Transforming Lives Awards

Celebrating Student Achievement

Washington’s Community and Technical Colleges

January 2021
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.

Awards criteria

Boards of trustees could select 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.

College trustees 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.
Abigail Gover  
Bates Technical College

I recently graduated from Bates Technical College with my degree in early childhood education (ECE). Because of my childhood, I sometimes doubted this might happen.

When I was three years old, I went to live with my aunt and uncle because my parents realized that they could not take care of me. Both of them were struggling with addiction, and my mom had nowhere for us to live. My aunt and uncle had guardianship of me, and I was happy. But growing up I never formed a strong bond with my mom and dad because it was difficult to see them. At 16, my aunt and uncle started filing for divorce. When I was 18, I found out my mom was going to prison for five years, which was very upsetting for me and my family. In a strange way, her prison sentence has made us closer than we ever were before. We now have a great bond and talk on the phone every week. The hardest part so far is that she was not able to watch or be there for my graduation.

I did struggle. In school I had a hard time focusing and wanting to stay in class. I was distracted by everything going on in my life. I would hear people and teachers push the idea of college, but I was never sure if I wanted to go or what I would do after high school. Then I heard about Bates near the end of senior year. I liked the idea of finishing up my diploma while taking classes. I wanted to be the first in my family to earn a degree and obtain a career I loved. At first, I struggled at Bates, too. I went through two different programs. Realizing they were not for me, I took a break. Then I went back and decided to get my diploma. At that same time, I started working in a daycare, which I enjoyed. Then, I enrolled in the ECE program at Bates, and I fell in love enough to stick with it. The ECE program made a huge difference in my life because I found something I enjoyed doing, and I found a career I love – working and shaping the lives of the children in my care.

I’m also so happy my success is tied to my mom’s success. She was working on getting her degree while in prison at the same time I was. When she gets out, she can have a career for a better life. Seeing her push herself in school made me push myself harder.

The ECE program at Bates has inspired me to continue working in the field, and I would love to further my education and get my bachelor’s degree. Lisa Webb, the ECE program instructor, and my papa were my biggest motivations to keep going. They would always encourage me to further my education. One of my goals for the distant future is to open my own childcare center because I want to create curriculum that expands the minds of young children and makes me a role model for our future generations.

My advice for future students who are unsure about attending college is to never give up and to remember THEY are their own cheerleaders. Just like me, they can break the cycle of the stereotype that says they will follow down the path of their parents by not finishing school. They can also have a brighter future.
Sara Moghadasipour
Bellevue College

I was a proactive student in Iran until the first year of high school – that’s when my parents forced me to choose a STEM field instead of architecture, my dream area of study.

I lost my desire to continue my education and I dropped out of school. A year later, I got married, and six months passed before I discovered my husband was an addict. I helped him to quit four times. The last time, however, he relapsed and threatened to hurt our baby. A year of struggle would follow with the law, yet I was finally able to divorce, becoming a single mom at the age of 21. I went back to school and received a high school diploma while working fifty-hour weeks to pay expenses. Although as one who practiced Bahai, not Islam, I was considered a second-class citizen in Iran with no right to go to a university.

When my daughter turned seven, her father took her back to practice government Shariah law. In that time, she was extremely unhappy and became sick in his care. I was powerless to fight this. Yet I couldn’t just let those laws and people – who destroyed my life – take away her health and future too. It was then that I fled my country to protect my daughter’s life.

After 30 months living as a refugee in Turkey, my daughter and I reached the United States. Soon, I started an entry-level job, even though my English was limited to a very few words. After months of studying by myself on weekends, I passed the college entrance exam and became a student.

Bellevue College became my second home, and instructors became my family who guided me toward a brighter future. My instructors played an important role in my academic achievements. Most importantly, my advisor Deanne Eschbach and my instructors John Cassaro, Victor Sandblom, and Tim Linneman went above and beyond their responsibilities, and spent countless hours to give me feedback, to encourage me, and to guide me in finding academic resources and scholarships.

Initially I was uncertain about what degree I wanted to pursue, until my first trip to downtown Seattle. I was shocked to see homeless encampments. I found out that in a modern society, people slip between the cracks; they go unnoticed, and financial problems can quickly escalate to the point that many have lost hope. I understood that sense of desperation and heartache, but I also knew that many of those people (like myself) when given a spark and the light of day to make a better life for themselves will do just that. The people I saw motivated me to follow my old dream of becoming an architect, this time to work with nonprofits, to create a sustainable network of housing opportunities for Seattle communities most in need.

In June 2019, I graduated from Bellevue College, as a member of Phi Theta Kappa with a GPA of 3.92, receiving an Associate of Arts and Science degree. That autumn, I got accepted into the University of Washington, where I qualified for the dean’s list over several quarters. Finally, this autumn, 2020, I got accepted into the university's architectural design program, where my journey continues.

If I were to share one piece of advice with other students or those who are unsure about their ability to attend a college, I would say you are not alone in this! Everyone in the college is there to help you succeed. Just be brave and stand up whenever you fall. No matter how great your struggles are, there is no “impossible” when you don’t give up!
Tamara Holmes  
Bellingham Technical College  

When I immigrated to the United States five years ago, I knew it would not be easy, but I had underestimated the challenges. I was starting over again at 30 years old in a new country, speaking a new language. In Russia I had worked in journalism and publishing, but these skills are not easily transferable to a new language. I was faced with an empowering and also frightening decision about who I want to be. I spent about two years studying English and browsing through college websites in search of the right fit.

I visited Bellingham Technical College in early 2017 to learn about the Dental Hygiene program. I had done some research, and this program seemed to be a perfect match – I’d be good at this work and could support my family with it. However, after some candid discussions with academic advisors, who provided me with a realistic picture of the preparatory work required to make it into the program, I began to have self-doubt. I was just one of hundreds aspiring to get into a highly competitive program that accepted only ten students every two years. Acceptance required a near perfect GPA, high test scores, an associate degree and health care experience. Maybe that would be attainable for some, but I was still learning English and would have to make double the effort of most of my peers. Moreover, I had no college experience and didn’t know what I was getting into. Maybe I should set my sights on something less ambitious? Maybe I was reaching too high?

That same day I learned about a student support program called TRiO!, and I decided to engage. With support from the TRiO! team, I started down what seemed like a long and unlikely path toward a dental hygiene degree. Along the way, Kelly, my TRiO! coach, played a critical role in helping me to focus on my studies and not lower my expectations. I often came to her with questions and hardships, and she was always able to point me in the right direction and help me find solutions.

Today, I am proud of my accomplishments. I’ve earned an associate degree in dental assisting with perfect grades and a certificate of merit, worked for a year as a dental assistant, and now am enrolled in the Dental Hygiene program. And I achieved this while also balancing the demands of family life and raising a wonderful young daughter. What was once just a dream is now a plan well on its way to completion. I will become a hygienist in 2022, and I have an outstanding offer to return to the tribal dental clinic to work in this capacity. However, three years ago none of these successes were certain, and I know that I have not gotten here alone.

If I could go back in time and give some advice to myself or any new student, it would be this: no one succeeds alone. Seek out people and programs that can help you succeed. College is not easy, but asking for and accepting help from tutors, teachers, and counselors can go a long way towards making your experience a success.
Dora Mendez  
*Big Bend Community College*  

**Tomorrow is Now**

School has always been very challenging for me due to my learning disabilities. I felt my dreams were unreachable. My parent pushed me to finish high school even though they both had minimal education themselves. Right out of high school, I felt that getting a job at a grocery store or factory was the only place I would end up, as I had no plans going back to further my education.

Then when things couldn't get any harder, my father passes from cancer. I saw the struggles my mom encountered working double shifts trying to make ends meet. I remember my mom driving and seeing potatoes and onions on the side of the road, and would pull over and say, “Honey can you grab those.” I was young and felt this was just for “fun,” and never saw the reality my mom and siblings were facing. Yet, we never went hungry.

After my father's passing, I became interested in the medical field. I told myself to think small at first, so I got a job at a nursing home. I then became very compassionate taking care of others and earned my Certified Nursing Assistant license. I felt more empowered and started to think of all the possibilities.

One day, I grabbed the newspaper and saw EMT classes offered. I felt a bit hesitant so I left the newspaper on my table. As days went by, I picked up the newspaper once again and told myself, “you might be stupid like many have told you.” Again, fighting that voice inside me, I decided to just call and was literally in class the next day. I thought, “what did I get myself into.” I left class for home with 20 pounds of books, a bit discouraged. That night I prayed telling God if this is for me, push me, it’s okay if I cry, but I won’t quit. After months, class ended and the state test comes along. I failed that test again and again. I cried many nights but failing isn't a choice. Got up once more and said if no one believes in you, who will? Retook the test and passed.

Furthermore, I faced my fears and have accomplished becoming a National Advanced EMT, Medical Assistant Phlebotomist, and a Firefighter saving lives each day. I once was that little girl with so many doubts, and here I am once more testing my waters making big waves at Big Bend Community College. Becoming a nurse sounds crazy and here I am soon to graduate with my pre-nursing in three months.

Lastly, I know for sure the TRIO staff members have made me believe anything is possible, building my foundation. They are the rocks to get me across on the other side of the water. Including the department of disabilities which came up with a plan to make sure I succeed.

I now believe failing isn’t a choice because you can eventually cry and give up and fall to the ground but failing has made me who I am now. I am that girl with the learning disability that people will call names, the one placed in Special Ed because of language barriers. I am proud to say that, because many hide their weaknesses, and yet my weaknesses won’t defeat who I am today and who I will become tomorrow. It will only make me stronger. “I am here for another round, Dora.” I say this because in reality, the person within me is my biggest challenge to overcome my fears of succeeding.
Unworthy of Education

“God intended for mothers to rear the children and fathers to provide financially. There’s absolutely no reason for us to waste money on a degree you’ll never use.” For the last four years, I’ve been told again and again that I’m not worth educating. At the age of 18, living in Provo, Utah, I met my 35-year-old husband. Within six months of meeting, we were married. Immediately after the marriage, he limited my communication with my family and took a job across the country, taking me with him. I was asked to stay at home with his seven-year-old daughter and later our son. For four years I fought for a formal education. But I stayed. I felt like I had made a choice to get married and if I didn’t stick with it, I was a failure.

Looking back, I realize how ridiculous it is that I stayed as long as I did. Between being locked outside in the middle of winter, pregnant, to his leaning on false church teachings to argue against education, to body shaming. In the thick of it, hearing every day that I was worthless, I believed it. Maybe I didn’t deserve education, affection, respect. Now, I can plainly see how wrong I was. February of 2019, I finally worked up the courage to leave.

I am beautiful. I deserve respect. I am worth educating. It took me a while to reach this realization. After leaving, I immediately started looking for jobs to support me and my son. I now work as a Registered Behavior Technician also taking on the role of Social Media Manager. My job has not only helped me pay our rent but has changed my life for the better as I work with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder who more often than not have been rejected by the public education system, helping them with social skills and home education. But between childcare, rent, and endless bills, I felt like I was caught in a vicious cycle. “How do I pay my bills without a higher paying job? How do I get a higher paying job without a degree? How do I pay for a degree when I can barely pay the bills?” Between the split of marital community property and working weekends, I was able to save enough to pay for my return to school.

But it wasn’t just money holding me back from returning to school. I struggled with my destroyed self image. But Joey Benitez, a professor at Cascadia College made a difference in my life that I’m sure not even he is aware of. Professor Benitez wrote me a glowing letter of recommendation naming me one of his top students in his career at Cascadia and University of Washington. His belief in me kept me going even when the doubt crept in. I’ll always be thankful for his sincere desire for me to succeed.

I’m finally back at school, with one quarter to go before completing an associate degree in communications with a career in public relations in my sights. I truly believe that through hard work and many, many late nights I’ll be able to accomplish my academic and career goals and provide my son with a comfortable life and the opportunity of higher education. Community college and the community that comes with it have helped me to bridge the gap between emotional abuse and poverty to education, self worth, and success.
What originally compelled me to come to Centralia College was that I knew I needed to somehow change my life for the better. However, I had no idea how transformative the process would be. Originally, I was just coming to Centralia to get my GED and to take an algebra class so I could join an electrical apprenticeship. I had a meeting with an advisor at 10:30 in the morning, and by noon that same day I was in my first class with a full course load. I didn’t realize that Fall Quarter began that day when I started my advising appointment.

The first person I met with at the college was Elizabeth Grant. She asked me why I was there and what I really wanted to do in the world. It was her guidance and kindness that made me first realize that I had the potential to do more than I thought I could. Dr. Grant made me feel like I deserved to be there, and her confidence in me gave me the courage I needed to believe in myself. Every professor I have had here at Centralia College has engaged with me in ways that encouraged me to learn more about the subject they were teaching. Their willingness to go the extra mile to make sure I understood the material is something I will always be grateful for. The dedication and selflessness these professors showed, gave me a sense of belonging that I had never experienced in my life, like I was a part of a family. The kindness and guidance I received, made me want to pay it forward to my fellow students and the entire world.

Along with individuals like Dr. Grant and all my professors, I received valuable guidance and assistance from the Trio program here at the college. If not for the help of Liisa Preslyn, and the rest of the Trio staff, I do not know how I would have made it this far. Miss Elisa Sunflower, in particular, has given me so much extra help and support with my math classes that I will forever be grateful to her.

The biggest barriers I had to overcome in order to attend college were, being a nontraditional student, I am now 47 years of age. I also didn’t finish high school and wasn’t very engaged when I was there. Attending Centralia College was my first real exposure to education. The fact that I was essentially homeless and unemployed prior to enrollment was an additional barrier. I was able to secure a place to live, in exchange for helping to take care of my elderly grandmother and father. This allowed me the footing I needed to attend college. Joanie Meister helped me get my funding figured out and made the process so easy. She is another example of how everyone at Centralia College comes together to help students be successful.

After graduating from Centralia College with my Associate of Arts degree, I plan on transferring to a four-year university to obtain a bachelor’s in mathematics and statistics. Eventually I will pursue a masters and doctoral degrees. Ultimately I would like to research climate change and issues of social inequities.

For future or new students, I would like to encourage them to believe they are capable of far more than they know, to understand that doubt and fear are normal, and come along with new challenges, but they will not be alone in overcoming these obstacles. Believe in yourself and work hard; soon your fears and doubts will have transformed into the satisfaction of success.
Tosha Big Eagle
Clark College

I am pursuing a bachelor's degree in human development and psychology at WSU Vancouver, while completing my certificate of addiction counselor education at Clark College. Addiction is something that has touched my life on many levels. When I was 19 years old and a sophomore in college, I went to a party and was introduced to methamphetamine. It took hold of my life. Subsequently, I dropped out of college and started my hard journey of addiction.

I was incarcerated for the first time when I was 21. Upon my release, I was renewed with hope and determination. I completed treatment and re-started college. Finals week of my second quarter back, I was blind-sided: My father, a Dakota Sioux, came to live with me to rebuild our broken relationship.

Unfortunately, my father was never able to break his cycle of addiction. In 2008, he overdosed in his sleep on prescription Methadone, while sitting next to me as I studied for my upcoming finals. Heartbroken, I felt like I was responsible ... like I could have stopped it. Sadly, I turned my pain into a heroin addiction.

In 2010, God intervened and put me in jail. In the seven years I spent incarcerated, I took every class and counseling session available. I became a Peer Mentor, a Mediator, and a Domestic Violence Advocate. These positions taught me to be a fair and caring person who leads with respect and love.

After leaving prison, it was difficult to find employment. When my son was born, I realized I would need to invest in my education if I wanted to take care of him and my family. I enrolled at Clark College, and connected with the college’s Re-Entry Navigator. With her support, and the support of the college’s Workforce Education Services (WES), I was able to find the resources and programs to help me succeed in college. My son began his own educational journey in the college’s on-campus child care.

At Clark, I found opportunities to create community and develop my leadership skills. Through the ACES (Addiction Counseling Education Students) Club, I discovered my passion for Human Services. The Re-Entry Club gave me a sense of community.

I was also able to find gainful employment—at first through work study, and now as a staff member in the position of Homelessness Prevention Coordinator. I work in the WES office, the same place that helped me so much when I was a Clark student.

Today I have almost 11 years of sobriety and over four successful years since my release from prison. These past years have brought many hurdles and successes. I am taking care of my maternal grandparents, who are infirm. I am the sole provider for my beautiful son, who turns three in March.

My dream is to work with minority youth and their families, and ultimately to pursue a doctorate in Prevention Science. I want to research ways to change the policies and systems which create barriers and contribute to unhealthy behaviors.

Our future is with our children. I believe if we educate and help them at a young age, we can reduce the risk of addiction, violence, and poverty. I would like to cultivate and reinstate cultural traditions among the youth in our community. It is my belief that our children (especially Native Americans) are suffering from a break from their culture, which leaves them vulnerable.

While addiction, trauma, and incarceration have touched my life, they do not define who I am. I want to continue to help others and be a force in the progress of treatment, prevention, and intervention.
Marcia Wilson  
*Clover Park Technical College*

I reluctantly came to Washington state a divorced mother of two, broke, terrified, and homesick. Left behind was everything I’d ever known, including the abuse we’d suffered at the hands of the man once called husband and father. The Pacific Coast, with its volcanoes and mysteries, was safer than anywhere in the east. We traded it all for a midnight flight.

“I’ll finish school,” I swore. “Get that degree and the money that goes with it.”

Poverty was the trap keeping us powerless, education our only rescue from the undertow. I applied to Tacoma Community College (TCC) and found they required two years of residency, unaware of Clover Park Technical College’s (CPTC’s) shorter wait.

Two years is agony while waiting for yet another late bus in the winter rain. I survived a string of low-wage, grueling jobs that ultimately wrecked my health. I walked three miles on days when bus money was short. I waved away my ongoing anxiety as “just PTSD.” Ever fearful of my ex, I cried in public and moved my children frequently. The fear of failure steered my every action.

My TCC advisor recognized a fire in me and urged me to “join my people” at Clover Park. At the information session, Kathy Smith slapped down a map of the environmental science program. This was how I could complete my AAS in 18 months and transfer to a bachelor’s program. I could be paid to work in the outdoor lab? Students get bus passes? Had I known about the PB&J sandwiches and food bank, I would have pinched myself.

I transferred, eager to meet Andy Fritz. Then his life was cut short by tragedy.

Through it all, CPTC soothed my fears and gave me a place to belong. Kathy, and Tom Lynott, Derek Faust kept us going forward. WorkSource, Advising, and Disability Services helped me to succeed by providing support services. Program faculty guided me to a work-study position caretaking the outdoor laboratory across the street from campus. They created an internship mapping emergent native flora. Student Life welcomed me to a part-time position. I made good friends, good grades, and countless PB&Js.

Everyone commiserated when I exhausted my financial aid. They believed me when I vowed to return and kept in touch as I job-hunted. They remembered me when CPTC needed a lab assistant. Derek emailed. I replied an emphatic yes!

Schools are safe zones lit by the camaraderie of students pursuing the same dreams. We struggle against our poverty. We juggle jobs, exams, and parenting while feeding the fire to support ourselves and our loved ones. It is easy to forget how the drive for education unites so many diverse populations. We just want a chance to strive.

When I’m not working, you can find me volunteering across the street, gathering data, blogging for the school, and plotting the return of the science club. Purpose, not failure now drives me. I have wall space reserved for my degrees.

I ache to tell refugees like me that there are safe spaces where they can breathe and uncoil. And all students suffer from self-doubt along the path of success. It’s a natural part of the journey.

To them, to you, I repeat one simple mantra: You are worth it.
Kalid Hussein
Columbia Basin College

When I was seventeen, my parents, eight younger siblings, and I arrived in the USA as Somalia refugees. Starting high school was very difficult because I didn't speak any English. However, I didn't give up. I learned English in just two years, but unfortunately, I couldn't graduate from high school because I reached the age limit without having enough credits. I worked at Bolthouse-Farms for two years, but I always wanted to continue my education.

I applied to Columbia Basin College (CBC), but because of my language barriers, I didn't score high enough to take college classes. For two years, I had to take ESL classes to improve my English. While at CBC, two individuals, Cinthia Alvarez and Natalie Huggins, have been extremely helpful to me. I met Alvarez, a High School Equivalency Program (HEP) recruitment specialist, at an outreach presentation. She helped me apply to HEP where I received support preparing for the GED exams. However, completing the GED was the most difficult obstacle to overcome. The first test I passed was math in 2015. Since English is my second language, I had much more difficulty passing the remaining three exams. Each quarter new classmates came and left, and I was still stuck in the same place. That made me feel unhappy and disappointed in myself.

When I felt like giving up, I asked myself, "How do I want my future to be?" By answering this question, I imagined my future; I decided giving up was not ideal. Huggins was my HEP English instructor. Huggins always believed in me. She motivated me when I didn't receive a passing score. She used to tell me, "You got this, Khalid. You are so close!" Her enthusiasm gave me the motivation to work harder. I still remember in 2018 when I passed my final, official GED exam, and she called and said, "Khalid, you did it!" I was so happy - that was a life-changing moment. After I earned my GED, Alvarez encouraged and helped me to apply to the College Assistance Migrant Program where I received the Outstanding CAMP Scholar Award in 2018. I became a mentor after my first year. Without the help of Alvarez and Huggins, I wouldn't be where I am in accomplishing my goals.

After earning my associate degree at CBC, I will transfer in the fall of 2021 as a junior to Washington State University majoring in mechanical and aerospace engineering (M&AE). I plan to continue my education and earn my Ph.D. in M&AE. As a result of research and hands-on-experiences, I'm passionate about M&AE. In 2019 I completed a five-week online NASA Community College Aerospace Scholars (NCAS) course, and I competed in an on-site Mars rover competition at Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. I assisted my team as a chief system engineer, and I was responsible for ensuring the rover design had proper software to function. My team and I received first place in the Mars rover competition. Recently, I was accepted to another program called NASA L'Space Academy worldwide competition in which eleven other students and I are writing a mission proposal. NASA will select the winning team's proposal to use in a future space mission. My NCAS experiences have inspired me to pursue my passion as a NASA engineer.

My advice for students who are unsure about their future is to visit and enroll at a community or technical college, and join all the programs and clubs that interest you. At a community or technical college, there are many programs and staff members that will support you in reaching your academic, vocational, and professional goals!
Hovering above the crisp white page was an excited tube of black ink, waiting patiently to make contact with the surface to illustrate the words of my journey—- a journey of courage, determination, sadness, excitement, hesitation, fear, happiness, patience, and gratitude. A warm tear escaped my tired eyes, rolling down my cheek to land on the paper and form a little puddle. Talking about my story feels somewhat selfish during a time that so many people are secretly struggling through some of the hardest moments.

A little over two years ago, I made the conscious decision to pursue an unaccomplished goal I had since a young age, however, life had happened a little differently for me. Where most of my peers ventured off to college after high school, the thought of burdening my family with the financial pressures of college fees caused great concern. Instead, I decided to pursue a working career, which I am grateful for as I learnt so much during my fourteen years of working in the corporate world. During my mid-twenties, I made a marriage commitment to my life partner, and shortly after I filled my heart and life with two beautiful children. My dream of studying was not forgotten, but I was at peace knowing what was written for me will never miss me, and what was not meant for me, will never reach me.

Having always had the burning desire to complete a degree and after many months of discussion with my husband, and his unselfish love and care for me to realize my dream, I set out on this very brave journey of traveling to the United States of America, with my children to pursue my dream. My dream was now not only to accomplish a goal, but it would be part of the legacy I want to leave behind for my kids. I want them to be inspired by my example to dream, set goals and never stop working hard, despite challenges. You may not always be successful at everything in life, but you have to at least try your best. My journey came with challenges – moving to the U.S. during a pandemic with a nine and thirteen year old; being separated from my husband, my family, and friends; a life that I had known and been used to for seventeen years. Getting up each morning and finding motivation to succeed even when I am almost twice the age of other students has also been challenging, along with managing full-time studies, whilst single-parenting my children and helping them transition. It has also been challenging financially, and we’ve had to scale down in order to try our best to fund my dream.

My future goal is to graduate from Edmonds College with my associate degree in business administration and pursue further studies at a university to complete a double major in accounting and information systems which will complement my past work experience and enable me to find suitable employment. My advice to future students is to use the wonderful resources available on college campuses to aid in accomplishing your degree and don’t hesitate to ask for help. Too many of us are not pursuing our dreams, due to the limitations imposed by our fears. Today, I know that my strength is stronger than my fears. Enjoy the journey of gaining knowledge and be gentle on yourself. The best gift you can give yourself is to believe wholeheartedly in yourself.
Ashley Kay Smith  
*Everett Community College*

Graduating from Everett Community College (EvCC) in the spring of 2018 was not an easy feat; it took me six years. During my journey to complete my degree, I attended two community colleges, one online university, failed 17 classes, lost both of my parents, and so much more. I was blessed to have the staff at EvCC who was always there for me throughout every hurdle and celebration.

Community college wasn’t my first choice - it was my only option. Attending a community college allowed me to rewrite my educational story and prepare me for a university but also life because that seemed to never stop. When I attended EvCC, they didn’t see me for my past but they saw me for my potential...something I never experienced before. Attending a college that embodies the word “community” is exactly what I experienced at EvCC. If it weren’t for the community I created across campus I know I would not have graduated. The many support services available to students are out of this world.

One individual and program that transformed my life was Omar Marquez and the TRiO program. I first met him when I was a College Access Coordinator through Americorps at EvCC. He taught me how to believe in myself, the truths behind education, find my why, and to always question everything (critically think). Before meeting him I had no confidence in my learning capabilities or even the will to want to finish my AA. During every moment spent with Omar, I was inspired to always be great and I loved that he never took my many excuses to not succeed as my truth.

For me, attending community college wasn’t a barrier, it was a blessing. The obstacles and barriers arose when it came to finishing my degree. Like most first-generation high school graduates and college graduates, I didn’t have the family support needed to push through, and I also spent the majority of my time working forty plus hours a week to pay for schooling and housing. Thankfully with the support from TRiO, living and working on campus really allowed me to focus on my academics and succeed in my studies. Specifically, Student Life allowed me to see myself as a leader on campus by offering me a position on the program’s board as the diversity and intercultural awareness coordinator. When I applied for this position my GPA was 1.86, and to be considered for this position I needed a 2.5. Luckily, they still allowed me to take this position. Giving me this opportunity required me to step up and be the leader that I have always been called to be in the classroom and in the community. It was because of opportunities like this at EvCC that pushed me to believe in my own potential.

Currently, I am a student at the University of Washington where I am continuing to excel in the classroom and in my community. My next steps will be to open up a community center in my community that will give students of color the tools they need to thrive in school and in their own lives. Some services I will offer are tutoring, mental health services, a food pantry and so much more. Also, I will continually grow my photography business, AshleyKay Photography, as well as travel the world inspiring young folks with my story.

One piece of advice I would give to any student wanting to attend community college is, YOU CAN DO IT!!! All you need to do is find your tribe that believes in you even when you don’t.
Lesly Duran
Grays Harbor College

Though accepted at a four-year university directly from high school, I chose to attend Grays Harbor College (GHC) as it was the more accessible and affordable option. I also felt I’d do better in classes of 25 to 30 versus 250 to 300 and benefit from the greater access to faculty. Attending GHC taught me how to learn and address some subject deficits I had. Now that I am at the University of Washington (UW), I feel that “starting small” gave me the confidence and background to attend a 35,000-student campus. Faculty, advisors, peers and everyone at GHC were all helpful in getting me here.

GHC’s TRIO program provided constant support throughout. When it became time they also helped me understand the four-year application process and encouraged me to apply for scholarships. I’m happy to share that I am now able to attend the UW without the added stress of holding down two or three jobs.

My second year with TRIO I began to work with a new specialist, Mr. Dave Brown. When overwhelmed with classwork, jobs and self-doubt, he was there to provide support and tell that me that I would do well in any academic setting. After visiting the UW in Seattle on his encouragement I fell in love with the campus and confirmed my acceptance that very day. I had to take that jump but he and the TRIO staff were behind me every step of my journey.

I am a first-generation student from the small, isolated town of Forks, WA. When I was two my dad was sentenced to thirteen years in prison which affected the way I was treated by others and changed how I saw the world. I was pressured at a small age to translate and speak for everyone in my household as no one else spoke fluent English.

At 14 I was faced with a life changing event. My dad was released and my family decided to move back to Mexico. I was determined to further my education and enrolled in an advanced institution there that allowed me to graduate early. Due to family finances and my strong desire to improve myself educationally, I decided to move back to the US on my own aged 17. I didn’t know where I’d stay or what would happen, but I knew I wanted an education. As an independent minor I struggled early academically and financially and worked three PT jobs while attending GHC.

I’ve gained empathy with other students who’ve shared the challenge of an unclearly marked path to higher education. The instability and uncertainty of my family’s living situation due to my father’s incarceration made me more resilient, resourceful and able to work successfully across cultures. My long-term goal is to work within criminal justice and improve our country’s correctional system. I want to make changes within the system, creating alternatives to incarceration such as rehabilitation centers where those exiting prison can become re-integrated with the support of their family members. Pursuing a degree in business will provide me with the skills to eventually lead an organization doing this work.

My advice to others is NEVER GIVE UP! You’ll experience emotions from laughing so hard with friends you cry to pulling an all-nighter fueled by eight cups of coffee, but in the end everything will work out, driven by the love of learning and finding your passion. Take full advantage of the support services your community college offers. You may feel clueless at times and doubt yourself, but through persistence you will end up where you were meant to be.
After my boyfriend died in a drunk driving accident I became a bartender in an attempt to have some sort of control of drunk drivers. Bartending was something I loved to do and I did it well. Before I knew it, 14 years had somehow slipped by. One night, after we had closed the bar, 3 men were shot and killed in our parking lot right before my eyes. It was that moment, that horrific moment that I knew I couldn’t do it anymore. After the bar was shut down permanently, I went home to a solitary silence that pulled me into a deep depression. Unemployed, withdrawn, and self-medicating with the help of Dr. Jack Daniels, I felt I had no purpose.

It was time to reinvent myself.

For anyone over 30, going back to school is terrifying. How will I afford it? Will I be the oldest one in a classroom full of young kids? How can I work and go to school full-time? I haven’t gone to school in over a decade, how am I going to pass the entry exams?

The first time I took the WAMAP (a web-based mathematics assessment) I failed. Devastated, I started to leave, but the staff in the testing center pulled me back in to the office. They weren’t going to let me give up. It had been 20 years since I had done any algebra, so I utilized the resources they gave me, studied hard, and passed the WAMAP my second try.

While earning my AA, I ran out of funding and couldn’t afford to pay for my books. Patty Sherman told me about the Work Study program and hired me on as a work study student in Conference Services which helped me earn money for my books and gave me an opportunity to work on campus. The invaluable support and encouragement I received from Patty and my team in Conference Services contributed greatly to my success. Patty worked with me constantly to ensure that school came first. The advantage that working for the college while earning my degree is immeasurable.

Professors Broxholm and Amador gave me the support and encouragement I needed to graduate after my stepmom died from dementia. They helped me adjust my schedule so I could take care of my mom’s funeral arrangements and even connected me with the completion center when I ran out of funding. After earning my AA, I joined Cohort 8 of the BASME. Without the support of Green River College’s faculty and staff, I would have never thought it possible to graduate Cum Laude with my bachelor’s in marketing and entrepreneurship.

Today, I work as a full-time classified staff in Conference Services where I plan to continue my education and expand my professional career in higher education so I can pass on the support and encouragement that was given to me.

My sincerest thanks and gratitude to the faculty and staff at Green River College whose devotion and support helped to build within me the determination and grit to succeed. There has been a transformation in the way I look at life, the way I live it, the way I interact with and support my community, the way I lead, and the way I support others.

My advice for anyone considering going to college is to utilize the resources available to you. There are professionals that are dedicated and determined to help you succeed. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. It’s there. Don’t let your self-doubt win out!
Amelia Abello  
*Highline College*  

An island girl’s story

I am a first-generation student from the small secluded island of Pohnpei, Micronesia. I am the second oldest among five children. My parents were only able to afford one child in college abroad, so originally my oldest brother was sent to Washington to attend Highline Community College. My parents knew about hardship and poverty growing up, but they still valued our educational expenses, even if it meant shortage of food. They believe education is the way out of hardship.

My oldest brother got sick and returned back home to Pohnpei, then dad and I left Pohnpei, so I can attend Highline. Once I was settled, Dad left after a few days as he can’t afford to stay long. It was the first time I was truly alone and the second time in my life to travel away from my home country. The new people, places, food, culture, and experiences were challenging. I was homesick and struggled academically for a few school quarters.

Highline College provided a whole new level of education from an islander girl’s point of view. Highline challenged me mentally, socially, and physically. I joined the AANAPISI club, where I met the kindest, most welcoming, and funny people. The members of the club pulled me through my lowest days. I also started working at the college’s library, where I met my easygoing team and my wonderful boss Gerie Ventura.

For two years, I walked one and half miles every morning just to attend my classes. I was forced to step out of my comfort zone, to learn and adapt to my surroundings, to do an independent presentation, to work with others openly on the errors of my research paper, to second guess my peers, to mentally challenge my teachers. It was difficult, but it molded me to be a stronger person. I learned most where I was lacking.

Finally, in 2019, I graduated with my associate degree in community and public health, at first, I did not plan to attend the ceremony because I did not feel like my studies were enough to commemorate, however I’m glad I changed my mind. It felt uplifting and honorable to be acknowledged for all the months of work, especially in witnessing my parents’ joy.

Although Highline College is not a highly recognized university, it is one the most diverse colleges that challenges a student academically, socially, and more. Currently I am working on my bachelor’s at another college and I’ve never been so confident in my classes due to all the lessons I’ve learned from Highline. Currently, my overall GPA is 3.64 and I’m expecting to graduate with a bachelor’s in public health by next year 2021. I aim to work in one of the communities and health services in Washington.

If I could share one piece of advice for other students is that you are not alone in your struggles. There are other students who are just as lost, but you do not have to get through college alone, join and be a part of your school community, get out of your comfort zone, social bonding could really change your whole perspective about college. College does not have to be depressing and stressful, if you surround yourself with the right people and activities.
Monica Shoemaker
Lake Washington Institute of Technology

Attending college was never something I considered a possibility of doing in my adult life. Physical injuries forced me out of my 12-year career as a hairstylist and forced me to explore new options. More than a decade out of high school, I suffered with a severe lack of confidence. Through word-of-mouth I had heard amazing things about this school, which played a large deciding role in attending LWTech.

My advisor, Tien, gave me a boost of confidence to begin this journey. Each quarter I met new instructors who committed their time and contributed to my academic achievements. Having loud support from Dr. Amy Morrison, President of LWTech, motivated me to reach higher. Programs such as TRIO and Supplemental Instruction contributed to my success by providing extra support and tutoring. I even gave back after becoming a nationally certified tutor, tutoring other students in the same subjects I previously received help. This college helped me find my voice, honoring me as the graduating class of 2020 student speaker; an achievement I would have never thought possible. I credit many of my achievements to those that had shown me patience, grace, empathy, understanding, and explored accommodations when I started to fall behind due to my physical and mental illnesses. Without their support, I may have been able to graduate on my own, but it would not have been with the same level of success.

My barriers pre-college included a handful of work-related injuries that I knew would be a permanent problem; this was later demonstrated through four surgeries I endured, all during school. I also knew that my sobriety would need to be a priority through thick-and-thin; I could not compromise that part of my life.

Stress and anxiety, mental breakdowns and depression, all pushed me to the limits, to the very edge of temptation and cravings. It was one of the most difficult tasks of my life to remain clean and sober during my weakest moments. Studying behavioral health and substance use disorders while trying to remain sober proved to be a challenge. The emotional “triggers” were plentiful. The biggest struggle came from the shock and emotional trauma of my classmate’s suicide. Emily and I weren’t close, but we had quickly bonded because of similar past life-experiences of addiction, homelessness, and poverty. The second death I encountered during school was a patient from the treatment center where I worked as an intern. Madeline was clean and sober for eight months when she relapsed on heroin, overdosed, and died. I attended her funeral and felt an emotion I couldn’t describe even if I tried. These experiences, individually, are not new for some students, but all these issues at once made it difficult to navigate my everyday life.

Through dedication, many tears, and support from the staff, I developed the tenacity and will-power to continue pushing forward to reach my goal. I was striving for greatness, not for the glory, but because I had already lived the lowest point a person could live. Shame from cocaine and meth addiction, living in a two-door Honda Civic through the winter months, trading myself for a place to stay and take a shower...everything I used to be is everything I was trying to redeem myself from; only I had the ability to change that, and I did.

I am proud to now be working for a non-profit organization as a crisis intervention specialist, assisting people in Washington state through major life-crisis, including suicidality, homelessness, addiction, and severe mental illness. My advice to future students? Challenge your perceived potential.
Adelina Machuca Santiago  
Lower Columbia College

My name is Adelina Machuca Santiago. I am a single mother of two children and being able to provide for them and build a better future in this country means everything to me.

My path from poverty in Mexico to success in America has been very difficult but not impossible. My motto is, “determination is my power.” I live that every day.

When I arrived from Mexico, I did not master the English language and looked for a school where I could grow into a professional setting to be able to make a difference in this community, to be successful and to give my family a better quality of life.

Where I grew up in Oaxaca Mexico there was no electricity, running water, little or no food and no access to medical or dental care. My desire for an education and a better life was so strong that I walked five hours twice a week to attend high school. When I moved to Longview, my goal was to find a school and learn English. That is when I found my second home, Lower Columbia College (LCC). I worked nights while going to school days. I spent two quarters in English as a Second Language and then progressed to adult basic skills classes, where I graduated from the High School 21+ program in the spring of 2014. I immediately started college summer quarter. I was not successful my first quarter, but I did not give up.

At LCC, I found the academic and emotional support to succeed. I found extra support and instruction in the I-BEST program, I received an Opportunity Grant and utilized LCC’s career, counseling and tutoring services. With the help of my advisor and advocate Mark Gaither I learned the skills I needed to be successful in the program of Promotora de Salud, (community health worker) and why I am now a health care coordinator for the Hispanics/Latino, Micronesians, Guatemalans, Salvadorians, Philippines, Puerto Ricans, Venezuelans and Native Americans in my community.

In school I worked hard and made the honors list multiple times and was awarded the 2015-2016 Outstanding Pre-College English Student of the Year. In the summer of 2018, I graduated with an associate degree in medical office administration, and also received a community health and wellness advocate, and health occupations core for the healthcare worker certificates. Also in 2018, the SBCTC honored me with state-wide recognition of my High School 21+ success. Today I work full time as a health care coordinator, child wellness advocate, and manage a large caseload of clients. I serve as an advocate to encourage my clients to learn the language and get their high school diploma or GED. I have helped multiple people to enroll in LCC as an ESL or ABE student, and others to obtain a higher level of education.

I love my job and know that I can be an example for others while helping them to understand that no matter how difficult life can be, there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

After surviving domestic violence and a successful legal battle for my children’s custody, my goal for the future is to be the best mother and father to my children while continuing to work full-time for my community. I also plan to continue my education when I am fully established.

My best advice is not to give up, that no matter how difficult life is, keep going with your education, it is the only heritage that no one can take away and label.
Sarah Fenton  
*North Seattle College*

My dad never missed a chance to remind me that my biggest competition—the only competition that mattered—was with myself. Looking back, I can see how intentional this was on his part. I didn’t understand how fundamental this advice was until I found myself facing a decision I never thought I would have to make. I’m not a traditional student. I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when I was three, and in the following ten years I received a number of additional diagnoses. Some of these diagnoses came as physical disorders, some of them came as major learning disabilities; all of them have at one time or another made me feel like I was on the outside, separate from my peers.

Because of this, school was never easy. It wasn’t until I was in high school that I received my very first A. Through grit and an inexhaustible curiosity about the world around me, I built on that success. It feels silly now, but I remember crying when I received my final transcript.

I entered college feeling excited and renewed and empowered. I had every intention of continuing to build on my hard-earned success, but I had no idea how difficult this transition would be. I did well until I didn’t. By my second semester I was not only failing my classes, but I found myself sitting across from a small team of doctors who told me that if I didn’t figure out how to manage my health conditions I wouldn’t survive. As an 18-year-old kid, it was jarring to be told I could die. Despite the urgency, I didn’t have the skills to unpack any part of my reality.

So, I kept doing what I was doing, trying and failing, and trying and failing again, until I concluded that I couldn’t be both; I couldn’t be a student and a survivor of my illnesses at the same time. This was the hard decision I mentioned earlier. In the midst of impossible circumstances, I decided school wasn’t for me, and I walked away. A year later, as I sat in an auditorium in South Florida listening to my sister give the valedictorian speech at her law school graduation, I realized I was wrong. I realized that my education was worth fighting for.

It’d be easy to tell you that this was my pivot point, but it wasn’t. It took another three and half years of hard work, of stumbling, and of falling, and of getting back up again before I was ready to reenroll. During that time, I changed my path, moved to Seattle, and decided I wanted to study biochemistry. I found myself at North Seattle College, ready to try again.

While at North I had the opportunity to participate in the undergraduate research program, a program that has helped me learn that successful research, much like my own journey, is dependent on numerous experiences of graceful failure. I learned that the best success comes from a conscious decision to thrive in the midst of that failure. The program was inclusive and taught me how to be confident in my place despite the things that make me look and feel different from the people I work with.

My biggest advice for students pursuing education at community and technical colleges is that giving yourself permission to take the risk, even when failure seems probable, is the greatest gift you can give yourself. Failure is never the end of the story but is often the factor that makes a story truly exceptional.
Max Krieger  
Olympic College

I was born the youngest of nine children into a secluded, sheltered and devout Catholic family in Ocean Shores, Washington. Growing up I didn’t know that behind the decaying ideal of a Catholic patriarch, my father was consistently abusing my brothers and sisters. When I was 4, my three eldest siblings brought my father to trial with accusations of physical and sexual abuse, and when I was 7, my father was sentenced to ten years in prison. My mother barely managed to support me and my five siblings until my father was released eight years later on good behavior. I didn’t want someone who had brought so much pain into my life to be welcomed back. I felt afraid, I felt confused and most of all I felt angry.

When I turned 17, I left and moved in with a former employer. I did landscaping. I did construction. I did anything I could on the side so that I could support myself while completing high school. When I graduated in the spring of 2019, I immediately moved to Tacoma to work full-time for a scrapyard. I was used to manual labor because it was all I knew, but I wasn’t happy.

One time when loading a semi-trailer full of aluminum wheels, we wanted to make sure that we made the minimum weight, but also that we didn’t go over the maximum. I created an equation using the average weight of the wheels, the weight of each load and the number of loads we had completed and calculated that we were right on the mark. We locked it up, weighed it and found that we were just under a thousand pounds from the maximum. That was a record that still stands at the company.

When we were suitting down and getting ready to go home, my coworker looked at me and said, “My son goes to college. You are smart. You should go to school so you don’t have to work here anymore.” I had already been wanting to go to college, but now that somebody had faith in me. I became motivated and looked for opportunities. I was 19, I lived on my own, paid my rent, and paid for food (which cost much more than I thought). I knew I needed financial assistance, so when I stumbled upon Olympic College’s (OC’s) SING (Students in Need Group) while filing the FAFSA, I knew it was an opportunity I couldn’t miss. I emailed Patricia Tomas, the director, explaining my situation. I was helped with textbooks, given financial assistance for food and even given opportunities for aid with my rent.

I am currently enrolled in three classes at OC as a freshman, and feel hopeful for my future. I plan to receive my associate degree from Olympic College and then transfer to a university to earn a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. I never could have believed the amount of understanding and assistance Olympic College has given me.

If you’re looking to attend a community college and don’t feel like you’re financially able to, don’t be afraid to reach out for aid. There are so many people and opportunities ready to help.
Jessica Richmond  
Peninsula College

My dreams of becoming a nurse started when I was a little girl, watching my mom become a nurse. My mom’s educational journey brought me a sense of empowerment and the drive to follow in her footsteps.

Due to the cost of living in Seattle, I moved to the Peninsula about eight years ago with my children. I came here with a goal to provide a better life for my family and to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse. I will never forget the first time I arrived at Peninsula College. I walked into the student admissions office excited and unsure where to start. The Basic Food Employment Training (BFET) department offered support and resources, and I qualified for tuition reimbursement and books.

I started with online classes. I wish I could say it was smooth sailing after that; however, that was not the case. The truth is, I have experienced many challenges that provided opportunities for me to learn and grow, and at times, tested me to my core. It started with my plans for housing in Port Angeles falling through and having to move to Neah Bay.

Moving to Neah Bay was a huge adjustment and posed many challenges. The biggest challenge living so far out west was commuting to the college, which was 60 miles each way. It took time to find employment; however, I was able to secure a job as a home health aide.

As an aide, I had the opportunity to listen to stories, learn history, and appreciate the rich culture from rural communities all over the peninsula. This offered me a deeper understanding of the importance of culture. Working as an aide reassured me that I am on the right path in becoming a nurse and revealed a passion for community health nursing.

Once I had taken as many online classes as I could, fuel, childcare, and my round-trip commute became concerns. I reached out to BFET regarding these issues and was referred to WorkSource for gas vouchers and the Early Child Development Center (ECDC) for childcare. The staff at ECDC made us feel welcomed and most importantly, safe, and secure. I owe a lot of my success to the ECDC for the peace of mind they give me.

For two years my daughter and I drove three days a week from Neah Bay to Port Angeles. Each class I finished brought me one-step closer to my goal. I finally completed my prerequisites, and it was time to apply for the nursing program. On July 1, 2019, I was accepted into the nursing program at Peninsula College. I cried tears of joy and had an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment.

I am now in my second year of nursing school and love every minute of it. I have received tremendous support not only from the instructors but from my classmates as well. After graduation, I would like to pursue my passion in community health nursing.

It has been a long journey through some of the toughest times in my life. There were moments I felt lost and uncertain of the future. My determination to keep going comes from my deep passion to help others and to provide a better life for my children. Words of advice to future students: find your passion, follow your heart, expect the unexpected, improvise and never lose sight of your goal. I would not be where I am today without the support I have received from my family, the community and especially the people at Peninsula College. It truly has been life changing.
Instability, insecurity and disorientation are some of the words I can use to describe my childhood. Like many immigrant families, financial stability and job security are not easily attainable. My parents constantly moved us from city to city every year in hopes to provide something better for us. This made making friends difficult, and I was becoming shyer and more insecure with every new move. Being the overweight new girl at school just called for students to bully me. Attending different schools severely impeded my education. The longest I was enrolled in one high school was one year, and the shortest was just two days. Some schools were so far ahead in their curriculum while others were so far behind; it felt like I just started all over again.

I eventually graduated from a charter school. I graduated unmotivated, without a support system, and financially unstable. Prior to attending Pierce College, I had attended LBCC in Long Beach, CA. My time at LBCC was short. My parents couldn’t continue to afford their bills and my mother’s medication from when she had breast cancer. We had to decide between paying bills or getting her medication. I knew I had to start contributing. I finished two quarters at LBCC, dropped out and started working. I drifted between jobs. Some were too far from home, some didn’t pay enough, and some had horrible working conditions. At this time, I did not have direction and all I knew is that I had to make money for her sake.

On December 23, 2017, I married my husband and into the military. He received orders to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and we moved to Washington. Moving to Washington, I found a support system in both my husband and my sister-in-law. They were both attending college and really motivated me to give college a second chance. I wanted to have direction in my life and feel fulfilled. I enrolled into Pierce College and that is when my life began to change for the better.

Everyone at Pierce College is so amazing and genuinely caring. I fell in love with Pierce College and claim it as a second home to me. The individual who I feel has contributed to my success is my supervisor Jordan Blevins, program support supervisor for access and disability services. Being a work-study under Jordan has been a life-changing experience. Jordan has provided resources for me, allowed me to give back to the Pierce College student body and gave me professional and personal advice.

My fear of failing has always been my biggest obstacle. I made a choice to either quit and fail or try and give myself the opportunity to become someone. Now I’m set on trying because as Albert Einstein once said, “You never fail until you stop trying.” I graduated with my Associate of Arts in June 2019. Currently, I am taking the leap of faith in my life and pursuing a Bachelor of Applied Science in dental hygiene. I will be applying for the dental hygiene program at Pierce College in December 2020. My ultimate goal in life is to live my life to the fullest. The best advice I can give anyone who is unsure of attending college is to start off small. Set specific goals for yourself, stay committed, and most importantly believe in yourself. Find someone that believes in you and make them your mentor. College is more than just a transcript and degree; it is a family. “Pain is temporary. Quitting lasts forever.” - Lance Armstrong Sally Jenkins, Every Second Counts.
Serin Caldwell  
*Pierce College Puyallup*

I dropped out of school in the tenth grade. Due to the circumstances of my home life, school was not a priority at the time. My parents were starting the process of a divorce because of my mother’s new-found heroin addiction—adding the drama of being a fifteen-year-old in high school surely did not ease my burdens. If I can be honest, I am not sure what I did with my time that year; it is hard to remember everything that occurred. I do know that somehow the court awarded my mother custody of my brother and me. We were constantly moving, and many times faced homelessness during that year; evading the cold by sleeping on couches of strangers my mother had met only days before. College was not even in my peripheral vision.

In the spring of 2016, I made the decision to ask my best friend if I could live with her for a few months. Her parents agreed to let me stay, but I never left; they became my family. I was provided with opportunities I never would have imagined before. My best friend was attending running start at the time, which led me to the decision to pursue the same path. I went to an alternative school for eleventh grade and made up the credits I had missed the year before. I started at the Puyallup location of Pierce College in the fall of 2017, during my senior year of high school.

I always knew I wanted a higher education, but it never seemed obtainable until that year. I chose to work towards an Associate of Science degree, because my dream occupation had always been an ocean scientist. The program changed my life: it was affordable, easily accessible, and had many outstanding professors to learn from. Though my life attending community college was not always smooth. I suffered from depression and trauma that blocked me from doing my best. Luckily, the faculty members went above and beyond when I communicated with them about my problems. One professor, Sue Habeck, was especially kind to me. She became the first role model of my college career. Getting personally taught from an educated, strong female scientist confirmed my pursuit of becoming a scientist myself.

Starting at a community college let me build close relationships with my peers and professors. Thanks to the close-knit community at Pierce College, I went above and beyond my own expectations. I graduated with my Associate of Science degree the spring of 2020 with honor cords, but I know I could not have done it without all the resources that Pierce College offers.

Currently, I am attending Oregon State University working towards a Bachelor of Science. I am majoring in ocean science and minoring in chemistry. I plan to extend my education until I earn my doctorates and eventually work in the field of chemical oceanography.

A piece of advice I would offer to anyone who is unsure if they can attend a community or technical college is that you can. I will not mislead you by saying it is not challenging, because it is, but at a community college you are never alone. There is an abundance of affordable resources at your fingertips, and people will always be eager to help you. Every person in that place is under unique circumstances, but we all are heading towards the same goal of success. In an environment such as Pierce College, if you want to succeed then you will succeed. The only thing you must do is try.
Lea-Janelle Hufana  
Renton Technical College

When making the decision in a career program, Renton Technical College (RTC) was on the top of my list due to my comfort level with the campus, as I have previously attended RTC. The instructors have always been effective with their teaching style, and the school administrators have always been very supportive. Renton Technical College has felt like home while advancing my academic career.

I put a lot of thought into enrolling in the surgical technology program. After researching multiple career paths, and taking into account my years of experience in the medical field as a surgery scheduler, becoming a surgical technician seemed like the right fit. I was grateful to discover that Renton Technical College offered the program that I have been most interested in; therefore, it was the perfect opportunity and decision for me to return to RTC.

My current situation does not allow me to work, and it puts a financial strain on me. I balance all of my time caring for my daughter and focusing on school. Right now, I am dependent on state assistance, which pays for the majority of childcare for my daughter while I am attending classes. It also assists me with food for my family.

I am fortunate enough to live with my parents; however, currently my mother's single income is earmarked to take care of my grandma and my father. It has been a struggle to find financial assistance for small life necessities such as gas to get to school and school supplies such as books, lab materials, etc. It is hard to be dependent on my financial aid, which most of the time is on a "still pending" status which creates even more stress not knowing what I am qualified for.

I have been a surgery scheduler for four years. Prior to that, I have 12 years’ of varied administrative assistant positions within the medical field. Two and a half years ago I gave birth to my daughter. In my previous positions, I really enjoyed the work that I was doing and the people that I was working with. However, I felt that there was a gap in what I can learn and how I could advance. I soon realized there was not much more room for growth.

Having a family has inspired me to be motivated to advance my career because I wanted to set a good example for my daughter as well as be able to provide for my family as a single mother. Once I graduate, I plan to become a surgical technician within a reputable hospital. I would like to gain experience and become a seasoned surgical technician. Eventually, it would be great to advance into a position within management or to gain additional training opportunities.

One piece of advice that I would share with other students who are unsure of their ability to further their education is to just go for it! If you find something that you are truly interested in and you find a program that fits, try it out. There are resources out there that will help you if you put the work in, and the school that you attend will help you navigate the system. Ninety percent of the work will have to come from you as the student, which makes it more worthwhile in the end.
Camila Christensen  
*Seattle Central College*

I was born and raised in the southeastern part of Brazil. Coming from a low-income family, I knew that the only way to break up the cycle was through education. I moved to Seattle in 2014, and I started working tirelessly at different jobs in order to support my family. As a Latina immigrant, going to college didn’t seem attainable because of the limited resources due to my immigration status, and the language, cultural and financial barriers. In addition, not having a role model within my community was very challenging.

It wasn’t until 2018 that I enrolled at Seattle Central College (SCC) to pursue an Associate of Applied Science degree in programming. At SCC, I had the opportunity to strengthen my passion for computer science and to find a community that I didn’t think existed. Seattle Central is my second home. I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for all the support I received there.

As a woman of color in a STEM field, I attribute my success to my friend and mentor Marilyn Saavedra-Leyva, the director of the Mathematics, Engineering, Science, Achievement (MESA) program at Seattle Central.

Growing up mathematics, science and technology were far from my reality, and I confess that I was scared when I decided to become a software engineer because I didn’t think I belonged. Marilyn supported me throughout my journey at Seattle Central. She empowered and encouraged me to always achieve my best. She believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. Through the guidance and support I received at Seattle Central, I completed my associate degree with a 3.9 GPA.

Through my passion for computer science, diversity and inclusion, I learned how I can make an impact in the community. I worked as a volunteer at Girls Who Code, an international non-profit organization dedicated to closing the gender gap in technology. The work that I did at Girls Who Code was more than just teaching girls the concept of programming, I was a role model to them. Also, I was the president of the Women in Science and Engineering club at SCC, where I learned how to be a resource to other women in STEM.

I am currently enrolled in the computer science program at the University of Washington. My career goal is to become a medical software engineer. My hope is to use machine learning to identify and implement medications to treat cancer. In addition, I want to continue mentoring girls in STEM, particularly girls coming from underrepresented communities.

Attending a community or technical college has become a more difficult and uncertain experience for many people. However, if I could give a piece of advice to someone who is unsure about their abilities of success, it would be, you can do it. Don’t let one bad experience define you. Independent of what happened to you, or where you are from, or how you got to where you are now, you can do it. College will present you with a rich and expansive range of opportunities and you will find a community of people that will support you. It is never too late to change your journey!
Natalie (Nat) Mortimer Montoure  
Shoreline Community College

The first quarter I attended Shoreline Community College, I enrolled in a History class taught by Professor Terry Taylor. Later, I took more classes from Terry, including History and Political science. Terry encouraged me to join the Honors College, of which he was a founder and is actively involved in. I joined the Honors College the following quarter. Through this program, I met people I could connect with. We all share a true love for learning and each of us is committed to a fulfilling and well-educated future.

Deciding to go back to school in my thirties was not a long, carefully thought out process. The years prior to enrolling, I was living in Bellingham, WA, where I was born and raised. For twenty years, I had worked with toddlers and infants in many capacities. Working with children had always been my passion and I loved working with them. However, over the course of about a year I began to experience severe mental health issues. I was forced to leave the families I was working with. I had to abandon seven families and nine children, some of whom I had cared for from four weeks to four years old. I lost my income, my home, and all stability. I lived in a tent for half a year and through a winter. Many days and nights were spent in hospitals and crisis centers. Eventually, I moved in with my oldest sister in Shoreline, WA. After about a year I was finally properly diagnosed and was able to find the right care and medication.

Once I was able, I started working at a nearby Italian restaurant as a prep cook. Previous experience co-owning a catering business and my two years of culinary school came back quickly, and I enjoyed the work. As my well-being continued to improve, I contributed to the care of my niece and nephew who I was living with, and I began to think about my future for the first time in several brutal years. My sister suggested I look into Shoreline Community College and Edmonds College. The application process was familiar from my experience at Bellingham Technical College, where I attended culinary school, and one day I just decided to take the leap and enrolled in the fall of 2019. I familiarized myself with the counseling center on campus and enrolled in classes. I would end up excelling and ended my first quarter with a 4.0 GPA.

Being an Honors College student includes enrollment in a class devoted solely to aiding students in transferring to four-year universities. Although I have yet to decide where I will attend next fall, I know I will have support and encouragement through the entire process and look forward to continuing my education. Coming back to school was exactly the right decision for me. I would encourage anyone considering enrolling to take the leap and get started! Two years from now, we will all be two years older. What can be accomplished in those two years at a community or technical college can change lives. I know it has mine.

I am looking forward to the future and feel accomplished with how far I have come. I work as a resident assistant in the on-campus housing, continue to excel in my classes, and even during this COVID pandemic, have made important connections with my classmates and professors. My family is proud, my friends back home are supportive, and my professors are committed to furthering my education. I am healthy, content and moving forward with my life.
Jessica Lonergan  
Skagit Valley College

“I’m a walking, talking miracle!” When I was born with multiple disabilities, doctors told my family not to expect me to ever walk or talk, read or write. I was born with Down syndrome, a heart defect, cerebral palsy, and the list goes on. But when I was a week old, my mom read a story about Karen Gaffney with Down syndrome who had gone to community college and had swam across the English Channel. Karen’s story helped my mom to expect more and not limit my future.

I was in and out of hospital dozens of times during my first few years, including two brain surgeries. I started talking when I was two years old, but I didn’t learn to walk until I was six. When I was thirteen, the doctor put four metal rods and twenty-eight long screws into my back because of scoliosis. I missed a lot of school that year.

I had lots of great teachers and assistants in school. Though I had many challenges, I learned to try my best, to do things for myself, and ask for help if I couldn’t. My mom took me to my individualized education plan (IEP) meetings every year so I would learn how to tell my story and speak up for myself. I learned that IQ test scores don’t matter. I had a right to learn and a brighter future with education. By high school, I was reading my plans aloud to my IEP team at the beginning of every annual meeting.

When my oldest sister started college, I decided that I wanted to go to college too. Most young adults with disabilities stay in a high school transition program until they’re twenty-one, but I didn’t want that. I wanted to go to college, so we added it to my goals. We started looking for a program that would give me a college experience during my last three years and we found a brand-new program called INVEST, close to home, at Skagit Valley College (SVC). The INVEST (Individualized Next step Vocational Education Social skills Training) program at SVC is a comprehensive post-secondary transition program for individuals with intellectual disabilities currently enrolled in local high schools until 21 years of age.

I began attending the INVEST program in 2017. This was a big deal for me and helped me to become more confident. I was proud to be a Skagit Valley College student. It helped others to see me as more of an equal and as an adult. At SVC, I learned how to be more independent. I learned how to set goals and communicate what I need and want with others. I learned more about myself and how to apply my strengths and interests to work opportunities. I enjoyed meeting new people and making friends on the campus. I especially enjoyed Campus Christian Fellowship Club where I ate, hung out, and played games with my friends.

I’m glad that Skagit Valley College has an INVEST program so students with disabilities can experience college too. Proudly wearing my red cap and gown, I graduated from Skagit Valley College by Zoom in June of 2020, achieving an INVEST Two-Year Employment Readiness Certificate. I miss SVC, my friends, and instructors, especially Director Lisa Forsythe, but I really enjoy greeting guests and earning money as a hostess at LaConner Seafood and Prime Rib where I work now.

Doctors said I’d never walk or talk, but look at me now: I’m a walking, talking, college graduate and that’s a miracle!
Dakota Seddon  
*South Puget Sound Community College*

In 2019 I was trying to join the Air Force, but as those plans seemed less likely as time went on, I emailed Coach Juan Murillo in the hopes he would allow me to play soccer for South Puget Sound Community College (SPSCC). My plans after high school took a turn, bringing me to SPSCC and playing on the soccer team until I could get health issues passed so I could join the Air Force and further my education and pursue a career. I’m here to try to create change as a student-athlete and as a member of the SPSCC community before I set off for a four-year university.

The first person I met who has made me a better person is Juan Murillo, my coach and advisor. The first year at SPSCC brought many conversations between us that were mostly around not what I can only work on as a player, but as a student. These conversations gave me this image of the change he was reaching for, and naturally that image became the same in my head. Doing what I can to make that image a reality, I met the Athletic Director Vernell Willingham, who has helped with any needs or questions I have. Murillo and Willingham preached the need for academic excellence to student-athletes. If a team has great academics then incoming athletes feel more compelled to reach academic excellence as well. Wanting the best for the college, I and other players on the team hold a high standard when it comes to academics, for the betterment of men’s soccer. We reach out to players to see if they need help and where they can find it.

Besides the impact brought by athletics, each professor had their own impact—their own way to teach, give help, and connect with students. One professor who did this was English Professor Jason Salcedo, who saw the struggle I was going through when writing a college-level paper. He helped break down my essays with me to the point where they jumped an entire grade. It wasn’t my grade going up and putting in the work that changed something in me, but the level of help and attention to detail he offered me. There are things in life that can only be taught in a specific moment you may go through. The lesson I learned from Salcedo was even though I struggled a lot, he still had hope in me. All he wanted to do was help me reach another level of writing. I have taken this with me by helping those people who may not want to help because it would be too much work. Most of the time I do it with soccer since I’m team captain, as well as set the standard of what we’re looking for in players.

I plan to attend a high Division 2 or Division 1 college for soccer, while pursuing business. I will be able to reach a new level playing soccer while pursuing my education. For students who may find themselves unsure about enrolling at a community college, you should always strive to be a better you today than the you that you were yesterday. A community college brings that type of challenge. It helps you become more time aware, organized, and involved in the community while you educate yourself. You’re put in an environment that is comfortable, but makes you uncomfortable enough to grow as a person in a healthy and constructive way. Take the challenge and be a better you every day; community college will help you achieve that while rewarding you in the long run.
Allegra Keys  
South Seattle College

I have never reveled in the idea of sharing my story with people, in fact, I avoid it when I can. I learned the power of my story at a young age, when my single mother would pull it out to whoever would listen and put emphasis on all the right words. “Muscular Dystrophy...I was told by doctors just to ‘take her home and love her because she wouldn’t live past the age 2’...miracle...” that was all she had to say, and a mixture of pity and awe would start pouring from her audience. So, I tucked away my story and only brought it out when it felt absolutely necessary.

My road to South Seattle College was not traditional. By the time I was a senior in high school there was absolutely no doubt I’d be attending a four-year college the following year. Between my disability that required I use a power wheelchair and took most of my muscles except for two fingers on my right hand; my female gender; my biracial ethnicity; growing up in the inner city of Seattle; and my 3.5 to 4.0 GPA my entire academic career despite major hospitalizations along the way, I felt I could get into any college I wanted.

University of Washington wasn’t what I imagined though. My mental health spiraled into a dark place and my physical health deteriorated along with it. Growing up, the older I had gotten the more ostracized I felt by my peers. My only solace was knowing that “college would be better.” But it wasn’t; I felt more alone than I had ever felt, which was no small feat considering I had been lonely for years at this point. After two quarters and failing every class, I dropped out, completely aware that as a first-generation student I was letting down my entire family.

I spent the next several years bringing my mental and physical health up to peak shape. And after I had done everything I sought out to do, I decided it was time to try college again. This time I was only doing it for me and not because everyone expected it from me. And if I could give advice to anyone, that’s what it would be: don’t let the world’s expectations of you be the reason you do or don’t decide to go to college. Do what feels right for you.

I registered at South Seattle College and TRIO Student Success Services (SSS) was the first thing I got involved with. Since they serve low-income, first-generation, and students with disabilities, I figured they were a good resource to have. Part of the reason I dropped out of college the first time around was because as a student with all those attributes stacked against me, I felt unseen, unheard, unwanted, and just completely lost. The advisors in TRIO SSS have helped me stay on track academically and have even encouraged me to go after scholarships I wasn’t confident enough to apply for. They are teaching me that it’s okay to tell my story and even inspire others.

By fall 2021, I’ll (hopefully) be back at UW, this time as an adult transfer student. I’ll be pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English with an emphasis in creative writing, Then I’ll be going for a Master’s of Fine Arts in creative writing.

I have been told my entire life that I need to share my story with others. Through sharing my story I can start dismantling the stigmatization around people with disabilities, which has honestly been my biggest struggle of them all.
Victoria Foote  
*Spokane Community College*

Before I came to Spokane Community College (SCC), I attended the University of Phoenix and earned my bachelor's degree in criminal justice administration. After I graduated, I learned that my degree was not backed by any type of accreditation whatsoever, so that deemed my degree worthless. So, after a year of trying everything I could to use my four-year degree, I learned that I absolutely loved working on cars and getting dirty, and that I would so much rather work in a shop than sit in an office.

So, being a single mother of three girls and not having a whole lot of work history due to getting into trouble as a young adult and acquiring two felony convictions in Idaho and a short prison sentence, I decided to look into actually going to school at SCC I figured out real fast that the University of Phoenix had maliciously loaned out money and now my grants and financial aid were completely maxed out. That was the biggest barrier that I discovered I believe, which made me feel completely hopeless until I was told about Workforce Transitions. I was told to make an appointment to see Wendy Jones, and I can honestly say that she is the reason I was able to attend and successfully complete the Automotive Technician program.

I researched SCC's automotive program, and I think what compelled me to attend was the fact that being a single parent, I could not afford to pay for mechanic work to be done, so I needed to learn to do it myself. I was somewhat intimidated, to say the least, until I talked to Wendy. Then I was excited. I wanted to be one of those girls who completed the auto program at SCC, and I wanted to learn it all, or at least as much as they could teach me.

There are absolutely people that contributed to my success. The number one person though was Wendy. Wendy walked with me the entire way by helping me pay for my entire two years of tuition. On top of that, she helped me pay for my tools and my books. If I had issues or questions, she was ALWAYS there for me to turn to. She always took care of everything and eased my stress. If it were not for her, I would not have been able to attend SCC at all. She is the most amazing person I have ever known and the most helpful.

The others that contributed to my success were all four of my instructors. They are the most intelligent group of teachers I have ever had the pleasure of learning from, and I wish I could have spent more time with them. Wendy helped me transform my life because she gave me so much hope and confidence that I could complete the program. She advised me on which avenues I needed to go down and complete to be successful. My instructors taught me so much. They are extremely intelligent, and they are willing to teach anyone who wants to learn.

Next for me is the diesel/heavy machinery program. Then someday I hope to own my own mechanics shop to service diesel and gasoline engines. If I could share one piece of advice, it would have to be that if given the opportunity to go to SCC, take it. They will figure out how to make it work for you, and they will stand beside you all the way through. There's no better school or people than SCC so go for it!
Le'Taxione  
_Spokane Falls Community College_

My name is Le'Taxione. I am a product of the school-to-prison pipeline. At the age of 11, I was one of the founding members of a gang in California. I’ve been a gang leader for over 30 years and served lengthy prison sentences in three different states until a life without parole sentence and the death of my daughter changed my life. The pain, guilt and shame of not being present when my daughter needed me forced me to do a self-diagnostic, resulting in me promising my daughter’s memory that I would never perpetuate gang violence or criminality again.

What compelled me to attend community college was that I found that the people whom I endeavored to serve – those who are considered unreachable gang members – and help rise above the miscreancy of the Structural Gang Culture mentality – were, as a vast majority, using drugs.

There were a couple of individuals at the college who inspired me; however, it was Dr. KayDee Steel who has helped transform my life through her vast knowledge and the firm caring in which she delivers the lessons, making me comfortable and secure in what I’ve learned, which enhanced my confidence in the lessons and methodology. She has been the manifestation of what a counselor must be to effectuate change in this field and in clients. She daily challenges my insecurities and counseled me without even knowing.

The barrier that I experienced was due to the technology. I served 23 years of a life-without-the possibility-of-parole sentence and since I was not expected to ever be released I was denied the opportunity to take the classes that those who were scheduled to be released were allowed to take. I continued to fight for my right to be educated through correspondence courses and autodidactic learning, knowing that education is the number one deterrent to recidivism.

I overcame that barrier by starting at the basics – learning my way around the programs of the computer – and began to grow in skill.

I’m presently working on an Afro-Centric approach to recovery – which will be my 12th publication – that employs the spiritual principles of Kwanza in the recovery model that people of African descent can see themselves in the content, context and concept of recovery, raising exponentially the success rate in recovery and sobriety among people of African descent.

My advice to anyone who wants to attend college is to first disregard any fears or insecurities that superimpose themselves upon those who have been justice-involved or those who have been impacted adversely in any manner. The only thing that can stand in your way of being successful in college is oneself. There are no obstacles outside of self that are greater than the obstacles inside of self.

I thank Dr. KayDee Steel for nurturing and even nudging me through this learning process, challenging me to grow that I may be effective in the counseling field.
Erin*
*Tacoma Community College

Growing up, I always thought that I didn’t do well in school because I wasn’t smart enough, not because I was actually a product of my environment. I didn’t know that the childhood I was experiencing was playing a major role in how I would one day end up. As a child, I developed the belief that I was never going to amount to anything, and I believed that all the way to adulthood. I shut the door on my future way before I got there.

My name is Erin, and I am currently a student at the Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women’s Tacoma Community College (TCC) Campus.

Here I’ve had the privilege of being a student of Professor Joyce Oswald. She has given me the opportunity to strive for something better and has helped me build the confidence I’ve needed to believe in myself. Before attending her Entrepreneurship Program, I was desperate to find meaning in my life. She hired me as her Teacher’s Assistant the first quarter I attended her classes. She saw something in me that I hadn’t yet seen in myself. Since then, I have been an active part in helping other women who were just as lost as I was find their educational spark.

I am currently three classes away from receiving my AAS in business and can’t wait for the day I get to graduate and say I’ve finally accomplished something. So many times in my life I have quit on myself because that was all I knew how to do. With the knowledge and skills I have learned through TCC’s programming, I know that I have lots to offer the world and am proud of who I am today.

My dream goal after graduating is to start a non-profit organization that provides one-on-one mentoring for formally incarcerated women releasing in Pierce County. I believe that wrap-around support and services post release are the most critical pieces to having a successful re-entry back into the community. I want to be a part of reducing recidivism and giving back to a community I once victimized. I now know that I’ve gone through all that I have gone through for a reason. It’s to share my experience, strength and hope with others. To show them that education is empowerment and it’s never too late to reach for a better life. TCC has shown me that there is a place where this is possible.

They also have an intricate team of faculty that works together to make sure all aspects of my future can be secure. Dr. Shabazz, program director, has fought for the rights of incarcerated individuals to have access to education. Professor Joyce Oswald has given me creative freedom to explore who I am and the building blocks to succeed here and post release. And last but not least, Emily Jones, my re-entry navigator who works diligently at guiding me through the many obstacles and barriers I will face educationally once released. Thank you so much to all of you for being a part of my journey.

My advice to anyone who wants to pursue their education is that no matter where you are in life, it’s never too late to start over. That is the beauty of waking up another day. Never give up hope. Never let the barriers stop you from reaching your highest potential. Always remember that you are more than enough and you are worth fighting for. There will be days when you may feel like giving up but those are the days you continue the good fight.

*last name and photo intentionally withheld by request
When I finished high school in 2008, I was working at a fast-food restaurant and that was enough for me. Then my family relocated to Spokane, and I fell into a dark place; hanging out with the wrong people and lost everything I worked so hard for. I had no job, no car and no place to live. Luckily, my family helped me as soon as I was ready to help myself. This process took 10 years then I was ready for a change and moved back to Clarkston.

Feeling as if I had a decade of my life, I wanted to make a major move in the right direction. I worked at a grocery store for two years and then was offered a job as a caregiver. I felt this was a great opportunity I could not pass up and was my first step in going back to school. My friends suggested I register at Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) in Clarkston because of their great nursing program and encouraged me to obtain my CNA.

Overcoming fears, worries, and self-doubt, I met with the CNA program coordinator, who not only welcomed me with open arms, but guided me in the right direction. Throughout my experience, the caring faculty and staff largely contributed to my success. I felt like I belonged and had a purpose. Anytime I was struggling, there was always someone willing to help. I finally understood the saying “failure is not an option” because no one was going to let me fail, and I wasn’t about to let anyone down.

This program made a huge difference in transforming my life. I felt a true sense of belonging and looking back, can’t begin to explain what an incredible feeling this was. I knew if I showed up every day, the only direction for me was forward.

An enormous obstacle was dealing with the memories of my former self. I spent a good ten years on a path of self-destruction, and something told me it is possible to change. If I could put as much into making my life better than I put in to destroying it, I could do anything. I still have moments where I struggle with self-doubt, but now I know how to turn those negative thoughts into positive ones by seeing how far I have come and the accomplishments I have made.

I have learned to set small goals and take it day-by-day. Many times I thought something would be impossible but then I’d tell myself that all I needed to do was show up, pay attention, and do what I needed to do. There was always someone willing to help. Most of all, it was the feeling I would get when I aced a test or passed a class I didn’t think I was capable of.

I am so proud to say I have mastered all my pre-requisites for the nursing program, completed my Associate of Arts at WWCC, applied for the nursing program, and have almost completed the first quarter. My goal is to earn my RN license and live out my dream of caring for others.

One piece of advice that I would share with anyone unsure about attending a community college is to not doubt yourself. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Set yourself up with small goals, make a plan for a small goal you want to achieve and give yourself credit and praise when you reach it. Just start by applying for college and making your next goal to complete your first quarter.
Briana Pardo  
*Wenatchee Valley College*

Born the middle child in a family of four siblings, both my older brother Joe and younger sister Angela had Down syndrome. Angela was also born terminally ill with congestive heart failure. My eldest brother Gilbert had battled leukemia when he was 15. He survived cancer but was left with a lifelong disease of addiction. I watched my mother care for my siblings with dignity and patience. She always made me feel loved even when her attention was on keeping my sister comfortable and dealing with the constant worry of my brother's safety while in and out of incarceration.

I was always curious at my sister’s doctor visits, asking the nurses why they needed bloodwork and why her heart was failing. After three pacemakers and seven open heart surgeries, my sister died at home. She was 13, and I was 15. After that I started hanging out with the wrong crowd, skipping school, drinking, and experimenting with drugs. I barely graduated from high school and could've easily kept going down that path, but my mom pulled me out of the blackness and enrolled me in a medical assisting program.

When I was 18 my dad retired and moved the family to Washington. He died of colon cancer a year later. I tried to attend college in California, but the cost of living was too high. As a single mom working full time and going to night classes, it would have taken me 10 years to finish my prerequisites. When I learned that the company I had been with for 11 years was closing, I realized I needed my degree. No sooner than I planned on moving I learned my brother had died of a drug overdose, and my mom was diagnosed with kidney cancer.

At 32 years old I packed up my family and moved to Washington and closer to the Colville Confederated Tribes, where the tribe could help with scholarships and I could help take care of my mom. At Wenatchee Valley College the advisors, instructors, tutors, and staff greeted me with open arms. It was such a relief to have all the support and focus on my education. An unexpected result was my involvement with the Red Road Association student club. The club allowed me to explore myself and my community, to understand what being a tribal member meant and why it was important to celebrate my heritage.

During the first quarter of my Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program I lost my mom, but I knew she wouldn't have wanted me to quit. During my capstone project on opioid use disorder (OUD), I began working with the local public health department and understanding the struggles that my brother had experienced all his life. I graduated in 2018, fulfilling my dream of becoming a registered nurse (RN) and completing my BSN. I can now affect change at a systems-level, increasing access to care, reducing overdose deaths, and changing lives.

Currently, I am working as the nurse care manager for the opioid treatment network at Family Health Centers in Omak. I have the privilege of working with people who suffer from OUD. When I care for patients, I see someone's loved one — not cancer, heart disease, or substance use. I have community college to thank for my education. There is a world of opportunities in the nursing field and I can't wait to see where my career takes me.

My advice to those considering college would be don't wait for your future, get started now. Use barriers as stepping stools to seek new opportunities.
Six years ago, I was still homeless and living in a tent at one of the local beaches in my hometown in Santa Cruz, California. Having to deal with the deaths of a few close friends had sent me into a spiral of depression and self-destructive behaviors during my teenage years. I had dropped out of high school, and getting an education was the last thing on my mind at the time. I developed a drug addiction that started in my late teens and followed me into my mid 20’s.

In the beginning, I never associated my drug use with any of the pain I was going through. What had started as a way to have fun and party on weekends quickly escalated into a full-blown addiction within the span of a few months. I have two loving parents who I emotionally tortured during this phase of my life. It is only because of their undying love for me that I’m here today, able to talk about it as I do. They eventually had to cut ties with me in my early 20’s due to my inability to stop ripping people off.

I had been to rehabs multiple times and relapsed every time I got back home. Where the facilities had failed in getting me to stop using, they had succeeded in planting a seed of hope within me. After my third failed rehab attempt, I found myself homeless and with no means of communicating with my folks who had recently moved a few towns over. I remember distinctly getting into a mindset where I was looking for a way out, and I knew this time I was going to have to figure it out myself. I managed to land a part-time gig at a local computer recycling center and quickly found myself spending most of my days there, working or not. One of the guys I was working with invited me over to his house after work one day to help him with a project.

When I got to his house, the first thing I noticed was that he had computer parts strewn out all over his carpet. We spent the afternoon putting together what would come to be the first computer I’d ever build. I can safely say it was that day when my curiosity for computers and technology became noticeably apparent. It was around this time when things started to heal a bit with my parents as well. I eventually decided that going back to school would be the best option for me and enrolled in some general education classes at my local community college. When I first started back out on my educational journey, I had what felt like a mountain of unknown challenges ahead of me.

The best decision I’ve made in my life was deciding to move to Washington. By the time I was enrolled at Whatcom Community College, I had a decent understanding of what it would take to succeed as a student and had proven to myself that I was capable and willing to achieve my educational goals. Since then, I’ve graduated and received my associate degree with honors in cybersecurity, am an original member of the Pod Leader student mentor program on campus, became a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honors society, and have made tons of new friends. Educational accomplishments aside, Whatcom Community College has helped to form me into the person that I never thought I could be. I will be forever grateful to this campus and to all that have helped me along my journey.
Lizbeth Ochoa
Yakima Valley College

I am a single mother of three children. My boys have been my motivation to better myself and pursue a successful future. When I realized that due to my lack of education, there was a barrier for me to move forward, I decided to make a positive change in my life and enroll into college. Even though I knew it was going to be very difficult to make that change, I took the risk and quit my job to be a full time student. I became homeless shortly after that but my motivation and determination to return to school continued.

I started college in January of 2020, excited for a new beginning and determined to give my one hundredth percent fourteen years after graduating from high school. I was happy but nervous that I would not be able to catch up as quickly. My first quarter at Yakima Valley College (YVC) was amazing. The professors made me feel welcome and made everything very simple and practical.

Even though I was keeping up with my classes and getting good grades, I felt a little confused on my education plan. In the summer quarter of 2020, I took English 90 with Professor Mark Fuzie. He gave me a recommendation to the TRIO program here at YVC. I applied and joined the TRIO program, which has been a very helpful program that has guided me to figure out my career plan. I have figured all my classes needed to graduate with my Associate of Arts degree. I am grateful to Mark Fuzie for advising this program, now I can see my career road map to accomplish my goal. This has been the most important part of my education having and understanding my career plan. Also having the guidance and help of the TRIO program staff has been a crucial part in choosing my career. My next step is to transfer to a four-year college to get my bachelor’s degree in elementary teaching. I want to teach in an elementary school to help children, especially Hispanic students using my bilingual skills to help them be successful in class. I hope to inspire my students and motivate them to do their best. It has been very difficult to be a full-time student and a mother. My biggest struggle has been putting a roof over my children’s head and food on the table while not giving up on my education. This is why I hope to get all the help needed to accomplish my goal.

To those individuals that have thought about attending a community college or technical college my advice is don’t overthink it, just do it. There are programs and professionals in the colleges that help, guide and advise. The hard step is to decide to enroll in college. Everything else comes easier with time and practice. Believe in yourself, you can do it!
2020-21
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