Transforming Lives Awards

Celebrating Student Achievement

Angel Delker
South Seattle College

Andre Henderson
Olympic College

Kristi Maldonado
Grays Harbor College

Melisa Suljic
Everett Community College

Erma “Jessica” Villarino
Yakima Valley College

Kyle Von Stroberg
Skagit Valley College

Washington’s Community and Technical Colleges

February 2020
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 34 students chosen, the ACT Awards Committee selected six awardees to serve as keynote speakers at the February 17, 2020, 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 2020 Transforming Lives awardees are:

- Angel Delker
  South Seattle College
- Andre Henderson
  Olympic College
- Kristi Maldonado
  Grays Harbor College
- Melissa Suljic
  Everett Community College
- Erma “Jessica” Villarino
  Yakima Valley College
- Kyle Von Stroberg
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While just six students were selected to serve as keynote speakers, committee members found compelling stories of determination and success among each of the 34 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.
In August of 2016, I was beginning my junior year at University of Washington Tacoma. As a Communications major, my hard work placed me on the Dean’s List for several quarters. Suddenly, my mother was diagnosed with stage IV neuroendocrine cancer and the outlook was grim.

Despite the despair I was experiencing in my personal life, I tried to remain focused on school. I spent many hours doing homework in the oncology department at Tacoma General Hospital while my mother received chemo. As my mom’s tumors grew, despite treatment, I began caring less and less about school. Instead, I cared about a way out of my grief. I was mourning my mother as she died before my eyes.

I spent countless nights sleeping on the cot in my mom’s tiny hospice room. I attempted homework, but I ended up failing two out of my three classes that quarter. I tried to return for winter quarter, but my family urged me to come back to the hospital to be with my mom. My mom passed away during the early morning hours in January of 2017. I wouldn’t return to class for more than two years.

In those two years, I made bad life decisions out of grief and couldn’t hold down a job, from fast food to gas stations. I even worked as a door-to-door canvasser. None of them stuck, and I knew that I was wasting my potential. I was couch surfing and relying on public transportation to get around. However, the urge to return to school never subsided.

This year, I visited Bates Technical College with my boyfriend, who was attending, and I saw a brochure for the Broadcasting and Video Production (BVP) program. My heart fluttered; school was my happy place, where I thrived. I knew that this program held the key to my success, the key I had been searching for. Bates was to be my bridge to a career.

The BVP program at Bates has profoundly transformed my life. For the first time, I know what I want to do. Having this sense of purpose improved my ability to make responsible choices. My teachers Roland Robinson and Ken Witkoe encouraged me to dive into each opportunity that presented itself, so I joined the Associated Student Government (ASG), a job which allowed me to secure housing and get my very first car.

Anyone thinking of attending a technical college should go for it. They won’t regret it. From my registration process through present day, the faculty and staff at Bates have demonstrated that they genuinely want me here. They recognize me for my worth as a student and as a human being.

Education is a tipping point for many students, and as students’ skill sets grow, our lives transform. I believe that being a part of this process is the very reason that the staff and faculty at Bates go to such great lengths to help students succeed.

With the hands-on instruction and support these teachers offer, not only have I learned skills for a career, but I’ve found my place. The ASG and the BVP program are my family; my people. Someday, I’m going to be a news producer for a local news station in the Pacific Northwest, my home and the place I love. I know that Bates Technical College is exactly where I’m supposed to be to make my dream a reality.
Kati Phillip  
*Bellevue College*

My mother defied the odds during her own tumultuous upbringing to raise me and my six siblings to the best of her abilities. My hope is to follow in her footsteps and the footsteps of others who made history by carving out a future of their own, when they too were dealt an unfortunate hand in life.

*Beginning.* I’m humbled to share my story with peers whose upbringing is not dissimilar from mine. My struggles are not my own, but rather a reflection of what many experience. I began my life as a statistic; I was one of 15 million children in the U.S. who lived below the federal poverty threshold. When I wasn’t surviving impoverished conditions at home, or sleeping in cars or between shelters, I was home-schooled, where I taught myself the guitar, piano, calligraphy and German. To this day, my family stresses the importance of an education as a tool for escaping poverty, so when I graduated from high school, I moved to Seattle to become a first-generation college student at Bellevue College (BC). I began my journey with the intent of transferring to the University of Washington (UW) for in-state tuition. However, my BC passage wasn’t without its struggles.

*Darkest.* When I moved to Washington, I saved enough money to live one month in an Airbnb. Back then, I worked as a barista with a four-hour bus commute until I saved enough to move near BC. My first fall quarter at Bellevue was a disaster. I was dealing with my grandmothers passing, a two-hour bus commute to work and class, all while taking 18 credits. Consequently, my health deteriorated under the stress, as I experienced debilitating anxiety that caused migraines, weight loss, teeth and vision problems, visible shaking, as well as a scalp condition with periods of hair loss. By the end of my first quarter, I was defeated and those feelings didn’t subside until I actively sought help.

*Dawn.* At BC, I was forced to quit my job to focus on improving my grades while relying on financial aid. I eventually maxed out my credit cards and had to seek financial assistance from local charities and family to keep afloat. I also sought help from BC’s student academic planning and tutoring services to establish a consistent study schedule, along with smart-studying habits. Additionally, I frequented BC’s counseling services to manage my anxiety. Soon, I became a student that participated and earned top marks in all my classes. But most importantly, I received help from BC’s faculty, Professor Jennie Mayer. After experiencing another tragedy in my family and being on the brink of eviction, Professor Jennie loaned me enough money to afford rent until financial aid was available.

While my BC commute is still two hours, I am able to balance by taking online classes. I also now work remotely as a full-time QA Analyst. I’m defying the odds while staying on the path to earning an ‘A’ GPA and pursuing a career as a data scientist. Once I’ve completed my final classes at BC, I’ll transfer to UW to complete my bachelor’s degree in Chemical Engineering utilizing all the tools I’ve learned while at BC.

My experiences have resulted in a unique perspective on life. The reality is, when you’re depressed or have anxiety, you need to muster the courage to recognize you possess potential. You don’t have to put aside your fears as you walk into your counselor’s office, seek tutoring, or visit your professor after class; instead, you do these things when you’re afraid, and that’s called bravery.
Irene Campbell  
*Bellingham Technical College*

Most of my childhood, my siblings and I didn’t have running water, electricity, or regular access to healthcare. I remember waking up screaming in the middle of the night because my tonsils burst due to untreated strep throat. I remember my mom struggling through the side effects of trial drugs and treatments because we couldn’t pay for medicine.

After graduating high school, I didn’t consider technical colleges. I equated a four-year degree with success and my ticket out of poverty. I graduated from college with a 3.9 GPA and a bachelor’s degree in Liberal Studies. I consistently worked 20 to 30 hours a week throughout college; yet, I still graduated in 2008 with well over $20,000 in debt.

I expected to find a great job with benefits. I had multiple reference letters from my past employers and professors. Many resumes and interviews later, I was unbelievably discouraged. In addition to bills, my student loans were now rolling in. I needed a job, but everyone wanted someone with experience. I ended up working at a Quiznos. I had to hold back the tears when asked to hold a sign by the side of the road to advertise. I wasn’t above holding a sign, but the years of hard work and debt had led to this? What was the point? I was paying for groceries and gas with a credit card and took out yet another loan (at very high interest) to pay for a car.

I eventually did find an entry-level job with a little better pay. I worked hard for over eight years repaying my loans and trying to build up my life. I got married, developed and defeated cancer, purchased a home, gave birth to a lovely daughter, and faced aging and ill parents. My career could no longer meet the financial demands of life. What could I do? I started researching other avenues. Would BTC’s dental hygiene program work? Even after reading about the impressive statistics of the dental hygiene program I had several fears and obstacles: How would we afford a $40,000 program with one income? What if I couldn’t hack being a student anymore? What if I failed? Prior graduates that I talked with loved their new careers, the financial gains, and the life-work balance that accompanied it. When I applied, the job placement rate was over 90% within nine months of graduation.

Entering my second year into this program, I am not disappointed. My instructors are unbelievably committed to my success. I’ve never had this much one-on-one access with multiple instructors at a four-year school. My BTC instructors met early with me and stayed late to ensure that I understood material and developed skills. As I prepare for Boards, I’m reassured by results of my prior graduating class who exceeded the national average test scores. I’m given weekly clinical experience and have unofficial job offers. Every quarter, I’ve been granted scholarships from the BTC foundation.

This new career will raise our socioeconomic status; allow us to provide more opportunity for our daughter; take care of my aging parents; and offer more free time to give to the community. I plan on working in a private office part-time and working in public health education.

My advice to potential students is simple. Know that your time, energy, and resources are valuable. My degree did not set me apart from other applicants nor did it get me where I wanted to be. After only a two-year program at BTC, I will have a high-demand skillset earning more than double what took me eight years of dedicated work to achieve. Know your options.
Shalon Gough
Big Bend Community College

Attending Big Bend Community College was an easy decision for me considering it is close to family as well as having the reputation for an outstanding Nursing program.

I chose to enroll in spring 2018. A few days after the quarter started, I was able to meet with the pre-nursing advisor, Jen Deleon, and get started right away in the CNA course. Getting started immediately was helpful; going back to school at nearly 30 years old is daunting, I was able to jump in with both feet and not look back.

The true transformation for me began after completing summer quarter in 2018 and beginning fall quarter, I had received a 4.0 in my beginning classes and wanted to strive to continue that but was unsure of my abilities since I was starting my first chemistry class ever! Luckily, I was enrolled in a course with Sarah Bauer. She was motivating and encouraging as an instructor and I did receive that 4.0 as well as continue on with her into organic chemistry. Realizing I’m able to achieve the grade I desire has opened so many doors for me. I joined Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) and met so many great students who quickly became friends, as well as classmates, that I’m on the same science track with. You don’t imagine, when you start back to college so late in life, that you’ll be making so many new and close friends.

Before I started back to college I was a part-time massage therapist and had been in that career since I was 19 years old. I also had a family, including three children. Working and having children would make it nearly impossible for me to attend college, more so due to the fact that my youngest son, Joshua, was diagnosed with a terminal form of epilepsy when he was six weeks old. Our family was lucky to have been blessed with 22 months with Joshua before he passed away in February 2018. Returning to work and life a few weeks after his death was impossible for me. I needed a change; I needed to help others who were in a similar situation. The nurses who cared for Joshua on our many trips to Seattle Children’s, and the Hospice nurses who cared for him while we were home, changed our lives and I don’t know how I would’ve survived Joshua’s life and his death without them. That was push for me to return to school for nursing; my hope is to change someone’s life like mine was changed by those around me.

This quarter I’m tackling a full course load with A&P, Microbiology, and Psychology 200. My immediate goal is to excel in these courses. I will finish my pre-requisites for nursing winter quarter and plan on getting into the RN program at Big Bend. I’ll continue to get my BSN and specialize in pediatrics, including hospice and palliative care.

My advice to other students thinking about starting at a community college is to just start. Don’t overthink it. Make friends with instructors and other students; they will become your life support. I’d end with don’t doubt yourself as a student. If you have a growth mindset, it’s entirely possible to not only pass your classes but pass them at the top of the class.
What compelled me to attend a community college was not only its affordability, relative to a four-year university, but also the fact that attending a community college would mean that I would not have to leave the network of people I had grown up with immediately after high school. Attending Cascadia College meant being able to continue working with the friends I made in my first job, being able to bike from my home to my college campus, and always being able to find people to support me through the transition from high school to college.

At Cascadia College, the individual who contributed most to my success was Bryan Fauth, the director of the Disability Support Services program at Cascadia College. He introduced me to Google Calendar, an app for computers and smartphones that sends notifications to its users to remind them of events: when the events take place, where they are, and any other important details the user enters into the calendar. After I started using Google Calendar, I became a much more organized person, because Google Calendar helped me handle the two most difficult aspects of the transition from high school to college. For me, the most challenging aspect of college was that suddenly, students were held accountable for keeping track of when their assignments were due, rather than being reminded day after day about them and encouraged to write them down in a district-provided planner. The second most challenging aspect of college for me was the changing class schedules from quarter to quarter, and even within a quarter itself when classes were canceled unexpectedly. However, as long as I put the times I had to be in class in Google Calendar and the room numbers of my classes, I wouldn’t be in danger of forgetting that I had classes on a given day.

Although few barriers prevented me from attending a community college after graduating high school, one obstacle that limited my college attendance was that it was very challenging for me to take college courses while in high school. Since I was not a student of the school closest to my house, I would need to sign many forms and meet with many people in order to attend college while in high school. Thus, I decided to wait until I graduated from high school to attend college courses, and earned college credit in high school through taking Advanced Placement exams instead.

As for my goals for the future, I plan on transferring to Western Washington University in the fall of 2020 to major in Special Education. As a former student of grade school with high-functioning autism, a former volunteer in a classroom for students with disabilities, and a current recipient of disability support services, I care deeply about making education accessible for all students.

Aside from the typical advice given to college students (don’t plagiarize, write emails professionally, and don’t procrastinate), the lesson I have learned that I am most adamant about passing on to other students is that they must put a system in place for themselves that reminds them where they need to be, when they need to be there, and when their assignments are due. Google Calendar, in my opinion, is the best organizational system for college students, but several other alternatives exist that may work better for other students. It is not important what technological organizer students use, as long as students find a system that works for them and sends them notifications before the deadline of their assignments.
Aaron Fowler  
*Centralia College*

I am 48 years old and have experienced many of life’s ups and downs. While in prison, I seriously re-evaluated my life and decided to make a change. I worked for Correctional Industries in the construction and shipping of office chairs, and later traveled around the state setting up office cubicles with state furniture. In 2014, I was accepted into work release and I got a job at Ostrom Farms in Lacey, WA. I worked until an injury prevented me from continuing. No work, no money. I lost my apartment, my relationship, and I became homeless. I had hit rock bottom. College was a last-ditch effort. Student government has contributed greatly to my confidence.

In winter 2018, I was accepted to Centralia College. My family encouraged me to get involved on campus and to consider applying for student government. I began researching the student government process and what it would take to get involved. The thought of becoming part of student government was exciting and I couldn’t wait for spring quarter. I honestly did not think I had a chance of being selected. Spring finally arrived, and I was able to engage in the process completely. I was selected as vice president of the Associated Students of Centralia College. It was an amazing feeling of happiness and excitement. By the end of my first year I found I really enjoyed working in student affairs. I ran for student government again in spring 2019 and was selected as president for the 2019-2020 year. Over these last few months, I have really grown personally and gained confidence in my leadership role.

When I was younger, I attended Centralia College, but I wasted the opportunity to earn my education. I did not care about life because alcohol and drugs were more important. My life declined to the point where I found myself in prison.

Currently, I have been experiencing challenges in my current degree path. I am finding that many companies do not hire felons. This is very frustrating to realize there are companies that do not provide second chances. At this point, I am unsure how to overcome this particular barrier and realize that I may need to look at other options. This will not dissuade me. I keep myself focused and continue to work towards a brighter future for myself. I am exploring earning my bachelor’s degree in business management and hope to someday work in higher education.

Aside from student government, I am advocating for previously incarcerated individuals. I hope to raise awareness for the need of an educational navigator position. This position would provide support and assistance to students who may face different challenges and barriers while trying to re-enter the educational system after incarceration. This position could greatly help a former inmate who is trying to get their life in order and find a place/job/pathway where they not only belong, but could excel.

I would give the same advice I am currently following – hang in there. If you think you want to give up – don’t! Just stick with it and don’t give up. This is literally what I am telling myself every day. It’s not easy – if it was, everyone would do it.
Jorge Maravilla

Clark College

My name is Jorge Maravilla. My life has changed forever because of the support I have received from the kind people at Clark College.

I grew up very poor living on the streets of Mexico City. I went to work when I was six years old to help support my family. I learned early that life is hard and I must never give up. When I was 27, I came to the United States to build a better life for my family.

The first years were hard. I missed my son, who was still in Mexico. I worked hard at an auto body shop and I took ESL classes to improve my English.

In 2014, I moved to Vancouver where I found Clark College. At the age of 36 I enrolled in the High School 21+ program. I wanted to get my diploma. I knew it would help me in my work. I found that I’m good at learning new things. I am so grateful to the instructors. I worked long hours at the garage and then would come to school with very little sleep. They were so supportive. When I got my diploma in 2016, they encouraged me to take college classes to develop my business skills. I am highly skilled at what I do – repairing and painting cars. As I became more comfortable speaking English, I realized I also have good leadership skills. Because I am bilingual I can help translate between employees and our employer. In doing so, I learned I’m very good at inter-personal communication. I’m a good listener and I care about people. I’ve been promoted as a manager at my work. I help encourage and motivate my team. We produce excellent results.

Now I can see my dream that I can build up my own business someday. To do so, I need management and business skills, and I’m enrolled in college-level business classes at Clark. My GPA is 3.73. This has not been easy. This would not be possible without my instructors’ support and encouragement.

To support my family and pay for school, since I am not eligible for financial aid, I continue to work long hours. I am grateful for the instructor who loaned me a textbook one quarter because I wasn’t able to afford the expensive book. I am grateful to the instructor who loaned me their calculator when I did not have one. There are so many people at Clark who have helped me overcome barriers and obstacles. It feels like home here.

I see a future for me and my family today. My son Daniel, who is still in Mexico City, is now 15 years old. We are making plans for him to come here next year. We talk on the phone all the time. I want for him to have opportunities. I hope I am setting a good example for him that if we work hard, stay on the path and never give up even when we want to, that good things will happen. He says he is proud of me which is the greatest gift a father can receive. I owe much gratitude to the people at Clark College who have given me the opportunity to achieve my dreams.
Marla McCafferty  
Clover Park Technical College

Two years ago, I fled my abusive marriage with my two young children, forever changing the trajectory of my life. In almost an instant, our lives were turned upside down. I went from being financially stable to needing food stamps, and from having a home with a mortgage to looking into low-income housing. Soon, I realized that I needed to go back to school for my job security, even though, like most people at this lowest point, I had no idea how I would be able to pay for my tuition, childcare, food, or the other unforeseen costs of college.

That’s when I decided to attend Clover Park Technical College (CPTC) to reinvent myself and redefine my life. When I came on campus, I was directed to the Workforce Development office (WFD). At first, I was overcome by defeat and in near pain at the thought of entering the building. But I mustered up the courage to walk through those doors and was immediately met with the support and the guidance I needed. The incredible staff listened and, most importantly, cared about my needs. I was then connected with the WorkFirst program within WFD, a program for students on welfare, which provided a firm foundation for my college career. In addition to receiving funding for my tuition and books, I also qualified for the childcare subsidy. With these obstacles removed, I could focus on my studies while attending classes. I was even offered a work-study position with WFD to help students similar to myself, who were struggling or needed additional support. Sometimes, they just needed someone to listen.

Working with the dedicated professionals at WFD helped me realize my true passion: providing support to people when they need it most. As a student here, I have had so much support from so many people; I have seen how hard these people work. That’s why I decided to change my studies to focus on Human Services.

The WFD department has made a life-changing impact on my life and has helped me succeed at CPTC. They are the first touchpoint for students who enter this college; entering through a door that can be so heavy to open. I am so grateful for the quality of education this school provides, the variety of resources, and the immeasurable support from the faculty and staff.

My most significant barrier was the fear of starting over while having to identify funding to attend school – tuition, childcare, and transportation. My first step in overcoming these barriers was taking those first steps on campus and walking into the WFD. Once I was able to connect with the WFD staff, everything else started to fall into place.

Moving forward, I will continue to seek out opportunities to learn and grow in the field of human services. I am very interested in pursuing a career in this field. Regardless of the position I end up in, I hope to continue to have a positive impact on people’s lives.

My advice for current and future students is don’t be afraid to ask for help. WFD was my safe place during my transition to becoming a single parent and full-time student. There are people on campus that care about your success and are ready to cheer you on.
Brett Jakubek
*Columbia Basin College*

I enrolled in Columbia Basin College (CBC) three years ago because I wanted to become fully educated to give back to the world the healing gifts and tools that I’d recently been given. My third child began kindergarten, and I knew it was time to proactively pursue dreams that had been proven impossible earlier in my life. My entire CBC experience was inundated with people who influenced and contributed to my success, but most notably it was Professor Stevens who convinced me that it was not too late to pursue seemingly “audacious-for-my-age” future goals. She noted, “Brett you’re already a healer. Now you’re just getting the educational ‘street cred’ to prove it!” CBC generously offered the foundational opportunities, mentoring, and encouragement I needed to begin this next phase of my journey.

I’ve been liberated from my psychological oppression (thanks to trauma-based psychotherapy, applied neuroscience, and an excellent support system), and I’m continuing my education so I can fully give back to society.

As a result of my long healing process, my brain literally healed from trauma, resulting in newfound cognitive capabilities! Quite simply, all of the pain, dysfunction, and violence I had internalized in my younger years has been transformed into fuel for forward momentum, and I’ve been utilizing it to pursue a psychology doctorate degree – a process which began at CBC. In fact, CBC was the very first institution and community of people to welcome my constant stream of curiosity, questions, and profound hunger to learn; not only did my experience there expand my learning, it helped heal my heart! It has been my life’s work (over four decades, to be exact!) to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles forged by the abuse and repeated trauma I suffered throughout my childhood. Even though I escaped the direct causes of pain from my younger years, I was haunted long afterward by severe PTSD, which made relationships and overall life difficult – it felt like a constant, uphill battle. Throughout those years, I focused every ounce of my strong will to recovery; I was resolutely determined to not only overcome and survive all of the damage, but to emerge from it on the other side, bearing gifts of insight, truth, and strength that I could freely share. My education is equipping me to contribute back to those who are currently suffering, alone, and crying out for help – just as I once was.

I recently earned my AA degree from CBC, and I am currently attending Washington State University, where I will earn my B.S. in Psychology. I then plan to attend graduate school to earn my master’s and doctoral degrees in clinical psychology. I have thought carefully about what the best use of my time and energy might be after I complete my education. I believe teaching at the college level, conducting psychological research (to create understanding and solutions to societal problems), and offering counseling to vulnerable populations are the most felicitous means through which I could offer my hard-won hope and knowledge.

If I could offer advice to those who are considering higher education, I would simply say: DO IT! You’ve only been given one precious life to live – how will you choose to spend it? Though your educational journey will inevitably involve some risks, stress, discouragement, or even failure at times, the self-efficacy and persistence that you develop over time are completely worth all the sacrifice and growing pains. CBC proved to me that there are educational institutions (and good people working within them!) who willing to advocate for you, no matter the challenges you might be facing.
Vinicius Armuchó  
*Edmonds Community College*

I was born and raised in a small, poor neighborhood in São Paulo city, Cangaiba. My parents always supported me to get good grades and a good education even though my mother didn’t finish college and my father never started high school. Because of them, my goal is to get good grades, apply for a scholarship to a university, and be as important as they are for me, for my family. Where I came from, it is common for people not to finish high school, or even middle school, and to start working to help with household bills or to just give up. They don’t believe that they have the power or ability to change their lives.

For me, when you don’t have someone as an example of what is possible and everything around you seems to be stagnant, you feel hopeless. In Brazil, it happens in precarious places. After I came to the United States and started college, my mother told me that most of my cousins now want to study English and come to the U.S. I affirmed to myself that when you see someone living the same reality as you, doing things that no one thought possible, it can inspire hope and motivation in others to achieve more. People who come from places like where I’m from believe my experience here in the U.S. is not within their reach. The majority of people there don’t even know this is possible.

At Edmonds CC, I’ve met a lot of great people who’ve taught me about how to live and how to see life in a different way. Especially Victoria, my current Housing RA supervisor. The way she always has a good vibe, you feel that energy is flowing to you all the time when you are with her. Another thing I’ve noticed about her, and I’m trying to improve myself, is how she makes those talking with her feel comfortable to talk about anything. She actively listens and shows that she is there to help or just to talk about life.

One of the most important programs for me at Edmonds CC is my soccer team. The team is like my family in the U.S. As an international student, it is hard to leave everything in your country to go alone for an adventure in a place that you have never been to before. However, playing and living with these special people makes me feel at home. Soccer is my favorite sport and one of the things I love the most. For this reason, the family that I’m building with the soccer team is one of the most important things that has been transforming my life so far.

Being here, having the experience to study in another country, meeting new people, learning about new cultures, playing soccer for a college, and living this dream is something extraordinary. At the beginning of October, my father lost his job and my mother called me crying, saying that she couldn’t afford Edmonds CC anymore. That was probably the worst moment in my entire life. Seeing my mother crying and saying, “I’m sorry,” to me was terrible. I felt that everything was my fault. A few days later, I realized that I’m lucky to complain about anything. A lot of people don’t have the chance to live this experience, and I’m here!

My advice: I’ve learned that it doesn’t matter what happens, being grateful is always the best thing to do. Nothing is by chance. We can always learn from our experiences, whether they are good or bad.
Melisa Suljic  
*Everett Community College*

My name is Melisa Suljic, and I am an advocate, a leader, and a strong person. High school was very hard for me because I spent all my teenage years in the foster care system and I moved schools every year of high school. Then approached the final year, and I was having to decide on what college I would go to. At that point I thought I would be lucky if I could graduate high school. I had been to Everett Community College (EvCC) to do a financial aid workshop and met a wonderful woman, Linda Summers. I decided that maybe I should attend EvCC because of the program that they had on campus that supported foster youth. While at the workshop I was able to meet Linda and a student in the program to see what the program was about. After speaking with them I knew that EvCC was the place for me. Linda and that student made me want to be a part of the culture and support that they had created.

The Connect program was a huge support to me in my college experience because, like in high school, I felt that I had nowhere to fit in. The space that Linda and that student had created made me feel safe and accepted, but it also made me feel so much more than that. For the first time in a long time I felt smart and like I deserved and belonged to be in college. I would say that a lot of my success and growth as a person has been from that foundation that Linda had set for me. As I got further into my education, I built an even stronger connection with her and learned to ask for help. That is when I had the courage to access the disability center to help me be a better student. I saw my disability as something to be ashamed of, but through my work with Linda I realized I just needed a different set of tools to help me in my journey.

Finally, in order to get into college there were so many barriers I faced, such as financial aid, worthiness, and courage to take that next step. The Connect program helped me apply for the college (which I didn’t know you had to do), fill out that complicated financial aid form, and continued support through the times there.

While in college, I also had many barriers with losing a child and suffering with depression. Although I had to take some time off, the Connect program’s Allison Werling fought to get me back into classes and helped me finish my goal and obtain my associate’s degree. Allison figured out a way for me to able to come back to school and still pay down the debt I owed. She also helped me get back into the groove of how to be a student. Because I had taken so much time off, I forgot how to study, take notes properly, and how to ask for help. Again, through the Connect program I was given another opportunity to become a better student and to achieve my goals.

In the future, I plan to continue this supportive role for foster youth. I am not sure in which capacity, but I do know that I want to give foster youth similar supports that I had received from these two amazing women in my journey.
Kristi Maldonado  
*Grays Harbor College*

My story, some would say is brave and at times scary. I can say, though, I did not end up a statistic. Back in the 90’s in South Texas it was not a place for kids to come out of the closet. I did when I was a teenager and my father kicked me out of the house. I had moved to Washington and was living in Auburn when I met my partner. I moved to Grays Harbor to live with her and her two children. She was attending Grays Harbor College (GHC). I volunteered with her for a Christmas Toy Drive for GHC students. I had never seen a community college do something like that for their students. In 2014, I started attending GHC for my Associate of Arts Direct Transfer Agreement.

While attending GHC, I was unemployed and relying on financial aid grants and food stamps for survival. I enrolled in the Basic Food Education and Training (BFET) program and was able to continue through school. I was able to work for Jen Gillies and work closely with the Diversity & Equity Center (DEC). The DEC was very small and located in the 200 building. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer (LGBTQ) students felt safe there on campus. I got involved with the Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA). I served as the GSA executive board secretary for two years. I, along with others, also petitioned the college to move the DEC to a more visible place. Our group sat in front of GHC’s president and made our voices known. This created a change on the campus and now the DEC is in the HUB, and visible to all.

I had started college back in Texas. I failed a math class and I had to pay the college back. I gave up on being able to go to college. From being homeless and working minimum wage jobs to stay alive, I had no extra money to pay for a class I could not comprehend at the time. In 2015, four of my GHC instructors nominated me for the Academic Development Award for my dedication to academics and courage on being a GHC student even though I had my own doubts about my place in college as well as the obstacles I knew I had to overcome. I am currently in my senior year at Washington State University (WSU), working on my Bachelor of Arts degree focused on Integrated Strategic Communications with a minor in Sociology. For the past three years, I have also held the Diversity and Equity Center chair. Once I graduate from WSU, I will continue with my education to obtain a Master’s Degree in Communications.

I have used my activism and advocacy to work, combined with my drag king stage persona Ceasar Hart, to be a light of hope for my LGBTQ community. I have helped the local community to teach tolerance and acceptance of all humans and their equal rights. I created a monthly drag show, *Small Town Big Hart’s Drag Revue*, in Hoquiam. Donations we raised have helped local nonprofits, and local citizens who are facing insurmountable life events. Monies have gone to PAWS, Hospice of GH, Beyond Survival, and more. We helped two agencies gain their 501(c)3 status. We also support “Operation Santa Clause.” This project helps to provide Christmas to individuals, regardless of age.

My life has been forever changed because of GHC. It helped give me the voice to be the advocate I am today.
Crystal Moore  
*Green River College*

I remember going to my last job interview at Kentucky Fried Chicken, the interviewer proceeded to use a tape recorder and ask me very extreme questions. I froze and completely failed the interview, leaving in tears. I knew at that moment I wanted something bigger and better for myself, something where I could express my creativity and work with my hands creating and building. Shortly after, I discovered the carpentry program at Green River College. Having zero carpentry experience, I was welcomed and encouraged by Glen Martin (the instructor of the program) who, in the next two years, played a huge role in my success at Green River College. Being a woman in the trades can be challenging and intimidating at first, but Glen always gave everyone the encouragement and knowledge to be and do their best. He always did whatever it took to make sure everyone was receiving the best education.

I had many barriers and obstacles entering Green River College; coming from prison and recovering from nine years of addiction, everything was new to me. I struggled a great deal with anxiety and social situations. Only having a GED, it had been many years since I attended school; so math was also a great struggle. I knew the odds were against me. Regardless of my past, the instructors and students in my class soon became like a family to me, always pushing me to be my best. I overcame my anxiety and self-doubt through the encouragement and love I received at Green River College. Graduating with high honors and receiving several awards, I was also the first carpentry student in Green River’s history to be awarded the President’s award at graduation, which I have hanging on my wall in my living room, along with all my certificates, to remind me whenever I may need it that anything is possible!

I am currently a third-year apprentice in the Carpenters Union. In the past few years I have worked on many unique projects, high rises, and even restored a historic church in Seattle. Recently I was chosen out of hundreds of other apprentices to attend leadership training in Las Vegas, and I am often told I will do great things and be a great leader one day. I am also striving to be the first woman foreman for my company within the next few years. All of this was made possible because of the education and encouragement I received at Green River College. I couldn’t imagine were I would be without those key people that pushed me to never give up on myself and to go beyond the limits! Today I am living a life I never dreamed was possible for someone like myself!

If I could share one piece of advice to anyone doubting if they should go to college, it would be “to find your passion and pursue it at all costs” and “don’t stay at that dead-end job because you think that’s the only job you can get”. There are so many people out there that want to see you succeed, and college is a great place to find those people and start your new life! Never give up, never give in, push yourself and great things will happen all around you!

A very special thanks to my math teacher, Michelle Oberle Haigh, for taking extra efforts to help me with my struggles with math; and of course, to Glen Martin for helping me to become the carpenter I am today!
What compelled me to attend college is knowing that education will be my only way out of poverty. Both my parents are addicts who were unable to complete high school. Due to the addiction I was raised by my grandmother, along with seven other children, her five sons, and my other siblings. She also never had a college education; she had to work dead-end job after job to barely make ends meet. I saw her be beaten from the financial burdens and the inability to access resources. Nights without dinner, used clothing, multiple children sharing rooms, all fueled my desire for an alternative outcome. I knew from then on if I did not further my education, I would be a product of my environment and be led down a path of destruction.

At Highline the individual that has had the most contribution to my success is Dan Drischel and the Women's department along with the Workforce Education Center. Dan offered guidance and flexible hours to consult. The Woman's program referred me to Workforce, which gave me support with food and rental assistance when my funds were depleted. Without this help I would be homeless, hungry, and would not have continued the quarter.

The barrier for myself and a lot of other students is funding and flexibility. I work full-time and I am a single mom of a three-year-old. I am not your conventional college student out of high school. Without Highline's flexibility and diversity, I could not make this happen. I can take classes online, after work, and on weekends. I was able to obtain access to resources for funding that allowed me to continue with my educational goals.

My goals in the future are to continue as a Chemical Dependency Professional and impact the community by helping fight the drug epidemic. I then plan on going to graduate school for a Master of Social Work (MSW) and/or JD degree in hopes to help communities on a larger scale like making policies and contributing my experiences to help make decisions that will bridge the gap of wealth and poverty.

Any advice that I would give is to keep going, keep trying – when things get difficult, reach out to staff and explain your circumstances. There is usually an alternative, and people here at Highline are very receptive to make our goals happen. Also, always turn in every assignment even if it’s late! Every point matters and efforts are usually rewarded.
Carina Clark  
Lake Washington Institute of Technology  

My journey to LWTech was not pleasant. My freshman year was the downfall of my high school education. I was bullied severely, so much that my family had to sell our house and move, because you can’t switch to another school without having an address in the district. That experience ruined my self-esteem and broke my spirits to the point where going to school was a fear of mine. After moving schools, I began practicing many unhealthy habits such as drug abuse, skipping school, losing interest in everything, not doing any schoolwork, or caring about my education or life. My junior year I was truant over 60 days, and the state sent my family a letter saying, basically, I had no choice but to attend the high school program at LWTech or potentially face legal consequences. So, I ended up at LWTech. Looking back now, all the bad experiences that happened in my life ultimately led me to the best experience of my life, and the most transformative and positive years of my life, so far.

Fast forward to the last day of my first quarter at LWTech. I’m sitting in my car, wiping flowing fresh tears from my cheeks as I read my grades: 4.0, 4.0, 4.0. All A’s. That was the first A I had ever seen. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I did that. In that moment I shifted from a bullied, angry, drug using, truant high school dropout, to a woman. A woman who got excited about her educational future and succeeding in school.

The entire High School program’s staff changed the trajectory of my life. My academic advisors Michelle Berry and Devin Blanchard, other advisors not assigned to work with me, the receptionists and office staff, every person in the office that comes to work there I had a personal connection with over time. The college’s teachers as well, I had numerous exceptional teachers that went above and beyond to help me with course work and succeeding in classes.

The absolute patience and willingness to extend a hand to me whenever I needed, for years on end. I must have spent over 40 hours of my advisor’s time during my career there. I am a first-generation college student and had no idea how to navigate the universe of college. Not only were they helping me discover a path to success within the LWTech AA degree, but showing me how these classes and degree will help me to transfer to a university – and how to go about that process. We spent hours planning my classes, writing essays and editing, talking about stress coping mechanisms, and just advising me in every way I needed to succeed during this crucial time in my life.

I am currently in my first quarter at UW-Bothell’s School of Business, working on my bachelor’s in Accounting. My goals are to live every day with a positive attitude, do well each quarter in school, and navigate the possibility of completing the fifth-year master’s program in Accounting so that I can sit for the CPA Exam after graduation. My future goal is to work in the accounting/finance industry and continue to live a positive lifestyle.

A lot of barriers were overcoming my own fear of school, social anxiety and depression, and never having understood what school did for me. I never would have completed my high school education, let alone a college education, without attending LWTech. I would have stayed a HS dropout. Here is where I realized my own potential. The one most important lesson I learned was to never doubt your abilities to succeed.
Good Evening to all, I thank each and every one of you for your time and consideration you put forth to be here to hear my story. First and foremost, I want to give thanks to the Almighty Creator for all my blessings and deep appreciation for being nominated for this Transforming Lives Award and that I have had the opportunity to be elected to receive this honor. I am so grateful each day to Lower Columbia College for not just my education, but a chance to better my life with a real prospect for a gainful career.

I have always seen myself as an open book with my life. Demonstrating a good work ethic is best exemplified based on a favorite motivator of mine, found in the Christian Greek Scriptures @ Galatians Chapter 5:22 & 23. It speaks about the fruitage of spirit and having a good work ethic that goes hand in hand with the trade I am pursuing.

The education comes first, and as you know in school, we get the lessons then a test. The opposite is true in day-to-day life, as you get the test then the lessons from the experience. I type now while I should be studying, but am pushing through to get it done. Lessons are learned every day in life when you have faith in a dream and journey you want for yourself. Whatever point and time you are at in your life, go for it. By opening yourself to be blessed, others will see your efforts. The one who matters most knows your heart and its condition, and will mold and bless your efforts.

I am entering into a field of constant job change, unfavorable climate conditions, and more than likely because of the times in which we are living – will be around a lot of toxic negativity. When others notice your work ethic, it places a memory in a person, as it may be the defining point of your character.

I have allowed others to see the good and the bad in my life, and not all the time did I make honorable, law-abiding decisions in the things I did with my life. So, I had to reach back to my early teachings and regain a good work ethic so I could start exemplifying and showing my basic teachings learned through Bible principals. I accept the horrible decisions I have made in my life and from my own experience in change. Change is hard, very hard outside of the norm – but in the same sentence, change is a choice. An individual choice if you missed your free will of choice.

Dirty Jobs television host Mike Rowe (a person who truly is making a difference in lots of lives for change, work ethics, and being a productive member of society) helped launch my path in the skilled trades by granting me a scholarship. In Mike’s words, “What’s the point of paying your debt to society, if society never forgives the loan? Unless we’re willing to lock up every criminal, forever, the question is, what’s best for society? I mean, who would you rather live next to? A former convict who has a useful skill and a full-time job, or a former convict with no skill, no prospects, and no hope of re-assimilating?”

My education journey is not over and even as I write this, an opportunity for me has opened to use the skills I paid for that can only help me complete my education.
Angelique Eklund  
*North Seattle College*

I came to North Seattle College through the Running Start program. This enabled me to go to college my junior year of high school. I was extremely nervous to start college. The workload and social aspect of it scared me. However, the day finally came and I went to my first English 101 class, as well as History 147, in the fall of 2018. I came with intentions of receiving as many credits as possible to save money. However, as my time there progressed, I interacted with various professors, counselors, and resources. I met with the career counselor Lydia Minatoya one day to talk about possible career paths for me. That same day I told her about my struggles with being slower at doing my work. I told her that when taking the SAT test, I could not finish a single section because of time. Lydia took out a piece of paper that had multiple questions with answers that included never, sometimes, often, and always. I answered these questions and checked multiple boxes, most of which consisted of often and always. When I was done Lydia told me I landed in the grey area which meant that I should go to my doctor and have them test me for ADHD. She got on the phone with me and helped me make my appointment. With her help I was given a doctor’s note, I got in touch with disability services, and I was granted accommodations. This was something I had never been granted before, and it has helped me in my classes.

I have also formed strong connections with my professors at North Seattle College. These professors not only offer awesome office hours discussions, but also have helped me work on my college applications and talked with me about what my next steps could be. One of my favorite professors has been Jill Lane, who teaches Political Science. She has made Political Science something I want to major in. She encouraged me to apply for a student leadership position at my college. I applied and was given the position of equity board member. Through this I have been involved in Guided Pathways, Dice, College Council, and I sit on three tenure committees. Being at North has made me a more driven person. I feel that I can, and should, continue in higher education. North Seattle College has changed my life. I initially saw it as just a money-saving opportunity, however, it has been much more than that. I have been given accommodations for my learning disability, which has been huge. I have become involved in leadership and internships. I have networked, learned time management and communication, and I am improving my organizational skills. Overall, I feel more prepared for my next step in higher education. I plan to double major in Education and Political Science and be the first in my family to graduate.

I highly recommend to anyone, especially younger students, to go to a community/technical college. Not only do community/technical colleges offer an opportunity to improve one’s grades, students interact and receive more attention at those schools because of smaller class sizes. These colleges are often cheaper, and there are more people hustling for their education. I have been in study groups and met people that work two jobs and are a full-time student. I have met many parents that are going back to school while having the responsibility of their children. This has made me value education on a deeper level and is something that I think is inspiring for younger high school students to see and experience.
Andre Henderson  
Olympic College

I enrolled in Olympic College at the age of 46 to turn my life around. I had struggled with addiction for thirty years and found myself homeless, jobless, in and out of jail, and barely surviving. When I had the opportunity to get clean and sober in 2016, I began to believe I could change my path for the better and give my six children and three grandchildren the gift of seeing me healthy, happy, and productive. I had no idea how much my college experience would transform me.

Returning to school for the first time since high school has not been easy, but I believe it is the best choice I have made since going to rehab. The college environment brought me into contact with caring individuals, without whose encouragement and support I’m sure I would not have made it this far. The Veterans Center has given me support and community. Multicultural Services has helped cultivate my leadership skills and sense of identity. Faculty members in the Human Services program and across the college have taught me to think critically and have given me academic self-confidence. Finally, my role as a student employee in the Office of Equity & Inclusion has helped me apply my growth and development in support of other students and the college as a whole.

In particular, the work I do on behalf of the office has enabled me to see the ways in which my experiences are tied to the systemic and institutional forces that influence the lives of many community college students. It has given me a sense of empowerment and agency to use my past as a way of connecting with other students. It has helped me find my role in college efforts to close equity gaps and broader movements for social justice.

I have accomplished far more than I ever dreamed when I entered Olympic College. I have a 3.8 GPA and have been on the President’s or Dean’s List in eight of nine quarters. I helped found and lead the student Reentry Collective. I am vice president of the Black Student Union, sit on the Student Government of Olympic College Senate, and serve as a member of the Planning Committee for the college’s annual Diversity Conference. I have also had the opportunity to present to large audiences of faculty, staff, students, and community members during various college and community events.

Through it all, I have had to overcome many challenges, including the ongoing struggle of recovery, the stigma of incarceration, and my own doubts that I could succeed in college and in life. Olympic College has taught me that my potential is not limited by my past. I will graduate with my associate’s degree in the spring and enter University of Washington Tacoma in the fall to complete my bachelor’s degree in Human Services.

As I begin the next phase of my educational journey, I will continue to use my voice to help those around me recognize their full potential as learners and leaders who can change their communities and the world. One piece of advice I will continue to give other students is this: Take advantage of all the resources the college has to offer both inside and outside of the classroom, and believe in yourself. When you connect the tools you bring with you to college with all the tools you will find there, you will succeed in discovering your path and your purpose.
Nitasha Lewis  
*Peninsula College*

I am honored to have been nominated for the ACT Transforming Lives Award. Attending Peninsula College (PC) is the best decision I have ever made. For me, obtaining a college education is an investment that will pay off for the rest of my life. Being motivated to have better job opportunities, developing valuable skills, and becoming financially fit is what compelled me to attend community college.

I was married at 16 years old. Before then, my family had hoped that I’d be the first to go to college. I was a great student with a high GPA. All was well until I met someone who was eight years older than me and I became pregnant prior to my 16th birthday. I dropped out of high school to become a wife and mother. Once I married, I found out that my husband was addicted to drugs. The trauma from that relationship caused me to become troubled. My confidence and self-esteem were low. I continued to make poor decisions with relationships. About five years ago, I was in yet another abusive relationship. When I decided to leave, he held my 11-year-old son and me captive for two weeks. I was rescued when my abuser took my son and me to the DHS office in Texas to obtain assistance. I slid a note to the receptionist and she immediately called the police. The officer took us to a domestic violence shelter.

While we were at the shelter, I began thinking about my life. I knew that I needed to leave my old life behind. It was the perfect time to reinvent myself. I wanted to be able to provide for my family independently. Because I needed to be self-sufficient and successful, I made the decision to go to a community college. I was watching “Twilight” in the common room of the shelter and decided that the Peninsula was where I needed to be.

I started to research Peninsula College. On the website was a message about getting students where they needed to go. That message seemed to speak to me. I contacted Healthy Families, in Port Angeles, who had room for my family. Once I arrived, I enrolled at PC. As a single mother, it has not been easy. Yet, I was not going to let anything stop me from obtaining a degree. I struggled to pay rent and other utilities while making payment arrangements for this or that. I utilized community resources in order to make ends meet.

Edie McLennan in the Workforce department was instrumental in my success. She recognized my zeal and helped to breakdown any barriers that I was facing. She listened, offered assistance, and helped me obtain my position with Upward Bound.

Attending Peninsula College has transformed my life. I enrolled broken and had no idea what was in store for my future. I have obtained my AA degree in Addiction Studies and I am currently in my fourth quarter of the BAS program. After I graduate, I will immediately enroll in WGU to obtain a master’s degree in Educational Leadership. My future is uncertain, but PC has helped me discover a path that matches my zeal. I have learned to be independent and have acquired skills and the knowledge necessary to provide a better future for my family. My mentors at Peninsula College not only noticed my potential but they’ve helped me to exceed it. My advice to other students is to invest in their education because it will transform them into the best version of themselves.
My name is Rhonda Reynolds and I have been attending Pierce College since 2009. Yes, that is 10 years. I started taking pre-requisites for a degree in Criminal Justice. My journey has been rather long, not the typical two years, but has finally paid off, I now have my associate’s degree in Criminal Justice.

When I started taking classes I was at the end of my first marriage. The battles I endured during that marriage, and then becoming a single mom, would set me back a little bit of time. I had to continue working so I would take classes when I was able to have a babysitter. A few years later I would marry again thinking things would be different, but that marriage ended, as well. When I was pregnant with my third child, I was due the week of finals and it was suggested to me to think about postponing attending that quarter, this would start a break from school to take care of my family. Becoming a single mom again of four children, I had to put a hold on college for myself and focus on working and raising my children. After some time had passed by, I decided to go back to college and finish what I had started.

I work the graveyard shift so I can be home with my kids and take them to school and pick them up. I would drop them off at school and then go to school myself. When my classes were over it would be time to pick my kids up from school. I would go many days without sleep. I was attending college full-time as well as working full-time, and taking care of my children on my own. I had days that I needed to bring my youngest to classes with me and I am so lucky that I had understanding teachers who wanted me to succeed. I pushed forward each day. I managed to obtain a high GPA throughout my schooling and several quarters was on the Dean’s List.

Throughout the last 10 years I have kept my goal of completing college in the back of my head. Even though I was in marriages that were meant to tear me down, I knew I wanted something better for myself and to accomplish my degree. I felt like a failure to my family and wanted to finish something. It was not easy being a single mom of four children, working full time, and being a full-time student, but I knew there was a light at the end of the tunnel and everything would be worth it in the end. Surviving two mentally and physically abusive marriages, I can say I have completed something now with my degree. My kids inspired me to keep moving forward and were with me when I walked across the stage to receive my long-awaited degree. With smiles on our faces and tears down our cheeks it was a moment that I will treasure and be proud of for the rest of my life.

I hope I can inspire my children to accomplish their goals in life, as well as others who have gone through similar situations as I have, that there is hope and they are not alone. Although it took me 10 years to finally be able to hang my degree on my wall, I can look at it now, smile and say I did it! I hope to work in the juvenile system and help people who have been through relationships with domestic violence.
Earl Ipili  
*Pierce College Puyallup*

The main theme of my adolescence seemed to be loneliness and isolation. At 13 years old, I was diagnosed with clinical depression, anxiety, and ADHD. At one point in high school I was failing every single class. No one could have convinced me that I mattered. I would isolate myself from friends, telling myself that my presence meant nothing in their lives. My body and habits would reflect my self-destructive behavior. My life consisted of not eating for extended periods of time; thinking I wouldn’t move out of the way if a speeding car was about to hit me, drinking in the dark when no one was around to stop me, and other signs of depression.

My initial attempts at post-secondary education did not go very well. It’s bitterly difficult to care about classes when you don’t care about yourself, or your future. I wasn’t attending college for myself; I was attending to please others and to have something to say when people asked, “What are you doing these days?” While bouncing from college to college with no future in mind, I happened to attend an Indie concert. To this day, I still consider it the most life-changing moment of my life. I knew that no matter how fictitious it sounded, I wanted to spend the rest of my life playing music.

I still live with mental illness but my dream pushes me to work for a future I know I can achieve. I’ve started seeing a therapist regularly and I’m taking medication for my mental illness. With my inspiration driving me to excel in my classes, I’ve been on the Dean’s and President’s Lists, and have been elected president of my local honor society chapter. Even I, a buffoon, knew that my dream of singing original music to thousands of people wouldn’t materialize without hard work, especially when I didn’t know how to sing or write original music. I came back to Pierce College to learn the fundamentals of music, but I stayed because of a community that sincerely wants its students to succeed. It’s so difficult to highlight one individual or program that contributed to my success, simply because every aspect of Pierce College believes you can be successful, and guides you towards it. From the advisors who listen to your fears and uncertainties, then guide you to be better than you have been, to the students who grow with you intellectually while becoming valuable friends in the process, and the incredible professors whose bountiful knowledge and passion spark genuine interest, even in classes you took just because you had to.

Pierce is the college that made me believe college is worth the hardship. After years of feeling like there was no point in looking to the future, I now aim high with my ambitions. My academic plan is to apply for the Berklee College of Music and the Curtis Institute of Music, and my life goal is to spend the rest of my life doing what I love.

> “There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure.”
> -Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*
Alan Abdullah  
*Renton Technical College*

My family and I are immigrants from Iraq, and we came to the United States in 2016 to escape ISIS and to receive medical care for my daughter, son, and wife who are all afflicted with the same genetic heart condition. From 2001-2011, I served as a Muslim civilian translator working for the American Army, and this made me a primary target for ISIS. My wife and I are passionate about teaching our children The Holy Quran so that they can discern who is using religion for nefarious purposes and will not be caught unaware. We teach our kids that it does not matter what color you are, doesn’t matter what religion, you must treat people with respect and welcome them. That is how humanity will continue.

My position in the military helped us to secure the visa to the U.S. As soon as I got to Washington state, they started to treat my wife and kids’ heart conditions at Seattle Children’s Hospital.

In the fall of 2016, I started classes at Renton Technical College (RTC). I chose to study at RTC because of the variety of programs that allowed me to be creative and successful in my areas of study. However, when I first started taking classes in computer network technology, I was afraid and worried because I didn’t know if I could do it. I talked with my instructor, Dale McCormick, and I explained to him my struggle. He always told me that I could do it and that I could be greater than what I thought. He said I had a positive personality, and the support he gave me motivated me. I completed my associate’s degree in computer network technology with honors.

I also got involved as a student leader on campus. I have served as a work study in the campus bookstore and now I serve as a work study in the IT office. With my new work study position, I get to practice the skills I learned in my computer network technology classes. I also serve as a tutor in the Learning Resource & Career Center and as a member of the Associated Student Government (ASG) Senate. In the spring of 2019, I was awarded the Students Serving Washington President’s Civic Leadership Award, nominated by my college president, Dr. Kevin McCarthy.

After a year living in the U.S. and starting school, I was feeling confident and progressing in my studies, and I was engaged as a student leader. But then I got a call from my mom, who needed me to go back home to Iraq due to her health complications. I knew I had to go help her, but it was so hard to leave my family and classes here. A week after I arrived back in Iraq, a travel ban was issued by the newly elected U.S. President, restricting entry from multiple countries – including Iraq. Thoughts were racing in my mind about my family. What if their health became worse? What if I couldn’t get back home to them? What about my classes and my campus jobs? I was detained when I got back to the U.S., but thankfully, it was brief. I was able to come back home, return to my life, and return to my studies at Renton Technical College. The help I get at Renton Technical College is amazing and beyond the imagination that I pictured in my mind. And that is why I have decided I will continue doing my BAS degree in Computer Network Architecture at Renton Technical College.
Astro Pittman  
*Seattle Central College*

My childhood was a series of unfortunate events. In 4th grade, my mother pulled me out of school after being bullied and abused by my teachers. I never ended up back at school. I did not escape my abuser though. He lived with me in the one-room apartment we called home. Later on, my mother abandoned me and I ended up homeless during the last two years of what my mother had laughably called “homeschooling.”

Since I was 12, I have had to work a full-time job, which resulted in me in never graduating. It was all I could do to stay alive. Another significant part of my story is that I am a recovered addict; which, when I think about my story, probably isn’t a big shock. Dealing drugs was how I survived for many years. I have been in and out of the criminal justice system since I was 17 for things like drug possession. I have been sober for a few years now and have managed not to get arrested for quite some time, and in that time, higher education rose to the top of my list of things to achieve. I spent over two decades managing restaurants because I did not believe I was capable of more. Being poor all of your life instills in you a fear of taking risks that is hard to overcome, but because I am stubborn, I decided to try anyway. I have come to learn that there is a plethora of programs offering financial aid to people in situations similar to mine; you just have to show up and try. So, here I am, a felonious, gay, man-of-color at age 40, trying my best to make things happen. Conquering my addiction gave me the resolve to rise to meet this challenge, something I thought for many years I could never achieve. Not only am I succeeding, but with the help of some amazing faculty, I am thriving. I never fathomed passing Algebra 1, let alone maintaining a 4.0 GPA throughout the entirety of my associate’s degree!

My time at Seattle Central College has proven to me that I can do much more than I ever hoped. My goal is to become a Master Addictions Counselor. I have been called to use my experiences in addiction to help others who suffer from this disease, to give back to my community, and be a part of the solution to one of modern society’s greatest problems. I have entered the bachelor’s program of Applied Behavioral Science at Seattle Central and plan to complete my master’s degree at the University of Washington. Seattle Central has been the perfect platform to begin my educational path, and I am so thrilled that Seattle Central offers a bachelor’s degree in my chosen field! I have discovered so many things about myself in my time here and I will only continue to grow as I press on. I brought with me an indomitable spirit, a thirst for knowledge, and many other strengths that have all served me well. Apart from getting and staying sober and helping others to do the same, this has been my greatest achievement, and my greatest gift. The relationships I have cultivated, the knowledge I am acquiring, and the confidence I have developed are all shaping me and my future into something much greater than I ever thought possible. I can now honestly say that my education here at Seattle Central has been the most affirming and empowering experience of my life, and I am grateful beyond words. Thank you.
Anna Nguyen
Shoreline Community College

The greatest challenge preventing me from attending a community college immediately after high school was my mother moving from Seattle to Bellingham. My mother moving meant I would be homeless. I had four months to figure out how to survive. I delayed pursuing higher education for one year and I settled for a minimum wage job in hopes that it would sustain my living needs. After being declined to all eight apartment complexes for the same reason (an insufficient credit history and needing a co-signer for lease approval), I realized that being eighteen years old meant nothing more than giving the state the power to charge and put me on trial as an adult. I had no freedom or control of this situation. This fear forced me to reach out to my absent-yet-abusive father. My father’s side of the family had been absent from my life since I was eleven years old.

One month before my mother left me, I found a way to get in touch with my father. After reconnecting, I moved to Everett with his new family. I had barely enough money to buy a vehicle for transportation. Two months later, with a car, a roof over my head, and a part-time job, I finally began to feel my life was back on track.

I applied to Shoreline Community College (SCC) for three reasons. First, the traditional four-year college experience wasn’t for me. Second, SCC was a more affordable education with academic flexibility. Third, it was a smaller community which meant personalized attention. With personalized attention came everlasting relationships.

My first quarter at SCC was stressful. I underwent the desertion of my mother, profound emotional abuse from my father, alienation from my family, and the loss of my job. This was followed by a year’s gap of forgotten knowledge, abstract concepts, and the basics of writing. Instead of allowing these obstacles to negatively affect me, I decided to search for help. My search allowed me to find Pam Dusenberry, Brooke Zimmers, Kate Boyd, and Claire Murata. I began a Get in Gear (GIG) class with Pam and Brooke where I fell in love with writing and research. Pam recommended that I move to English 102 with Kate Boyd, whose teaching style gave me the space to communicate the real me. Claire Murata was the embedded librarian that quarter.

Claire Murata is the most important individual at SCC that contributed to my success. She did everything in her power to support me in my academic and personal journey. On numerous occasions she would sacrifice her lunch time in order to actively listen to my concerns and challenges, staying late to proofread my papers, and finding information for my classes. She was the first person to believe in me and told me that I could do it when people doubted me. Her ability to make time to actively help me with my academics and to be a shoulder to cry on transformed my life. I couldn’t be any more grateful for meeting such a significant human being. Ultimately, she helped me find the strength and courage to continue through my personal achievements today.

The significant impact that SCC has left on me is indescribable. In the next few years, I plan on becoming a Board Certified Behavior Analyst in order to continue impacting and transforming the lives of atypical children. One piece of advice I would share for other students is to take advantage of resources available and bridge connections with people in this diversified community. Being in a small community means you are never alone. You are more valuable than you think.
Kyle Von Stroberg  
Skagit Valley College

Have you ever woken up and wondered, “What am I doing with my life?” I have. It was while I was sitting in a jail cell that I realized my life needed to change. I was tired and not proud of who I was as a person. One of the jail guards, Julie Zorn, asked me what I wanted to do with my life. My answer was simple, “Anything other than being here.” She suggested I look into attending Skagit Valley College and gave me the number to a counselor at the college. I truthfully did not think I was worth it, or that they would even care, but I called anyway. The man who answered was Aaron Kirk. When he answered, my life changed at that moment. My old life was over and a new one began. He was the first person who believed that I could do something different with my life and he would also connect me with others who would continue to change my life. Aaron helped map out my next two years at SVC, and has continued to be a part of my life to this day.

As someone who was formerly incarcerated, a former addict, and who was homeless, I have endured numerous barriers and obstacles. I wondered if I could even attend college with a criminal history. Would they accept me? If they did, how would I pay for it? Aaron made all of this happen. He helped me fill out the application and the paperwork to get financial aid.

I attended the Life Transitions program at SVC, coordinated by Margo Grothe, who also supported my transition. She never judged and she was there to help in every way she could. You see, I was homeless and fresh out of jail when I started college. I was eating at the Friendship House and showering at the gym. Margo’s class gave me a safe place to be during the day, as well as a place to clean up and have something to eat, it also helped me readjust to life outside of jail. Being in her class allowed me to tour all the different programs offered at SVC and realize what I wanted to study.

I love turning wrenches and getting my hands dirty; I always have. I thought I would be working on cars but it was Mike Beemer’s Marine Maintenance Technology program that forever changed my life. Who would have thought that someone who cannot swim would be working on boats? Mike talked to me, listened to me, and convinced me that this is the path to take and that he would be there every step of the way. This program gave me a new purpose, a desire to succeed and show everyone that “I am a somebody,” not just a number, not just someone who would be forever trapped in the criminal system.

Now a full-time employee at Tom-n-Jerry’s Boat Center, I founded the Second Chance Scholarship for formerly incarcerated SVC students. It required $10,000 to be endowed so I built a boat, raising $5,200, and got donations for the other funds. As of this year, eight students have received over $5,500 toward their education. I am a regular speaker at the Skagit County Community Justice Center, as well as the Island County Jail. I plan to return to SVC and earn a Bachelor of Applied Science in Applied Management to expand my scholarship statewide.

My advice is always believe in yourself, always do right by others, and that it is never too late to start making the right decisions.
Amanda Sides  
South Puget Sound Community College

I came to Washington after living abroad for four years. I was married and sadly, things did not work out. With every door that closes, however, another opens. I chose to go to somewhere new rather than return home to South Carolina. I wanted to make my way in life on my own terms, and also for my safety, to not return to the toxic environment that I had left behind. Before being married, I helped take care of my disabled mother. I became her defender against my stepdad, who was a violent alcoholic. I lived in this environment for seven years, where she always took him back and even allowed my brother to return home after he was physically violent towards me. With drugs, alcohol, and violence in the mix, I felt it better to venture off to live life on my own than to go back. I came to Washington with just two bags of luggage, a broken heart, and a lot of determination to succeed in a life that tends to kick you when you're down.

How I enrolled in South Puget Sound Community College is kind of interesting. I was talking with a friend one day about how I wanted to go to college. At that point I had been in Washington a year and I kept talking about going back to school, but I was not doing anything to make it happen. As soon as I finished work that day, I decided to change that. I went and applied, and did all the trips back and forth to get enrolled. I will now graduate next spring with associate’s degrees in Accounting and Business, all because I stopped talking about what I wanted and took action to make it happen.

If I had to think of any one specific thing that started my involvement on campus, I believe it would be finding out about the Career Services Center during an internship fair. I walked up to the table and ended up speaking with the director. I was encouraged to apply for a work study opening and so I did. As time passed, I was asked to apply, and became involved with a new program called Ignite as a peer mentor. I started working with students to help encourage them and ensure they have support on their journey through college. I have learned about various scholarships, student life events, and services offered on campus. Each thing I learn, I utilize the information for myself and share it with everyone else that could use it. I have helped volunteer on campus, been asked to speak on panels, shared my story during foundation scholarship events, and help give back to the community that has welcomed me and given me so much.

I come from a background where I was laughed at by my own family for trying to learn and for being smart. Where I was told I would never graduate high school. I learned early in life to not let people’s thoughts of you keep you from your dreams; prove them all wrong. If you want your dreams to become your reality, you must fight for them and put the work and dedication in to make them happen. Never be afraid to ask for help along the way. I’m a first-generation college student holding three jobs, a 3.94 GPA, and I’ll be transferring after spring to work on my bachelor’s degree and become a CPA. College has given me the chance for a better life, and through hard work, the future is mine to forge.
Angel Delker

South Seattle College

My road to higher education was not a comfortable journey. I have faced adversity in my life, but the toughest challenge was raising a child at the age of 17. Raising a child while still a teenager, trying to find yourself, and getting an education is one of the hardest things that no teen should have to go through. No matter the tribulations I was facing, I always promised myself that I would finish high school and go to college.

I was finishing up my sophomore year of high school when I found out I was pregnant. I was so devastated because it threatened my personal promise to finish high school and go to college. On December 31, 2006, I gave birth to my son. I knew at that moment I needed to do better for him and for myself. I had to drop out of school to take care of my baby, but I knew that one day, I would go back to school and get my high school diploma.

During this time, I was bouncing from one job to the next for better pay. I wanted a stable job to support my child, and obtaining a high school diploma would allow me to find permanent work. I quit my job and went on public assistance to attend school full-time. In the fall of 2013, I decided to sign up for Adult Basic Education classes at South Seattle College to improve my skills as I worked towards my diploma. Two years later, in spring 2015, I received my diploma. I knew my life was going to change, and the next step for me was college.

I continued my education at South Seattle College, but I knew the next two years were going to be a challenge, and I needed to find support on campus. I remember passing by a sign and reading information about the TRIO program, so I decided to sign-up. The TRIO program was incredible; I was able to find a space to study and get help with my classwork. Another support system on campus I took advantage of was the Student Life department. Student Life’s support and services helped me get involved on campus, and inspired me to run for student government. That year, I ran and became the next student body president for South Seattle College's United Student Association (USA).

As president, I became a voice for undocumented students. I created information sessions to help undocumented students get the latest updates on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and local, state, and federal policy changes. Under my leadership, the USA took undocumented students to the state capital for a “lobbying day” in Olympia. They were able to share their stories of how higher education helped better their lives and their families’ lives. We urged state legislators to continue to fight for undocumented students in community colleges.

Becoming student body president helped me find my passion for social justice, so I decided to apply to the University of Washington. I got accepted to the University of Washington's School of Social Work in June 2018. My life experiences have helped me thrive in the Social Work program. When I finish the program, I will apply for my Master’s in Social Work and work for marginalized communities.

My advice to future and in-coming college students is not to be afraid to build a support system and community. Those two essential systems can help you find the resources to be successful, create a sense of belonging, and establish long-lasting relationships.
Let me start this by saying I never finished the sixth grade. My childhood was rocky at best. I was raised in a biker clubhouse where drugs, alcohol, and violence were ever present. I've spent over 10 years of my life behind bars, starting at age 16. One stay was in juvenile prison and two stays were in the Washington State Penitentiary. I have spent my whole life trying to find happiness or just a way to change the things that have always held me back. I deal with a severe anxiety disorder that has made it hard for me to reach out to people. I've had lots of dead-end jobs because my criminal history and lack of education made it harder to get the jobs that I wanted. My prison time has made me believe I would never amount to anything. Having a criminal background makes most employers overlook your application, even if you are qualified. My upbringing and the fact that I've served time in prison are barriers I must overcome each day.

I tried once to go back to school, only to end up in prison during my time in school, leaving me with debt I had no idea how to repay. Then came the loan forgiveness program. Spokane Community College was my only choice with both my mother and sister attending there, making it easier to find my way around the school. Starting with the low numbered classes like Math 21 really helped me build a foundation. While in the English department, I met Sharon Miller. With Sharon's help, I was able to believe in myself and earn high scores in English. Before her class, I never thought I'd ever be able to write an essay, and now I feel confident in my writing.

I am now in my third year of college and can't wait to transfer to a university, where I'll major in Business Marketing. I really would like to take my degree and become a business consultant. I've always felt like I know what makes money and how to do it. I want to help businesses make more money or help make their operations run more smoothly. Without education, I'd never be able to accomplish this goal and achieve my dream. I work very hard at school and try never to miss time. My time is valuable, with having three small children at home, I need to use it wisely. I also believe that me being in school and treating it so seriously helps my kids realize that it is needed to help you move through life. My education is important and the staff at SCC is the reason for it.

I am asked to give one piece of advice. The first thing I'd say would be, “Never give up!” I'm 44 years old and I've been in prison three times. I have two failed relationships and seven kids. Through everything, I've never stopped trying to better myself along the way, sometimes not even knowing how I was going to eat or pay my bills. Just don't get into your own head with negative thoughts, stand tall and believe that you can do it if that’s what you want. Just start telling yourself that every day until you believe it. We wake up the same every day; it's just what you want to make of it. Just believe in yourself because you are worth it and there are plenty of people to help you succeed along your road.
Kasey Hermens
Spokane Falls Community College

When I was a teenager, I felt like there was a beaten path I needed to follow in academia: high school would end with a diploma and I would toss myself into a four-year university that would mold me into a professional. So, when my GPA fell very short and I barely graduated high school six years ago, I felt like college wasn’t something I could fit into anymore. I grew up in a household riddled with emotional turmoil and this took its toll on me, manifesting into mental illness and harmful behaviors. After I scraped by with my diploma, thanks to the immeasurable support I received from my mother and teachers, I took some time to work on figuring out who I was.

During this time, I woke up one morning with extreme fatigue and a radiating pain. My symptoms progressed and after three years of searching, I was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease. I received a list of diseases like periarticular sclerosis, hyperostosis, osteitis, and synovitis, all of which are fancy ways of explaining the chronic pain I still suffer from today. I could no longer participate in some of my favorite activities without pain, and felt my identity slipping away again with each of the lifestyle changes I was forced to make. The medical bills were the cherry on top that made higher education feel even more out of reach.

In time, this adversity forced me to reflect on who I was before my diagnosis, and who I wanted to be after. I had to learn how to live my life and stop waiting to see where it was going to take me. I decided to take control and applied to be a student at Spokane Falls Community College, and then applied for financial aid. The admissions process was simple, and I didn’t have to explain my awful GPA or why I lacked extracurricular activities. I was accepted and offered enough money in loans and grants to make things work. I was thrilled.

Through my personal experiences, I gained a greater empathy for those with diseases or injuries that limit their daily activities. Because of all the time I spent under the care of physicians, I grew to admire the health care field. I learned about occupational therapy -- the way it helps people develop and recover meaningful activities in their lives -- and I was hooked. With this path in mind, I took the Allied Health Chemistry series with Professor Adriana Bishop during my first year. I learned the value of the scientific process in a team environment and grew to love the material.

Adriana Bishop instilled a confidence in me that I had lost in high school. I was challenged, understood, and shaped into a scholar with a sense of self. I networked with my peers and faculty, received honor roll grades, and through my academic pursuits was reminded that I could accomplish any goals I had. That fire she helped light is still within me and I plan to take it to Eastern Washington University where I will pursue a B.S. in Exercise Physiology, and eventually a Master of Occupational Therapy degree.

I would tell anyone struggling with their ability to attend a community college that while life can be difficult, you have the power to turn things around. Take your time and pace yourself. There will always be people in your corner to help you along the way and you can be a story of strength and success, even when the cards aren’t stacked in your favor.
Sioeli “Joe” Laupati  
*Tacoma Community College*

Gangs have been a part of my life since the 1980s. I was in grade school and my dad was in the military and always gone. My mom didn’t want to live on base as a single parent, so we stayed with family, first in the bay area and then in Tacoma. The crack epidemic was hitting and the gangs of the 1970s that used to protect our communities were now starting to destroy our communities. I went back and forth between my family in WA and CA because I craved the gang action that wasn’t up here yet. With my dad not around a lot, other people became my father figures. Even though I was running the streets, I made it through to my junior year of high school.

I was on track to graduate with my friends, when my father retired and we moved into a predominantly white area. I dropped out and went to live with other gang members on the eastside of Tacoma. At one point, I owned 21 cars and 3 houses. All we thought about was money and fun, which meant living dangerously. I wasn’t worried about the law, even though I saw a lot of people die and go through very traumatic events. I was numb.

With the magnitude of having a child, I realized I wanted to provide a positive crime-free environment. I had regular jobs but was struggling without a high school diploma. I had my second child in 2006 and my third in 2008. I was ready to get off the streets when my oldest son’s test scores earned him a spot at a private school. I had to come up with the money so I stayed on the streets.

I knew in the back of my head that the longer I stayed on the streets the more likely it was that I would go to prison. I told myself I would just stay until my son got through high school. A month after he graduated high school I ended up going to prison. When I got out in 2018, I joined my son as a student at Tacoma Community College (TCC).

While incarcerated, I told my counselor I didn’t have a plan. He asked me what I would say if he could put me in a place where I was surrounded with people that help me succeed. I said yes.

That place is TCC. The alternative path to gangs, guns, and selling drugs came in the form of education. The programs at TCC go way beyond the classroom.

It was the Re-Entry Navigators that got me started. They suggested TCC Learning Communities. This cohort style gave me the instant community I needed, since I was living in a half-way house. Soon I was participating all over campus. Within a year, I attended two CTC leadership conferences, spoke on a state-wide panel, and got a work-study position. I have been promoted to student ambassador in the Office of Student Engagement, where I facilitate a diversity leadership program. I have also won two Outstanding Student Awards.

I am majoring in Sociology with an American Ethnic and Gender Studies Pathway. I plan to get my MA and become a mentor and counsel youth and inmates that are on, or likely to get caught up in, the same path that led me to prison and advocate for their education. I would tell other students to give college a chance, even if they aren’t sure about it. I would also say what my learning community faculty told me, “Go out and be a positive change agent for the world.”
Jacob Lorang  
Walla Walla Community College

My path to college was not an easy one. I entered Walla Walla Community College at age 36, only 15 months after my younger brother committed suicide, and a little over three years after my youngest daughter died in an accident at age seven. In between those tragedies, I had also been struck by a falling steel pipe weighing over three hundred pounds which permanently altered my ability to continue drilling water wells and hobby-farming in my spare time. I was broke. In every way possible. The conservative-religious framework that contained my worldview became dismantled. I switched from studying theology to psychology in order to understand what was happening to me. I was having severe panic attacks, suicidal ideations, and the smallest thing would put me into a fight-or-flight response. I went to college to find my way back from the edge of the map.

It was hard. If it wasn’t for a number of very important conversations, I never could have made it through those first two years. My parents didn’t go to college. I did not fully understand the significance of going to college. I previously believed them to be liberal institutions of intellectual bullshit designed to entrap the weak-minded into submission. What surprised me was to find teachers and counselors who not only allowed me the freedom to express my thoughts, they introduced me to highly influential thinkers who questioned the system, the philosophies people believe, and the effect those combinations have on society.

My first intellectual conversation was with a counselor, prior to classes starting. They encouraged me to pursue an opportunity for a scholarship to study at Whitman College. I had grown up mowing the yard of one of the frat houses. Community College was a leap for me. I was shocked. However, my philosophy teacher, during office hours, suggested the same thing before finishing my first quarter. She listened to me rant, and introduced me to philosophical frameworks that helped contextualize my frustrations.

By far, the greatest influence that kept me in school those first two years was TRIO. I never would have been able to meet the deadlines for the administrative requirements. Even when I was in tears, and didn’t have the energy to find solutions, I was buoyed by their support. And I did it! I crossed the line from technical labor to intellectualism. I received a full-ride scholarship to obtain my undergraduate degree from Whitman College, an elite liberal arts institution! It has not been easy. I’m too old to fit in, and my background sticks out in the way I walk, talk, and sit at a desk. Working with TRIO counselors taught me to continue reaching out for support, which was not a concept I had developed or believed necessary in my life prior to entering college.

Now, I am writing my senior thesis on inter-generational social mobility as a Sociology major. It has not been fun. But the personal development has been exponential. I am hoping to continue research into grad school. I have every reason to believe I can work alongside Ivy League researchers and contribute significant scholarship that might affect change to bridge gaps restricting mobility for the marginalized and underprivileged. College is a privileged institution. One should not assume they can successfully navigate through it on their own. “Access does not mean inclusion” (Jack, Anthony; The Privileged Poor, 2019). But if we can be intentional about community then perhaps we can continue to develop meaningful relationships that foster belonging beyond circumstance and chance.
Matt Yearous  
Wenatchee Valley College

What compelled me the most to enroll in the accounting and business program at Wenatchee Valley College (WVC) was the simple desire to get back into the workforce with a degree, after being a stay-at-home father for the last 13 years.

During my time at WVC, there have been many students and educators that have contributed to my success, but there are three people who stand out the most. Throughout the last couple of years Jennifer Korfiatis, Michael Choman, and Nelson Martin (now retired), have helped me learn, understand, and grow to love the industry of business management and accounting. From day one, they have always been there to lend a guiding hand in the pursuit of my educational success. Many times, I have come to them in search of understanding and guidance regarding my classes and sometimes even personal issues. They are always willing to help and their doors are always open to students.

My life has been positively transformed through my time here at WVC and has led to some of the most significant personal and professional growth of my life. Before the diagnosis of my seizure disorder, most of my life was spent working in labor intensive professions.

Choosing this path of higher learning has shifted my strengths from the physical to mental. I believe that the passion that our teachers have for what they do has led to my success as a student and as person. Professors Korfiatis, Choman, and Martin have, in their own way, helped in transforming my life. If it wasn’t for them, I don’t believe I would have been able to fully overcome the obstacles that I faced in returning to WVC.

I returned to WVC in 2017. I was enrolled back in 2008 but due to medical problems that led to physical and emotional constraints, I had to walk away. During this time, I was able to adjust to life with a seizure disorder and understand how to emotionally accept my life as someone with physical constraints. This took time, experience, and personal growth. When I was finally ready to move forward with my life, my first thought and my first goal was to go back and finish what I had started almost a decade ago.

Now that I am half a quarter away from getting two degrees in accounting and business management, I have begun actively looking for work. While I have real concerns and fears about having a seizure disorder, and a company not willing to hire someone that could pose as a liability, I will not waiver in the pursuit of my next goal: finding meaningful employment. My time and experience here at WVC has become the foundation upon which I will write this new chapter of my life. The educators, primarily the aforementioned, are the cornerstones of my foundational strength. Having these teachers and what they have taught me, has given me the confidence moving forward into the professional world in which I am looking to work and thrive. Because of this experience, my parting advice to the next student is this: Everything you want in life is right outside your comfort zone — go get uncomfortable and thrive.
My name is Jodi Borrelli. My goal is to become a Substance Use Disorder Professional (SUDP). I am in my second year at Whatcom Community College (WCC) and will graduate from the Substance Use Disorder Program in the spring of 2020. I am a recovering drug addict. My addiction began after a shoulder injury and pain medication was prescribed by my doctor. I went from soccer mom and PTA president, to heroin addict living on the streets of Tacoma, and making an appearance on Washington’s Most Wanted.

Upon release from jail, I moved to Bellingham where I began to heal. Being in recovery, I was employed for the first time in years, but working at a gas station felt hopeless. My motivation for going back to school was simple: I wanted a better life. I was apprehensive about everything. I lacked confidence. I had heard about the SUDP program at Whatcom Community College and thought it might be a place to start. The ladies in the BFET (Basic Food and Education Training) office met with me and enrolled me that same day. It was through the BFET program that I had doors open that I never imagined. They became involved with me and showed me it was okay to ask for help. As I work through my program, they continue to offer guidance and support. It is reassuring to know I have people in my corner who want me to succeed, not just in my academics, but also in my recovery, in my life, and in rebuilding relationships I thought were once lost.

Being labeled a “drug addict” has always been a huge barrier for me. Coupled with being on Washington’s Most Wanted, it was devastating. I’m not embarrassed about my story anymore and I don’t regret the past. Occasionally, I get the opportunity to share my experience and hopefully inspire others. I’m not the same person I was in my addiction. Today my children call me. They tell me they love me and are proud of me. I have been given a second chance at life.

As I continue doing what is right in front of me, opportunities seem to present themselves. My goal is to finish my program at WCC and become a certified SUDP. This will allow me the opportunity to help other women who are also striving to better their lives. Some of them may be going back to school themselves. Whether starting new, or returning back to finish a degree, school may seem daunting at first. If I could share one piece of advice with another student, it would be to find your motivation and take action. At one time or another we all feel inadequate. Sometimes it feels like I’m learning to read and write all over again, but that’s okay. What is really happening is that I’m learning how to learn. I’m learning how to do things in a different way.

As I continue forward in my education, I am finding my way through this process. I am finding momentum. I am discovering my life is much fuller than I had ever expected. Opportunities continue to show up that, two years ago, I would have thought impossible. Victor Hugo’s classic French novel Les Misérables tells a story about an ex-convict, Jean Valjean. Despite his troubled past, he discovers redemption and transformation by having the opportunity to prove himself. I have something to prove. This is change. This is my life today.
Erma “Jessica” Villarino  
Yakima Valley College

My name is Erma “Jessica” Villarino. I am a single mother of a talented eight-year-old girl with an intellectual disability. I am currently attending Yakima Valley College (YVC), pursuing an AAS in Automotive Service Technology.

I am in my second year in Automotive Service Technology and I have faced many obstacles. Before entering the Automotive Technology program, I was hesitant, not knowing if I would be able to balance work, school, homework and my daughter.

At that point, I was enrolled in the GED program through WorkFirst as a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipient. I completed my GED within four months and was honored to walk in the graduation ceremony, one of the highlights of my life. As I finished my last GED test, Lynn Lewis, the GED Instructor, asked if I had any plans on attending college. I responded, “I didn’t think I would make it this far. The only experience I have had is with tools and machinery.” Lynn mentioned the Automotive Service Technology program, which landed me in Murray Ruggles office. When I met with Murray, I was not confident in what direction to take. Murray encouraged me and gave me options which made me feel at ease. He said, “What if you try it and it works for you?” Those words encouraged me to take the placement test for the program.

Entering the automotive world was difficult. I had very little knowledge of vehicles. I expressed how worried I was of failure to Murray and he recommended I ask my other instructors for help. I asked my instructor Bob Olsen if he could help me identify vehicle components. He offered his personal time after class to get me familiar with vehicles and their components. I received encouragement from my first-year lab instructor Roy La Forge. I faced hardship being a full-time student and being unable to work due to childcare issues. Roy took the time out of his busy day to hear me out and even recommended a few jobs for me. Monserrat Vargas, who is a financial aid specialist, saw me in tears many times with the frustrations I have overcome. She saved me from quitting school when I was blocked from my school account for a $50 laptop late fee when my daughter was sick. She told me not to stop because of one barrier. Monserrat offered to pay the fee because she believed in me so much. I was able to resolve the issue. I am thankful and grateful for these YVC representatives. If not for them, I would not be in my second year in Automotive Technology.

Because of all the encouragement, I became a participant in Skills USA Technical and Leadership Competitions. I am a gold medalist winner at the state competition, which was my ticket to Skills USA Nationals held in Louisville, Kentucky. I received honors in the Job Demonstration Open. I am also a winner of three scholarships that have helped me financially as I earn my degree.

I am proud to say I am a YVC student. I encourage others to get their education. I want to be a helping hand just like the good people I mentioned. I am proud to say I work in the College and Career Readiness office where I first signed up for the GED class.

As I move forward with my education in Automotive Service Technology, I am looking forward to opening my own class one preventative maintenance business. I have great confidence in myself and in my future. A word of advice to others would be to face your fears, as they become experiences.
2019-2020
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