open to learning from your peers, and get involved with student leadership activities and give back to the campus community because it is fun and incredibly rewarding.
Amanda Deubert  
Grays Harbor College

My family has been immersed in generational addiction which affected both my parents.

Education was never important in my house; survival was the word of the day. My sister and I were eventually removed from my mother’s care. After living in various foster homes, we moved in with our dad, but continued to be exposed to the trauma and violence our mother’s addiction generated.

Upon entering high school I was determined not repeat the mistakes of my parents. Unfortunately, I met a bad boy, and all those behaviors resolved not to repeat seemed genetically and environmentally wired. I deteriorated, until the day I saw the disappointment in my father’s eyes. I became galvanized, unenrolled from traditional high school and enrolled in alternative high school and graduated with honors.

Soon after graduation I began to use regularly. It went terribly bad, horribly fast. I went from being a child making bad decisions, to a young woman who had witnessed a murder and was facing 20 years in prison.

Scared and alone, with only a public defender, I learned the law and received a plea bargain. I soon married, but still struggled with active addiction. I had a gorgeous little girl, and seeing life through her eyes changed me. My marriage turned violent, and I had to remove her from the home as I strove for safety and security for us both. I suffered from addiction, violence, homelessness and despair for another three years. In 2015, I went to jail again and found out I was pregnant.

My attorney suggested for me to go to inpatient treatment and I reluctantly accepted. The decision the judge made that day allowed me the opportunity to start a new life. I received a ticket to the path of recovery, which is the greatest gift anyone has ever given me. They say the only thing you have to change is everything, and believe me I have.

As of September 6, 2017, I have two years clean from active addiction. I’ve graduated from multiple treatment services and several parenting classes. Recently, I started as an intern at the Community Action office in Aberdeen. My son is now a healthy 18-month-old and my daughter has been returned home after nearly three long years.

I am enrolled as a second year Human Services student with an emphasis in a Chemical Dependency at Grays Harbor College, with a cumulative 3.83 GPA. After earning my associate’s degree, I intend to earn my bachelor’s degree. This year, I was elected the Community Liaison for the Human Services Community Connect Project.

There isn’t any one person or program that has contributed to my success; it has been a community effort that has allowed me to achieve such potential. My parents are in recovery and we are attempting to heal as a family. My father has over 25 years clean and continues to amaze and inspire me.

Furthering my education will be a great benefit to myself and my children, allowing me to support my family and lead by example that we are greater than our circumstances. This field calls to my heart, and I believe I can be a great asset with my life experiences. Drugs have plagued our nation, affecting nearly each and every home, with a great irreversible impact.

If I could offer only one piece of advice for others it would be to not let your own perceptions and doubts limit your greatness. You can be and do anything you believe you can.
Samira Shokati
Green River College

Growing up as a Baha’i made me a minority in Islamic republic of Iran and exposed my community to discrimination including being denied access to higher education. I graduated from high school in Iran in 2000. In 2012, when tensions between religious factions in Iran heightened, I sought political asylum in Turkey. Eventually I was given the opportunity to immigrate to the U.S. as a refugee in 2013. Arriving in the U.S. and facing cultural and language barriers without my family and my support system was extremely challenging. Most days I missed my family in Iran and simply wanted to go home.

There are many financial and emotional challenges a refugee faces, and I was not an exception. Receiving financial aid and scholarships were what kept me going and allowed me to continue my education. I worked as a part time Medical Interpreter and tried to do my best at school. I managed to provide for myself and kept my GPA above 3.8. English being my second language added to my academic struggles. The language barrier for a refugee is an ongoing struggle. But I tried to practice more, read more and use the resources the college provided to my I spent my free time in the writing center. I worked hard, asked many questions and got as much help as possible. I slowly improved, and am still continuing to progress today. GRC’s system of teaching is sensitive to the needs and shortcomings of students who speak English as their second language. Having English as my second language never affected my learning, I never felt like I was left behind. This helped me to improve faster than I imagined a 32-year-old would.

The TRIO program was extremely helpful as it provided tutors and tours of various universities to help me plan out my next step after graduating from community college.

One individual at Green River College was my rock: Allison Warner. Allison was my first and best advisor at GRC. She goes above and beyond to help the students. Her encouragement and positive energy helped me stay in school and focus on my studies. There were several occasions that I came close to quitting school just to get a full time job to afford my rent. However, she helped me to manage my finances and stay on route.

I am currently a senior at University of Washington, pursuing a BA degree in Interdisciplinary Visual Art. I plan to further my education in healthcare by earning my doctorate in Family Nurse Practice. My goal for the future is to focus on my fight to eliminate injustice. My ambition of advancing the campaign of social justice in healthcare is fueled by my own memories and experiences of being a victim of social discrimination. Healthy communities require more than medication. Becoming a healthcare provider will enable me to educate and empower my patients.

If I could share one piece of advice for an individual hesitant to decide whether or not attend a community college, I would say do it! Regardless of your background or your family status, you certainly are able to do it and the only thing stopping you is you.

Aim for the best and never give up and you will get closer to your goal every day.
Vanessa Primer  
*Highline College*

I would not be the person I am today, nor would I have as bright of a future if I had not enrolled at Highline College.

I was disabled, struggling, homeless and living in my van, with no clue what the future held after exhausting all my savings and resources after an accident. Being homeless or disabled is a huge barrier in itself, but not insurmountable. But the combination of the two?

It was difficult enough to navigate daily life with no income, trying to go to school was an apple out-of-reach, way high up in the tree of life, that I could not climb with my cane.

Everything was a daily struggle, even the basic things a home-full person takes for granted: find a safe space to sleep, eat a meal, take a shower, make it to doctors’ appointments. I never had enough gas for my van, food in my belly, or hope in my heart.

One day I realize I am completely disabled and the old me — that could walk, run, dance, and navigate life without pain — was gone and not coming back. I knew I needed to train for something else if I wanted to move forward with my life. I knew I could get financial aid and had many friends that had gone on to success after going to community college.

A friend and Highline alumna reminded me how bad her life had been and to look at what she had made of herself. She challenged me to enroll at Highline.

I spent a day researching the school, its programs, job prospects, and of getting my Worker Retraining and Basic Food Education Training paperwork ready. By the next day I was officially a student.

There are so many people at Highline that helped, challenged and pushed me. My fellow Non-Traditional Students Club members, instructors Leonard Muigua, Steve Lettic, Chun Yu, Ron Godfrey, Amelia Phillips, and Helen Burn; my advisers like Bopha in TRiO, Jacque and Jen in Honors, and Osure in MESA, Thomas at the CLS. I cannot count them all.

Highline has been my home for the last two years — each instructor, program, activity and class were all silk spinning me into a cocoon — transforming this caterpillar into a flying wonder.

I am a few credits away from graduating — with honors in each — with a double AAS in Digital Forensics & Network Engineering, a certificate in Homeland Security, and am enrolled in Highline’s BAS Cyber Security and Forensics program.

I am Student Body President, and serve as the Washington Community and Technical College Students Association (WACTCSA) Central West Regional Director.

This essay is being written from the dining room in my new home, made possible only through help from Highline. I am looking towards a bright future, made possible because of an education at Highline.

I will go on to a career that will fulfill me and allow me to give back to my community. I will do this because of advice given to me that I pay forward as often as I can. Do not lose your momentum. If not today, when? You can do it. I believe in you.
My barriers to starting college were many. Starting my career at a young age was a huge barrier. I began working at age 13 and did not ever think that I was going to attend college or get a degree. My parents didn’t push me to pursue education as a requirement. I was young and determined to become an entrepreneur in the business world. Therefore, my mind was set on not attending college, but working my way up the chain with experience in sales. I began working in a mall, where I sold outstanding amounts of products, and was the top salesman for many years in a row. Later, I traveled to different states and ran trade shows and ended up becoming sales manager of a wholesale business.

This was until my career of ten years in sales ended until the business I worked for burned to the ground and my former boss was not able to get his company rolling again. After that, I struggled to gain a steady job. Nobody would hire me with experience only. I worked odd jobs here and there, but knew I needed to make a life-changing decision. On top of this my wife was pregnant, and I was about to be a father with a family to support.

I had watched my wife work through her associate’s degree in dental assisting at Bellingham Technical College, while I was working, and was intrigued by how easy she made it seem. She enjoyed school, something that I did not experience with my prior education.

I chose to apply at Lake Washington Institute of Technology for three reasons. First, I had family who had attended and were successful. My brother graduated with a welding degree from LWTech after having struggles in high school. Second, I lived within distance. Third, the admissions process and advising team at the college were excellent.

My advisor, Katie, worked with me to set small goals and did not scare me away from the college. She was helpful, inspirational and supportive — from the day I walked into the building to speak with an advisor, all the way up until I graduated — and I leaned on her throughout my whole education. She helped guide me to all the resources, from grants and scholarships to tutoring and childcare resources.

The nursing program allowed me to reach the education requirement to become a registered nurse and improve my own life and to support my family.

Currently, I am working as a registered nurse for a pediatric clinic. I recently applied for the RN-BSN program at Washington State University, and will continue with my Bachelor’s degree in nursing. I enjoy learning now and have found it takes “having an interest in what you learn, to enjoy what you are learning.” After my BSN, I plan to work towards nurse management.

The best advice I would give someone struggling with the choice to return to school, is to talk to an advisor and apply. If you enjoy what you are learning and are interested in it, you will succeed. Start by taking a class and find something that interests you.

Use available resources, embrace yourself and your college peers. A quote I told myself when the days were hard: “Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.” Don’t give up!
To accept something as true, is to believe ... 

I was born addicted, into a lifestyle of criminality, where my delinquent behaviors and actions weren’t only accepted, but expected. Through false belief-systems, I came to believe school wasn’t important, and I would just become another statistic.

When I was in trouble, my mother, who is still suffering from addiction, would say things such as you’re just like your father or brother: my father, a drop-out, addict, and alcoholic overdosed at the age of 42 from morphine and alcohol. And my older brother, also a drop-out and addict, has spent most of his life incarcerated.

After a while I began believing those statements to be true, and those beliefs have reflected negativity throughout most of my life. I believed this was how my life was supposed to be.

When it comes to my prior education it’s very simple, I don’t have much of one. I’ve never started a school and finished at the same school within a year. Sometimes we moved around so much that I would attend three or more schools per year. I wasn’t allowed to participate in D.A.R.E. activities to keep me from saying anything incriminating towards my family. Sports were out of the question because that would involve getting involved. After numerous in school detentions, suspensions, and plenty of weekends spent in juvie, I was finally expelled.

Since I didn’t have school to keep me busy, I became an addict shortly after being kicked out; and before long, a full-fledged-junkie. My parents allowed me to use drugs if I used in the safety of my own home. When we had a home. Eventually, while maintaining the funding needed to support my habits, I became a criminal.

Over time, I earned numerous felony convictions, resulting in six years in Washington State Corrections. I’ve been in juvenile facilities, county jails, and several state prisons, accepting that path because I believed that I was supposed to be just like my family.

Two years ago, I realized I had a choice as to how to live my life. I chose to go back to school and get a higher education and am the first in my family to do so. I enrolled at Lower Columbia College winter quarter 2016. I started at LCC full of self-doubt. My inner-critic would constantly tell me I wasn’t smart enough for college.” Honestly, I was terrified! But I believed in a life that was better than the one I’ve always known – jails, institutions, and death. That shred of hope was the foundation of my new life.

I have been active in extracurricular organizations such as the Multi-Cultural Club, the Forensics Team, TriO, and Phi Theta Kappa where I serve as the Gamma Tau Chapter Vice President of Service. I have been honored with the duty of serving as the 2017-18 ASLCC President, and have made it my personal mission to enrich the educational journey of those who attend LCC, in turn, enriching our community. I was presented with the 2016-17 Outstanding Student Award by the Psychology Department, and have earned my way onto the President’s List each “full-time” quarter thus far. I have extended my service to the Cowlitz County community through public service projects, where I have participated with multiple organizations and institutions.

I am currently working toward an Associates in Arts – Direct Transfer Agreement, and will continue my higher education in pursuit of a Master’s Degree in Organizational Management: Leadership and Entrepreneurship. I hope to inspire, motivate, and teach others to not sell themselves short, to dream big, want more, and make positive changes happen. Always be thoughtful of what you believe, because changing what you believe can change your life.
Josh Daley  
*Olympic College*

In less than two years, I’ve gone from being homeless to being on the path to a career I’m passionate about. I couldn’t have done it without community support and help from Olympic College and its Foundation.

In February 2016, my dad and I were homeless, sleeping in a car and moving from parking lot to parking lot in Kitsap County. I had a job in retail. I was living paycheck to paycheck. I thought that was going to be my future.

Then I saw a flyer about Coffee Oasis, a Kitsap County center for homeless youth, whose mission is to “Change the world for homeless youth in one community after another through evidence-based youth programs supported by sustainable coffee businesses.”

Kerry Hiskey, my caseworker at Coffee Oasis in Poulsbo, helped me find housing and then encouraged me to think about what I wanted to do with my life. I like to work with my hands, so she suggested the Olympic College (OC) welding program. After going to a job fair at OC, I was even more interested. Tons of employers in the area were looking for welders. There was a huge demand. But, I had no way of paying for this education, and school was about to start for the fall quarter.

My life changed when I was asked to give a speech at a new Coffee Oasis opening in Kingston, WA. I talked about my goal of attending OC. I didn’t realize it at the time, but there was someone in the audience who could help make that happen.

David Emmons, from the OC Foundation, introduced himself to me after my speech and said, “I can help you with your schooling, if you’re serious. School starts in two weeks. Register and then come talk to me.” I was skeptical, but my caseworker helped me apply. The next day, I went into David Emmons’ office. He connected me with programs at the college that covered my books, welding helmet, safety equipment and I received a Herbert Goodman Professional Technical scholarship. Mr. Emmons said they could fund the first quarter and if I was successful, the Foundation would cover the rest of the year.

I never thought I could go to college. Homelessness and finances were big barriers in my life, but the biggest was my lack of self-confidence. I didn’t think I could do it. Back in the small town in Wisconsin where I’m from, I graduated at the bottom of my high school class. I had never been successful in school. Community support helped me believe in myself. David Emmons helped me believe in myself.

And, you know what? I’m actually doing very well in school. I have about 45 credits and I have about a 3.4 GPA. I received another Foundation scholarship for this year, and am looking forward to finishing school. The difference between high school and community college is that this program is something I’m passionate about. I love welding and I’ve got a knack for it. I expect to graduate by the summer of 2018 and I’m interested in looking for jobs that will allow me to learn different welding techniques, like underwater welding. I’m the adventurous type and like different challenges. Eventually, I’d like to work for the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton.

I could never have guessed I would end up on this path. I have good days and bad, but what keeps me going is that I have a community of people who believe in me. Having people believe in me when I didn’t believe in myself is what set it all in motion for me. It’s what changed my life. Here’s what I would tell other students who are wondering if they can go to community college – you can do it! I found a lot of support at OC. Believe in yourself and know there are people there for you and you can succeed. Be willing to ask for help. See what’s out there. I did and it changed my life.
Jeffrey Haley
Peninsula College

I used drugs in one way or another, for 25 years. Ten years of that was done incarcerated in one form or another, using the entire time. In 2004, just before my last term in prison, I overdosed and flat-lined for just over 3 minutes. After two weeks of recovery time, I went right back to my adversary and continued to use until I went back to prison in 2005.

While I was incarcerated, I wrapped up my GED and took some computer classes, in an effort to get my life on track.

When I got out of prison I gained custody of my son who is now 18.

I stayed straight enough to hold down construction jobs and raise him, until he got old enough that he wanted to hang out with his girlfriend more than his ad.

With my son around less, I returned to drug use and in a short time lost everything I had worked so hard for. In May 2016 I picked up another drug related charge and for the first time in my life I had enough. I attended Drug Court and chose to go back to school.

I wanted to be a counselor to help people with the disease of addiction. I gained a new perspective on my use history, seeing it as “research time.” I started courses in the Addiction Studies program with Stacie Bell in fall of 2016. All of the staff are awesome, and I feel like the program was designed for me.

While in the first year I also started working at the Detox Center in Port Angeles, where I realized that this is what I want to do forever. Turning my lifetime of drug use into an opportunity to help other addicts get clean is a dream come true.

I have now graduated from Drug Court and am interning with Cedar Grove Counseling’s Johnny Watts. Johnny is also an Addiction Studies alumnus.

If I could give potential students any advice, I would say it’s easy to get overwhelmed with everything you think needs to be done. Just take one step in the right direction and start getting things done one at a time. Somebody’s hand will guide you through the rest. If you just start, you will build confidence along the way and things will begin to flow.

Peninsula College really helped me change my life, and for that I am eternally grateful.
I rolled over and sat on the edge of my bed, still drowsy. I leaned over to open the window for some fresh air. As I opened the window, I gazed out and saw it was raining. Beyond the rain stood the ever-present reminder I was stuck. As I brought myself back into my surroundings, I saw my cellmate asleep several feet away. My gaze settled on the little square table separating our bunks and sitting on my side of the table was a book.

There was no way to know then that the contents of that book would lead me to where I am now, a Pierce College graduate, a transfer student and merit scholar. I now attend Pacific Lutheran University pursuing a bachelor’s degree in economics. This recent achievement would not have been possible without the time I spent at Pierce College, yet as I reflect, I realize my journey began long before I enrolled in classes.

I first met Mr. Ansorg in the prison’s education department. With the beard of a wizard and a dwarfish face, he struck me as an old soul with a kind demeanor. Over the next two years I worked for him, as a GED tutor, and he became my friend and teacher. I was with him nearly every day—days full of honest, intelligent and challenging conversations. He recognized my genuine desire to choose a different path and he provided me with resources to prepare for college and taught me the value of hard work. With his help, I became a good student during my time as an inmate.

On September 2, 2014, I was released from state custody after serving 30 months. My first stop was Pierce College to register for classes. I chose the college because it was close to my release address, not realizing the impact Pierce College would have in my life. Attending college was terrifying, because I had to face the unknown. As a convicted felon, I had this pervasive fear I would never find success and thought my criminal convictions would haunt me forever. The environment challenged that assumption and my self-confidence grew, and I began to fight back against my fear of failure.

After several quarters at Pierce, I had received good grades and felt confident in my abilities as a student. I decided to apply as a tutor, giving me the opportunity to help my peers achieve their goals while mastering concepts essential to my own success. The application process would force me to face my past for the first time. “I hope I have a job,” I thought to myself as I sat outside the director’s office.

Inside, a discussion was taking place about my criminal history and the outcome would decide whether I became a tutor. I heard the click of a door and looked up, the director approached me with an outstretched hand and exclaimed, “Congratulations, Max you’re hired!”

My new position may not have looked like much, but as I considered my new role, I was now responsible for other students’ learning and was required to work without supervision. As a felon, the biggest label I dealt with is untrustworthiness, but I had just been placed in a position of trust. I felt relieved to be employed, but more importantly I felt relieved because I knew this job would be a signal to future employers that my transformation was authentic.

Two years later, future employers do recognize me as a trustworthy candidate. While working as a tutor I was introduced to several faculty members in the Institutional Research (IR) department. As someone with a history of bad decisions, I am always curious why people make decisions they do. The environment in IR is all about using data to inform decision-making and my curiosity fit in well. Since my first meeting with the IR staff they have continually encouraged my inquiring mind. I have always been honest about my past mistakes and they have never judged me for those mistakes. I am now pursuing an internship with their department to learn how to use my new skills in a way that contributes to student success.
I lost my mother when I was two years old in a drunk driving accident. I spent much of my childhood in various foster homes. Shortly after walking out of my last foster home, at the age of 20, I was kidnapped and shot, leaving me a paraplegic. After being able to walk, to suddenly using a wheelchair is something I am still getting used to. For years I stayed home, being a single mother to my son. After moving to Washington in 2012, I thought I was too old to go to college, and was scared I would be laughed at or made fun of because of my wheelchair. Perhaps most of all, I felt guilty. I didn’t want my family to struggle living paycheck to paycheck the way I grew up. I knew that if I was a full-time student the rest of my family would have to make sacrifices, so I stayed working full-time in retail jobs that I hated and felt guilty for wanting to go to college. I will struggle with some of these obstacles for the rest of my life, but I’ve learned that life is too short and too precious not to try.

My son has always encouraged me to “not be afraid and just do it.” I would usually smile at him and say “I’m too afraid.” Last year on my birthday I realized that I needed to start living the fullest life possible and I decided to “just do it.” I enrolled at Pierce and realized for the first time that if I embrace my son’s advice and just do whatever it is that I am afraid to do, that is when I have the best experiences. Now, I finally feel like I’m becoming the person I was always meant to be.

After I became a CNA, I decided I wanted to become a nurse. I chose Pierce College because it was the closest to my house and had a nursing program. While attending Pierce I realized that I am allowed to change my mind and choose any career path that makes me happy. In summer of 2017 I changed my major to Business Administration because I feel that working in Human Resources for a company will be beneficial. I will be the person who helps hire new employees; people will learn to see past the wheelchair and perhaps the next time they encounter a wheelchair user they will be more open-minded to that persons abilities instead of their disabilities.

Sean Cooke and my ASPCP cronies are part of the reason my college experience has been amazing! Although Sean is the Director of the Office of Student Life, I feel like I can come to him and he will talk me through whatever challenges I am facing. When I first started school here I would just sit silently at the back of my class and I would never talk to anyone, now with the help of my cronies, I’m not afraid to say hello to people, make announcements in front of my class or even get on stage and speak in front of crowds. The people I work with encourage me to push myself every day to do things outside of my comfort zone, like going on the high ropes course, braving a haunted house and being able to dance like nobody is watching. They help me understand that I am making a difference. They are my family and I love them all.

I plan to stay at Pierce until graduation in 2019. I am hoping to score a spot on the 2018-2019 student leadership team because this program is amazing! After I graduate from Pierce with my DTA in Business, I plan to go on to the University of Washington to get my Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration. I don’t exactly know where I want to work yet, but I know I can chase any dream I set my sights on.

Looking back on the time when I was afraid to go to college, I realize that many of the obstacles were imaginary. I think a lot of people have similar fears, but I think we’re often more afraid than we need to be. I wish I could tell people to “not be afraid and just do it.” Whether you use a wheelchair or your legs, don’t be afraid to say yes, you never know where you’ll end up.
Against all odds, I’m still standing. Throughout my life, I’ve been exposed to violence, homelessness, and a struggle to maintain hope. For me, Renton Technical College was the place where hope was reaffirmed and my life transformed. But the road to get here has been long and hard. I walk this world in an undefined middle space. My father is black and my mother is white. Being mixed, I never found a group I could fit in with. I was always different.

This difference was magnified my senior year when I moved to a town that was a stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan. Desks and bathroom stalls had swastikas scratched into them. I was told to “go back to Africa.” For the extra lazy, a simple “n****r!” would suffice. I left immediately after the school year ended.

A year later, I joined the U.S. Air Force, serving in Germany during 9/11. After my discharge, I struggled to transition back to civilian life. I couldn’t overcome my deep despair, even after being admitted to a hospital ICU after a failed suicide attempt.

Fast forward to 2007, I was homeless in Seattle. Sometimes I would sleep in doorways near the Ballard Labor Ready so I could be the first to work in the morning. I contemplated suicide daily. When I swallowed my pride and asked my mother for help, she responded “You’ll be fine.” I realized I was completely alone and it was time to get my life together. College was my only way out.

I chose RTC, because every day my bus would stop by the campus. It would empty in the morning and fill back up in the evenings when I came home. I saw people of diverse identities heading onto campus and in their faces, I saw hope. So at age 33, I registered for my first college classes and from day one, I knew I was home, because everyone was encouraging and I formed friendships with ease.

I took to academic life like a duck to water and I currently maintain a 3.7 GPA. By my second quarter, I was invited to join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, I was hired as a peer tutor, joined the Associated Student Government, and served as vice president of the RTC Surgical Technologist Club.

I completed the Surgical Technologist Program and now I’m working toward completing my associate’s degree, while working part-time as a tissue recovery coordinator for the nonprofit organization, LifeCenter Northwest. This work has been difficult for me professionally and personally. Within the last six months, about a quarter of our tissue donors have died by suicide. One case that haunts me was a black, teenaged boy who died of a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. His case notes showed evidence of a family history of suicide and that his sister discovered his body.

When my student leadership advisor asked what I would do if money were no concern, I replied I would go to school to become a social worker. As a social worker, I would facilitate improvement in lives of people suffering. This would enable them to recover and reclaim control of their lives. Though difficult, my life experiences have given me wisdom and perspective. I have mastered the ability to find common ground with anyone, regardless of background. This skill greatly enhanced my patient care in the medical field, and will make me an outstanding social worker. I have learned I have the capacity to empathize with the suffering of others and that everyone, regardless of identity or life experiences, ultimately desires to be understood.

The advice I would give to fellow students is to own personal responsibility for success and ask for help. You are ultimately responsible for your success or failure. Our colleges have an amazing support system of people who care. Find them. Because of RTC, I have hope, I have skills, I have purpose, I have direction. RTC has transformed my life and I will work to transform the lives of those I will serve.
Omar Osman  
Seattle Central College

My parents fled Somalia in 1991 due to the civil war. I grew up in a refugee camp in Kenya. My ambition to pursue higher education was influenced by these events and experiences. I concluded education is the key to my pursuit of happiness.

In 1997, my parents left for Mombasa, Kenya when I was three months old, followed by a move to a refugee now known as Kakuma, because living in Mombasa was quite difficult. When I was six years old, I started school in the camp. Classes sometimes took place under a tree, and were often overcrowded with more than 350 students to a teacher.

At 14 years old, I finished my primary education. There was stiff competition to continue my education, since the camp had only four secondary schools and 20 primary schools to meet the needs of over 150,000 children and youth. Only the top performers from each primary school could move on; only three percent of primary school graduates were accepted. I studied very hard and did my homework under streetlights because we didn’t have electricity. I was fortunate to get into high school, but some of my classmates failed by two or three points. I was not happy to leave them behind after sitting side-by-side with them for eight years. Even though I was admitted into high school, life was still very difficult. I wasn’t allowed to leave the camp to work in the Kenyan employment sector, because refugees are perceived to be a threat and terror in the community. I lived among people from more than 18 communities from various African nations with different languages, religions, cultures, beliefs and lifestyles. I tried to fit in with these communities and live peacefully, but saw discrimination and violence over limited resources. I forgot my childhood and began to sell bread after school with my mother to earn money for food.

After high school, with no further education available, I organized the Kakuma Youth Leaders to improve conditions for my generation from the various communities. With no budget, the primary goal was to motivate hopeless youth in the camp to believe in their self-worth and find their voice. Soon I started volunteering with humanitarian agencies like United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) in office and outreach between agencies and communities. After a year, I was selected to be a youth leader representing over 150,000 youth. I held the position until I left the camp. In June 2016, I was selected in a nationwide competition to participate in Global Refugee Youth Consultation in Geneva, Switzerland, to advocate for refugee youth in Kenya and create core actions to improve their lives.

After 19 years of being a refugee, my family was lucky to be resettled to the United States in 2016. When I got here, my first priority was education, but I also had to support myself and my family. I went to work at Walmart full-time, while starting school at Seattle Central College (SCC) in January 2017.

My camp leadership role made me want to participate on campus as much as I can. I got involved in student leadership, decided to run for president. In just one day I had to get 100 signatures from all over campus. I felt very comfortable talking with people about what I could do for them as president.

I love Seattle Central. There are more diverse, international students, and the educational opportunities are unlike anywhere else. I like this environment because I am from a very diverse place, and being here helps me to use my experience as a refugee to learn even more. I hope to transfer to the University of Washington to study political science and eventually want to work in government and public advocacy. My advice for students would be to get involved and don’t let anyone underestimate your potential to accomplish your goals and dreams, no matter the barriers you may experience.
Jorge Lara Alvarado  
*North Seattle College*

I migrated from Mexico City with hopes to find better opportunities. The most significant challenge I faced was leaving my sister and mother behind. My mother had recently undergone a mastectomy and my sister was about to graduate from high school. Despite the pain it caused me to leave, knowing I would not be able support my mother through her recovery, I knew migrating to the U.S. was my chance to pursue my goals.

The years required to complete my necessary prerequisites have not been easy. As an immigrant, I learned to balance the requirements of supporting myself while excelling academically. I have accomplished this far from home and far from family. These years, including my time at North Seattle College (NSC) have provided me with the foundation I will need to become an agent of positive change in my field and my community.

I completed my GED at Seattle Central College, but an advisor there said I was not eligible to attend college due to my migratory status. So, looked into North Seattle College, where I found a vast amount of resources and community. My success at NSC was possible thanks to the collective effort of faculty and staff. My instructors established a solid foundation and I feel ready to take on the upcoming challenges in my academic and professional life. Advisors and other staff made me feel comfortable and created a safe space in which to thrive. They assured me I had access to resources such as financial aid, scholarships, counseling and more, so I could focus on being a student.

My family is my main source of support. To have mine far away has been difficult. The distance between us reminds me of the sacrifices we have made and why we want to better ourselves. One way I have coped has been to financially support my family. At one point, I worked four jobs to earn enough money to support them and take care of my needs. This relieved my mother from financial burden and paid for my sister’s college tuition, which brings me peace when I second-guess my decision of leaving them.

In the last few years, safety has become one of the main factors to consider when I think about attending college. Faculty and advisors were there to help me with my concerns and struggles. They understood the extra barriers that immigrant students experience when navigating the education system. Not only did they point me in the right direction, they explained the benefits and risks that come with the decision-making process. I did not experience this degree of openness in other schools. This is of high importance for me because as someone who embodies multiple target-identities, I am sensitive to cultural and political issues.

The support I received from NSC have been fundamental to my academic and professional development. The barriers I have endured as an immigrant have strengthened my resiliency and ability to face multiple injustices. Currently, I am in the Civil Engineering program at Seattle University. My tuition is fully covered by scholarships and grants. I am on the path to get my bachelor’s degree to eventually move forward into graduate school to obtain a master’s degree in structural engineering so I can design and build bridges. I hope to inspire people of color and the Latinx community to become agents of positive change as knowledgeable, and thoughtful individuals. I want to serve as a bridge to help others with their understanding and tolerance of differences.

Immigrants and other minorities may not currently be aware that they have access to college because the process is intimidating, especially for first generation students. To all students who may not be sure about attending college, I say to you: Do not give up! I believe in you. You can overcome the barriers. The process is hard. The faculty and staff at community colleges are passionate and willing to assist you to succeed.
Kaylin Clarke  
**South Seattle College**

I hoped to gain the knowledge and confidence to succeed after graduation, but at South Seattle College, I found myself.

What initially attracted me to welding was the ability to fuse together something entirely new from pieces that at one point felt disjointed. As someone who has lived the majority of my life identifying as a man, it echoes my journey. The idea that our identities aren’t permanent; that they are a meld of our experiences, and can be melted down and rebuilt at any point in our lives.

During high school in Spokane, I was known for being a star athlete. My sporting days — and future military career plans — came to a screeching halt when I was diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis, an autoimmune disease that, in simplest terms, blocks messages sent from the brain to the muscles. At 17, I could hardly move and resorted to sitting at home.

It wasn’t until later in my 20s I started to realize I was transgender and wasn’t truly being myself. Being naive to the LGBTQ+ community, I felt ashamed for having questioned my identity. I started self-medicating with alcohol and slowly started destroying my life. It took receiving a DUI to wake me up from my daze, and it’s by the grace of God I am still here today to share this story.

Last year, my mother shared news article about the high demand for welders, highlighting South’s welding program. This sparked something in me. I started researching earning potential, availability in the intensive program and funding sources. I took a leap of faith knowing only that my tuition was covered by programs like the Basic Food, Employment & Training (BFET) program and an Opportunity Grant.

By mid-quarter, I was successful in class but my anxiety was rising and I was very unhappy. Then I saw a sign for a “Trans 101” seminar and those repressed thoughts came flooding back. November 17, 2016, is a day I will always remember. I realized I was transgender. I was extremely nervous and scared, especially being in a primarily male-dominated technical program.

I reached out to Sol Damaris Mendez, Department of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion program manager. She was so understanding, but she just sat and listened to my story. She let me take my time and when I was done, I felt so free having admitted to someone who I really was. My welding instructor, Doug Rupik, also responded with overwhelming support and asked how he could help me through my transition process. Then, the most amazing email came from South, outlining the campus stance on equality and inclusivity at a time of political drama concerning which bathrooms trans individuals could use. The college’s acceptance of who I am as an individual, that I matter, and have something to offer my community has allowed me to persevere through my transition and financial struggles.

Now I’m seeking a bachelor’s degree and was accepted into South’s Bachelor of Applied Science Sustainable Building Science Technology. Whether earning a college degree or admitting you have been living your life as a lie, dream fearlessly, dream big. Seek out people that will support that dream ... then prepare yourself for the best fight of your life. It is all worth it in the end.
Patricia Barnes  
**Seattle Vocational Institute**

I am a proud, 60-year-old African-American female, born and raised in Seattle. As a child, I saw so many hurting people. Witnessing someone’s pain would cause me much grief because I didn’t know how to help. I remember thinking of special things to do just to bring a smile to someone’s face. My mother is a great motivation, because she taught me to always be nice to others, polite, forgiving and, most importantly, always to give to others, even if it hurts. After my parents divorced, my mom worked two jobs to provide shelter and food for us kids. During this time, I took on the housekeeping, chores, cooking and taking care of my younger brothers. I was a child-parent at seven years old.

Throughout high school I worked as a nurse’s aide in a nursing home after school to help out with the household finances. I didn’t enjoy school or friends much during this time. Although I did graduate with hopes of going to college, that didn’t happen because my first priority was to find a job and help out at home. I worked several entry-level jobs, but lacked the academic and professional skills I needed to perform my duties successfully. Many times I’d end up quitting work because I felt inadequate. I lacked confidence, professional and personal support. I grew up thinking I was a failure and not good enough to become a professional member of society.

My painful childhood experiences led to depression and suicidal attempts as an early adult. I remember telling the doctor, “I don’t want to die; I just want the pain to stop.” This doctor must have felt my pain, because from that point on I was given a special kind of love, care and support I’d never felt before from a professional. I began to trust, and allowed forgiveness and healing to restore me. I vowed to give my time, energy and resources to help someone else along the way.

My greatest accomplishment is returning to school after 35 years. In 2010, I enrolled at Seattle Vocational Institute (SVI) where I received a certificate of completion in the Administrative Office Professional and Medical Administrative Specialist programs. I choose SVI, which provided clerical training and helped me get a job years ago when it was the Seattle Opportunities Industrialization Center. While at SVI, I attended student government and leadership forums that inspired me to believe in my dream, never give up and continue to excel. I heard from professionals in higher education with stories similar to mine and helped influence my decision to continue my educational path on to Seattle Central College.

I could not have made it without the support and continual encouragement from family, professionals and academic members in my community. I would like to acknowledge Tessie Gonzales (SVI), Professor Steve Woods (Seattle Central) TRiO Student Support Services, and Library Staff (SCC) just to name a few for encouraging me through challenging times.

I will graduate from UW School of Social Work Master’s program in June. My goal is to work at Seattle Central College as a social worker. I plan to work toward my PhD, focusing on Organizational Leadership to address global issues of oppression. Never give up, seek advice, and don’t let anyone to dictate your future. It’s not about where you’ve been, it’s about where you are going.
Robin Oliver
Shoreline Community College

I am 53 years old (going on 21) and beginning a new life thanks to my educational experience at Shoreline Community College. I enrolled at Shoreline in 2015, because I had lost my lifelong vocation as a chef in the spring of 2014, when a tendon in the bottom of my foot ruptured. By doctors’ orders, from that day forward, I would have to find a job that I could do while sitting down. I had always worked in various restaurant positions, so I knew that aside from ownership no worker ever sits during a restaurant shift. It was a dark revelation to find that there are no sit-down jobs available without an education.

When I registered, I was sure I would never pass a math test or be able learn how, because I had never been able to before. As a child I felt lucky to receive a grade as high as a C- in any subject. There wasn’t a term for ADD when I was in school, it was just failure to concentrate. After years of being scolded harshly and sometimes yelled at by teachers, though thoroughly ignored by most, then finally kicked out of high school for dying my hair pink, I gladly walked away from the school system forever with an extreme prejudice, and a firm belief in my mental incompetence, having earned .05 high school credits.

After 35 years I finally had to face my fears to become qualified for work outside of the physical labor professions. The fear of becoming a homeless and jobless was greater fear than that of having to learn algebra. I began with the GED courses, and scored higher than expected in English, science and social studies. I had always loved to read in many subjects. My big problem was math. I could not do fractions or comprehend decimals, and division was beyond me. My math instructor, Shelby Sleight, noticed that I had dyscalculia, a form of dyslexia with numbers. Success seemed impossible.

The dedicated teachers and tutors gave me the first positive and effective educational experience I had ever had. Until I worked with Shelby and tutor, Michael Rhymes, mathematical problems caused me to physically panic; my heart would race, I would begin to sweat, and I would feel my pupils shrinking into tiny dots, sometimes with nausea.

Shelby and Michael focused on what I needed to learn and skills I personally had to strengthen to earn a high school diploma, pass the college entrance exams and the upcoming business math classes, if I hoped to earn a degree in Business Technology. My teachers worked with me five days a week for one to three hours a day until I was comfortable with math. There was a peak moment when I finally saw the natural flow of mathematics, and understood the language used to describe it.

I earned my high school diploma through the High School 21+ program in the spring of 2015 at the age of 51. This was a life-changing experience because I had learned more than mathematical skills in my education, I saw who I really was without the shame of failure.

In winter 2016, I graduated from Shoreline again, this time with a degree in Business Technology and a 3.7 GPA. I have re-enrolled in the Visual Communications Technology program and am the president elect of the VCT Club. The graphic design technology I work with everyday requires a constant use of finite mathematics. Ironically, in my new life I have found my calculator to be one of my favorite tools and a constant companion.
My name is Valerie McCormack and I’m a single mom of two. When I think about my life, I realize that I have overcome many challenging obstacles on my path. I grew up in a very abusive home. Both of my parents were alcoholics, my father was in and out of prison. My mother was very abusive physically, mentally, and emotionally. My mom would frequently beat me as a child. I never once was told that I was loved by my mom or even hugged as a child. Growing up being treated this way made me feel as if something was wrong with me.

I was kicked out of my home at the age of 13. My mother’s boyfriend was sexually assaulting me and when I told my mom what was going on, she didn’t believe me and chose her boyfriend over me.

It was very hard for me to concentrate in school because of all the voices in my head telling me I was worthless. I had low self-esteem and felt I had no support, so I joined a gang. I dropped out of school at the beginning of the 8th grade. I became a mom at age 14 and it was a very abusive relationship as I thought this was how I was meant to be treated.

Another challenge in my life, is that I had four children, but have lost two. I lost my 8 year-old-daughter to cancer and my 5-month old son to SIDS. I turned to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain. I was lost and broken with no hope, no reason to continue living. I attempted committing suicide, but thankfully was not successful. I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I was invited to church, where I met my angels who were so supportive. I began to have hope. I put myself into treatment and I am happy to say I have many years clean and sober.

I want to share my story with others and give them hope they too can change their lives around. One of my greatest achievements was being able to turn my life around by turning my pain into purpose to help others.

I have been a volunteer in my community for several years with a few of the local non-profit agencies including Skagit Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services (SDVSAS), Community Action Agency, Relay for Life, and the Ronald McDonald House. I have served many in my community that are homeless, living in poverty, victims of domestic violence, and raised thousands of dollars for childhood cancer. I am a volunteer advocate with SDVSAS.

My difficult upbringing shaped who I am today. They are some of the reasons why I am determined to continue to better my life for myself and my other two children. I understand that education is my path to success.

I am enrolled at Skagit Valley College in the HS21+ diploma program. Two classes away from completing the HS21+ Diploma program and then I will be continuing on in the Human Services program here at Skagit Valley College. I was never taught growing up how important having an education was. Now that I have an opportunity to get an education here at Skagit Valley College I’m doing everything it takes to make it happen. I believe this is my second chance in life and I’m willing to do what it takes to get this education. I want to be a significant role model for my children.

My piece of advice would be; don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do it. Don’t let what others say effect your decision about your educational dreams and goals. Education is the pathway to success. Be patient with yourself, and know that each day is a chance to take action in your steps toward the person you want to be. Don’t underestimate what you’re capable of. It’s never too late to go back to college.
Sayda Kong  
*South Puget Sound Community College*

I am from Sudan (Africa). I grew up in Sudan, but it was not an easy life. We always needed to flee in the middle of the night to walk from city to city. When they bombed one place we moved to the next place but we still had to walk to some city to get flour and salt.

One day I was carrying flour back on my head and I had my plastic shoes in my hand because I had blisters on my feet. We had to be quiet and sneak by the trees. But, I got bit by a snake on my ankle and screamed. My brother found me passed out on the ground and carried me home but there was not even a bicycle to get me to the hospital. I had to spend the night very sick and then my dad laid me in the hot sun in the middle of the road so any car passing would need to stop. I spent three months in the hospital but I recovered and became a nurse practitioner in 1994. Because of the war many people in my family were killed. They really wanted to catch me because I was a nurse. So in 1999 I escaped to Egypt to look for any country I could go to. I was selected to come to the United States by the US Embassy as a refugee. When I arrived, I didn’t know how to speak English, and I was desperate for one day that I would be able to speak English.

When I came to the United States, I became a mom of two boys and worked as a caregiver. I couldn’t go to school since I had to take care of two kids and work. In 2012 I had a job injury so I can’t lift anymore. After my surgery I stayed home with no income, depending on government sources. I became a citizen in 2006 because I memorized the 100 questions and answers—even the spelling. I did this because I wanted to be a good example for my kids. Finally, in 2013, my boys were in school and I decided to come to take a placement test at SPSCC. I wanted to learn English so that I could go back to my career in nursing. I was placed in level 3 ESL classes and entered the I-Best Program. One of the ESL teachers, Crystal Ashley-de-Varglass, took me under her wing and helped me learn about American culture. I worked hard to get my way up through college, leading to my graduation in 2016 with a Medical Assistance Certificate. However, for my medical disability (I was in a wheel chair), I cannot work as a phlebotomist, where you draw blood in the hospital which required a lot of bending over and walking. I came back in order to get my Medical Assistance Degree and my AA degree. Because of my language barrier I need to get my AA degree before I can take the National Board Test to transfer my nurse practitioner degree to the United States. Having a better job to support my kids to finish their education and have a better life so they can be independent.

I believe that if I work hard, one day I will get out of government funding and be able to help my community as an American citizen. I want to be able to feed myself and meet my kids’ needs. All this is happening because of the support I get from SPSCC. Thank you for the disability services, math tutors, writing center, computer lab, STAR bus pass program, and the library. These student supports have been critical in my growth and success.

If my voice can be heard I would tell everyone to please follow their education everywhere you can. Never give up; without education, we are nothing. I see some people that would be able to do it, but they are not giving themselves enough time; they rush or just give up. I will be an example that they should not give up.

In closing, I want to thank Kayana Hoagland, my former math teacher, for nominating me for the Transforming Lives Award. When I read the nomination letter I cried, because at that very moment I realized how close I am to achieving my AA goal after all these years of hard work.
I was born and raised in Spokane, Washington, my mother tried raising my two sisters and myself the best she could. We were always on welfare and it seems that there was not a day that went by that I was not hungry. I clearly remember planning "sleep overs" with my school mates in hopes that I could eat at their house on the weekends. With poverty comes many other challenges like drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and failing grades.

I dropped out of high school in 1988 and received my GED in 1990. I thought I would never see the inside of another school the rest of my life. I spent my twenties and thirties raising kids on a minimal income. I was always working some sort of entry level position and times were always tough. I just assumed that because of my family's past, I was destined for a subpar life.

It was just the "hand I had been dealt". Then in 2015 I decided to look into attending Spokane Community College at the age of 44. I was tired of dead end jobs and to be honest, I was tired of feeling like a failure. I had spent years driving by the SCC campus while watching others park their cars and go into a place where they were learning to better themselves. Just another reminder that I was not like them. I decided one day in March of 2015 that I was worthy. I was nervous and had no idea what to expect, but I took the assessment test and enrolled in school. I am a first generation college student in my family. My story gets better, that exact same day I met a homeless man who had been recently robbed of his backpack. I bought him lunch and we talked for a while.

I offered to bring him a backpack the next day if he would agree to meet me. I went home and shared my experience on social media and asked people to help me fill just ONE backpack. Well, in the first 24 hours we filled 25 backpacks and that was the day that Giving Back Packs was started. We have since handed out over 1,500 full backpacks to our homeless population in Spokane. These backpacks are filled with food, toiletries, clothing, and hope.

With my grade point average (3.4) and my community involvement I am happy to report that Gonzaga University offered me a $34,000 scholarship and I am currently a student at GU studying Communications with a minor in Public Relations. My son Josh is now a student at Eastern and my daughter Allea just enrolled at SFCC.

The cycle has been broken. I would not be here today if it were not for the teachers and staff at Spokane Community College who encouraged me and believed in me.

I will never forget my teacher Cindy Trujillo speaking with me during my graduation ceremony and telling me that she would love to see me come back to SCC as a Communications instructor. Sometimes I cannot believe that this is MY life that I am speaking about.

I am now a huge advocate for others who are thinking about returning to school. We are never defined by our circumstances, we can rise above those things that have held us down.
Tracy Fejeran
Spokane Falls Community College

Three years after becoming blind, I was diagnosed with end-stage renal disease. It was the most difficult transition of my life. I have adapted over the years, attended self-advocacy workshops and taken advantage of resources that helped me live as independently as I did as a sighted person. I got involved and volunteered with groups providing peer support and awareness.

I am now a junior at Eastern Washington University, pursuing a BA in Communication Studies and a minor in Disability Studies. My goal is to be successful in the career of my choice and contribute to my community despite my disability.

I was on dialysis for five years. The treatment left me weak and sick even though it was lifesaving. I received a kidney transplant in February 2014 and have to take antirejection medications for the rest of my donor kidney’s lifetime. This leaves me with a compromised immune system, so even a simple common cold could become life-threatening. I caught pneumonia last winter quarter while at Spokane Falls Community College (SFCC) and was in the ICU for several days.

During spring break of my first year at SFCC I had a heart attack and received a double stent implant. I forged on and continued the school year. I had so many complications that by the middle of spring 2016, I had to have open heart surgery and a double bypass. I worked out an arrangement with my instructor through the Disability Support Services (DSS) office to complete my assignments. I had physical and occupational therapy to regain my strength and return to school. I returned in the fall to complete credits needed to graduate. So aside from all that, I still had the challenges of being blind, navigating through campus. I had some orientation from the Division of Services for the Blind prior to the starting at SFCC, but still found myself walking towards the parking lot.

My fellow students would ask if I needed help, but I would be humorous and say I was looking for my car. Sometimes humor can make an awkward moment less embarrassing, I found myself walking into the janitor’s room face-to-face with his mop. I would go in circles in the Engineering building, because I get easily disoriented. Fortunately, the college community were very understanding when I had to seek help as a last resort. I chose to attend a community college because the environment was perfect for someone like myself. I am a returning student after 12 years and a person with a disability and other health issues. It is a great segue to my transition to university for my undergraduate degree.

I attribute part of my success to Angela Merritt and the DSS staff. My greatest impediment was access. I had to be able to access my class materials and textbooks via digital format. My textbooks were all in alternate text format prior to the start of each quarter. My instructors were made aware that I needed all hand-outs and written materials in digital format. DSS staff were always available to listen to my concerns. I have to say that DSS made my school experience at SFCC a memorable one and inspired me to achieve my goals despite my impediments.

I say to students considering college: set your goals and understand what it would take to achieve them. Choose a school with resources to help overcome your barriers. It is up to you, the student, to advocate for your needs and maintain communication with your support person or office. Stay positive and hold your head high regardless the downfalls you encounter through your pursuit of educational success.
Rain Coley
Tacoma Community College

At 23, I figured out what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wanted to be a sonographer. When I researched what it would require, I was convinced I wasn't smart enough.

I am a high school dropout and couldn't do basic math. The prerequisites were intimidating so I never pursued it. I became a mom for the first time at 15 and everyone, including myself, saw that as the end to any chance I had at becoming successful. I grew up with an abusive alcoholic mom and we once spent about a year in the YWCA shelter. People like me do not become success stories. That is the message I have heard and have told myself my entire life.

In my early 20s, I prided myself on being a free spirit that went where the wind blew her and the idea of college seemed stifling. How could I be the wild and free quirky girl under the pressure of deadlines and expectations?

Over the course of eight years, my family moved three times because of my husband’s active duty status. I would research ultrasound programs in whatever new area we were living in, each time telling myself that maybe one day the prerequisites would change and be easier. The years passed and the desire to pursue what had become my dream grew.

I applied to Tacoma Community College (TCC) on a whim, realizing I could continue to keep watching the prerequisites get harder or I could try. I started checking out math tutor DVDs from the library, working through them while my kids were at school. In the evenings, my daughter would help me with my multiplication.

In January 2014, I started classes. During my time at TCC, life happened. Family members passed away, my marriage almost ended, and the entire time, I have worried about my living situation. Through it all, I challenged myself to stay focused without medication and to do my best.

I've been told multiple times I suffer from "impostor syndrome" and I would say that there is truth in that statement. That lifelong voice has prevented me from celebrating my own successes. When I finally got an A in precalculus, I told myself it was because the grading must have been curved. I retook Biology 241 three times, improving each time, and when I finally got the A, I said it had to be the instructor taking mercy on me. My inability to see myself as others see me, keeps me humble but it also keeps me from feeling pride in the hard work and accomplishments I've reached.

I am proud to say I've been accepted into the diagnostic medical sonography program 2017 cohort and plan to excel even more in this next chapter of my college experience.

I have found support in multiple unexpected corners at TCC. I found it in SI leaders and WTC staff, as well as instructors that have challenged me in and out of the class, that didn't let me make excuses, and have become mentors. In new friends that understand the days when you just want to cry, throw your books in a fire and quit. Every single one of these people got me where I am today.

If I gave a prospective student advice, I would tell them to just start. It is the most terrifying, yet rewarding, decision they will ever make for themselves. More than ever, I realize I have found myself and that means more than anything.
My name is Citlaly Gutierrez Fuentes and I received my Associate degree in biology from Walla Walla Community College in 2017.

I am a first generation student. My mom left school at a very young age to support her household. She worked in babysitting and washing dishes as a 10-year-old girl. Therefore, she engrained the importance of education to my siblings and me since it wasn’t an option for her.

After high school, I dreamed of going to a university, but because of my background — my mom being a single parent and low-income household — I felt like it was unattainable at the time.

I eventually rounded up the courage and applied to universities, and got accepted to a few. I started my educational journey in August and had my dream cut short in December because of my predisposition to cancer.

In my first semester attending that university, I became very ill. I had two, 2mm and 8mm tumors removed from my breast to ring in the new year. After surgery, I fell into crippling depression because I couldn’t return to college since I was in recovery for months.

I felt like my ambitions were not in my hands anymore. I didn’t want to give up on something I just started, so I grabbed the little bit of hope I still had and enrolled myself in Walla Walla Community College for spring quarter 2016.

I joined the honors program they offered, and TRiO program as well. They guided me and pushed me to my full potential. I learned confidence, resilience, and community here. I realized there are other ways to reach my aspiration besides the traditional standards of going to a four-year school. In addition, I had so many more opportunities given to me because of my drive and my pursuit for higher education.

I’m still fighting tumors and just recently had a part of my breast removed. Yet, I’m still holding on to my desire to become an orthopedic surgeon one day and live out the American dream that my family has fought for, to be that inspiration to reach an educational goal and proudly say ,“Si Se Pudo.” That means “Yes, we did it!”
I would love to share my personal experience of poverty, losing my country, and learning to succeed and love a new country with others who may have been through a similar story as mine. I am Guatemalan. It defines who I am and the reason I strive for success. I grew up in the midst of poverty, unable to afford a pair of shoes until age 10. My backpack was made out of a cheap plastic bag, yet I was always happy and proud to go to school when I could. I remember those long arduous days in the cornfields helping my parents work when there was no school. Their income alone was not enough to sustain our family, and I often had to help them. Even though I grew up in an impoverished home, I did not see it as a negative thing, rather I embraced my culture and appreciated my humble beginnings.

Moving to the United States meant relief from the poverty in Guatemala and new educational opportunities for my family and I. In 2001, my father made the decision to immigrate to the US in search of a better job and provide a better life for us. My father was away for six long years working hard to provide for our family. Soon after, my mother would also leave Guatemala to join my father in the US. My parents worked extremely hard but were unable to give us the life they envisioned for us. For three years, my siblings and I were without our parents, which was very difficult. Finally, the day arrived when our parents came back for us and brought us to the US. When I left Guatemala, I promised myself that I would get an education and not squander any opportunities before me, and make my family proud. I was 14 years of age when I first arrived at the land of the free, realizing that it was not all that free. I had to earn everything through hard work, dedication, persistence, and perseverance. Nothing was handed down to me.

In the fall of 2014, I decided to attend Wenatchee Valley College and further my education. There I faced new challenges. In my first quarter, I had to start with below college-level classes and work myself up. Being a first-generation college student was not easy, but thanks to the academic support receive from the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) I was able to succeed through my first year. Additionally, I was nominated and awarded the “Inspirational Student” award from the CAMP Program. This inspired me to continue working harder and never give up on my educational goals.

My second year at WVC, I wanted to be more involved in my educational experience, and I decided to challenge myself. I was elected secretary of the Associated Students of WVC. I wanted to join student government to ensure the needs and ideas of students like me are heard. I also wanted to become a better leader. I wanted to represent, encourage and be a voice for other students like me. I gained and strengthened valuable leadership skills like communication, teamwork, patience and problem-solving.

WVC helped me go beyond my expectations. If someone asked me if I would change my past, I would say no, because so far my biggest achievements at WVC have been many: learning English, being successful in school and now wanting to get a college degree. From this moment forward, I can say I’m very proud of myself for being where I am.

I’m currently attending the University of Washington where I’m planning to get my Bachelor of Science degree. My bachelor’s is not the only goal I would love to accomplish at UW. I’m planning to earn my PhD. in Psychology. After getting my PhD. I would love to return to Guatemala and write a book about the challenges that I overcame in the United States. It would be rewarding to return to Guatemala to provide support and resources to underprivileged children because I know how important these resources are. To be able to give back to my community and my country through my hard work and dedication is what motivates me.
I came to Bellingham in March 2016 to attend Whatcom Community College. There were countless obstacles I overcame to come here. I was born and raised in a refugee camp in Algeria. This is because my people fled from Western Sahara where they were persecuted by the Moroccan occupation of our land. After eight years of studying English in my camp, I met with an American friend, Joey, who wanted to help me get to school. Joey suggested I try a community college because it would be a smoother transition for me. He told me that his sister lived in Bellingham, WA. At that point, I started looking into WCC. We wrote a strategy to follow, but it was full of red flags.

Because I am a refugee, I had to obtain an Algerian passport so I could travel. This meant waiting for almost a year to get approval. I was not able to apply like an international student from a regular country because my family and I did not have any money, and I did not have a high school diploma. At the age of 14, I had to quit school in order to take care of my mother and my six younger siblings.

I contacted Whatcom and shared my story with the international office and did the application process. They assured me I didn’t need to have a high school diploma to apply. Before I could get my I-20, I had to prove I had $12,000 for tuition. Joey helped me start a fundraiser page so people could donate to help pay my tuition. I had to open a bank account in Spain to have a recognized bank statement with the $12,000. I also had to take my TOEFL test so I could apply for an F-1 visa. The visa was the last rock in the road but it was the biggest. After three years of preparation for Whatcom, nobody could predict if it would actually happen because nobody had power over the visa. It was a “yes” or a “no,” depending on how the 2-minute interview went. It was a “yes” for me.

I was so excited about the news of my approval. Looking at the brochures for WCC, I saw there were students of all ages and backgrounds. I was compelled by the diversity of the students, events and clubs. Plus seeing female students with veils made me feel this was a great place for me since I am Muslim and I wear a Hijab.

Starting my life-transforming experience at WCC, I was so blessed to have Jason Babcock as my math instructor. Because of my math struggles, he gave me plenty of time and support to understand the lessons. Jason helped me and guided me to places where I could receive additional help. His uplifting words and classroom approach were what I needed to succeed. He not only helped me with math, but he supported me through the struggles I had during my first quarter as a new student in a foreign land.

The Intercultural Center has become a home for me. I’m able to practice my faith rituals—a big part of my life—and spend time in a diverse, safe community that is willing to listen, support, and love, in spite of all the differences.

After finishing my AAS, I hope to transfer to a 4-year college to major in Sustainable Development, and perhaps go for an MA. One of my goals is to bring one woman from my refugee camp to study here. I also want to build a library in my camp to create a culture of reading. My biggest dream is to help refugees as well as advocate for the right to self-determination for my people.

I want to tell those who are currently attending a community college, or those hoping to attend, they have to know that no matter how many barriers are in their way, nothing can stop them from following their dreams. Being part of WCC has convinced me there are so many hands willing to guide you to your success.
Amanda Murphy  
Yakima Valley College

At my high school attending YVCC was discouraged by students and staff alike. Our teachers told us the honors and AP classes at the high school were of much higher quality than a community college’s classes, and other students looked at YVCC with disdain and told me to wait a couple more years and attend a real college.

Even the counselors seemed to try and talk students out of attending Running Start at YVCC, but I did my own research. I saw that YVCC had high quality classes with excellent professors, and running start made my classes very affordable.

I was compelled to attend a community college to get a head start on my higher education.

I knew that I wanted to go to college and going to a community college, especially through the Running Start program, provided an affordable way to start working towards my degree.

I choose YVCC specifically for their science department. I have known for a while that I want a career in science, and no other school in Yakima can compare themselves to the science programs, equipment, and professors available at YVCC.

One individual who helped transform my life and contribute to my success was my chemistry professor, James Klarich. Mr. Klarich possessed an enthusiasm about chemistry that was contagious and made me more excited about chemistry and school than any other professor has. Mr. Klarich inspired me to pursue a chemistry-based field and get my associate of science.

This year I hope to graduate YVCC with my associate of science and transfer to another university. From there I plan to get a bachelor’s degree in chemistry before transferring to a pharmacy program to hopefully get a career as a pharmacist.

If I were to give advice to any current students I would tell them to find classes that excite them and to not just take easy classes and graduate without finding their passion.

For people who are unsure about their ability to attend a community college. I would tell them to just take it slow, pick one class that you think sounds interesting and throw 100 percent of yourself into it, school isn’t just about getting good grades, it’s about finding yourself and pursuing your passions.
2017-2018
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