Transforming Lives Awards

Celebrating Student Achievement

Saidi Lwanga
Bellevue College

Richard Kemp
Columbia Basin College

Jessica Davila
Edmonds College

Shelly Hoffman
Grays Harbor College

Brittany Lovely
Lower Columbia College

Michael Schantz
Yakima Valley College

Washington’s Community and Technical Colleges

January 2022
A message from College Spark Washington
*Partners in Making Educational Equity a Reality for All Students*

College Spark Washington supports the postsecondary dreams of students and their communities through grantmaking focused on dismantling racism in the Washington state education system. We envision an education system that encourages learners to be their authentic selves and is eager and equipped to guide them towards realizing their dreams.

Washington state community and technical colleges ensures equity in higher education. For that reason, we’ve granted $8.3 million directly to the SBCTC and over $17 million across all Washington state community and technical colleges.

We are honored to sponsor the Transforming Lives Awards because we wholeheartedly believe that higher education can transform lives for students, and Washington’s community and technical colleges serve a significant role. U.S community and technical colleges enroll almost half of all U.S. undergraduate students and are essential for workforce training and retraining. As people turn to community and technical colleges for their educational needs during the current economic downturn, it is vitally important to support and understand today’s community college students, their goals, educational choices and outcomes.

Success in most endeavors is the product of a partnership, not the result of acting in isolation. And the beauty of such cooperation is that you get to share your success with those who have helped you. Today, we celebrate students’ perseverance, their steady persistence in a course of action, especially in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement, and the institutions that helped them along the way.

*The Washington Association of College Trustees thanks College Spark Washington for its generous support of 2022’s Transforming Lives nominees and all community and technical college students across Washington state.*
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 their 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.
Jordan Bates

Bates Technical College

I live by the motto “adapt and overcome.” In the fall of 2015, I enrolled in Bates Technical College to obtain my high school diploma with a focus on business management. I felt defeated after not graduating from my original high school, but this put me in college and on track to finish high school.

My second quarter at Bates, I became pregnant at the age of 19. Unfortunately, I had severe morning sickness, which forced me to have to take a break from school while I sorted this out and left an abusive relationship. In the hardest decision of my life, I decided to give my baby girl up for adoption. I found her the perfect parents and set up an open adoption where she is now thriving.

I then returned to Bates to finish my high school diploma while working meaningless jobs that just went nowhere. Confused and frustrated, I set out to accomplish my purpose. As I was tending to this, my world shattered and stopped. My mom, my best friend and my absolute everything, passed away in her sleep at the young age of 56. The rock of stability, I had expected her to be there for decades to come but now she was now gone forever. It was at this point that I could hear her encouragement to me: “adapt and overcome.” To be honest I had no will to do so. But the last words I whispered in her ear were “I promise to take care of Dad and Joe the best I can. I love you!”

I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to help people. Meanwhile, COVID had shut down the whole world – not just my little world. As the daughter of a disabled combat veteran of two wars, I was eligible for VA benefits for a period that would soon expire if I didn’t get started right away.

My Dental Assisting program instructor Teri directed me to complete prerequisite classes during the pandemic summer. I was finally able to start the program in fall of 2020. I was then earning the best grades of my academic career and was in a beautiful loving relationship. Still, my father was barely holding on after the loss of his bride. My brother continued to struggle with the loss of his mother and was also diagnosed with PTSD. With my help, my brother is now enrolled in the welding program in a great school, and my dad is doing much better. Now that everyone is on track, I can finally enjoy my success. June 2021, I graduated with my Associate of Applied Science, and I am now a dental assistant. I did it!! I have adapted and overcome with flying colors; I even made the dean’s list spring quarter.

Robin, my Bates high school counselor, has been through all this with me since day one. She has been such a motivation and support. Teri, my instructor, saw me struggle and helped me cope with my life while balancing the things I needed to succeed. She was always there to help me get back on track and to make sure I was taking care of myself.

My advice for anyone trying to find their way is to take a deep breath. Your struggles don't define you, and you are so much stronger than you think. Yes, there will always be challenges in life, but it matters what you do with the challenges and how you overcome them. Just remember: “Adapt to any challenge, and you will overcome.”
Saidi Lwanga  
**Bellevue College**

I was raised by my mother and grandmother in a rural village in Uganda. Growing up, my country was devastated by a civil war. I have a vivid memory of me, my mother and grandmother running for our lives into the forest to the sounds of gunfire. And when I was just a toddler my father was taken away at gunpoint by soldiers. We have not heard or seen him since that day.

My grandmother was the village midwife, and I want to be a nurse because of her. She often told me, “Uganda would be a paradise with all its gifts, if only we educated all girls and gave them access to birth control.” Many girls 12-14 years old were sold as brides and had permanent birth injuries due to having babies at a young age. My grandmother selflessly served so many, and I want to be able to do the same.

I attended an Anglican high school boarding school, and then Makerere University on a scholarship where I earned an AA degree in Global Health. Afterward I worked for the Ugandan Youth Federation (UYF). As head of the UYF, I spoke up to President Museveni personally and demanded to know why funds earmarked for Maternal and Child Care and HIV/AIDS prevention were not used for that purpose. I was put in jail as a result.

When I was released, my mother advised me to go the International Youth Federation meeting in Germany and seek political asylum. My life was in danger if I stayed in Uganda. I eventually made my way to Washington state where I befriended Ugandans living in Seattle. They worked as home nursing care providers. I became a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and also worked as a home care aide.

But I knew I had to go to college if I wanted to achieve my dream of becoming a nurse, so I checked into various local community and technical schools. I selected Bellevue College because it had an excellent reputation, especially the nursing program. But first I needed to take ESL classes to become proficient in English.

Working full time and going to school part time was challenging. Often, I did not have enough money to pay for my tuition, and there were times when I wanted to give up. But I was introduced to a local family who needed homecare for a family member who was suffering from Parkinson’s disease. Due to his Parkinson’s, he had difficulty speaking. But I was able to understand him. We shared a special bond. He was a former educator and knew my desire to become an RN. He would encourage me, and tell me how smart I was, that I would be an excellent nurse and that I must never forget that. I took care of him until he passed away, and his words still inspire me.

I have also been blessed by many people at Bellevue College who helped me earn my AA degree. Multicultural Services (MCS) was one place where I could go and get help. It was the first place I went to whenever I had a problem. The staff, especially Kathy Colasurdo and Henry Amaya at MCS were like my own family and made it a safe place for me.

My advice to students who are facing adversity is to believe in yourself and keep pursuing your dream. Never give up! And as I continue with my path to getting an RN in honor of my grandmother, I will always remember Bellevue College. To me, it is home.
Yuliya Derkach  
*Bellingham Technical College*

My first dental visit was at the age of seven, after moving from Ukraine to America. Before that, I didn't even know what a toothbrush was. Zhanna, the assistant who took care of me, created a safe environment by speaking to me in Ukrainian, and she explained why oral health is essential. As a result, I fell in love with learning how to improve and maintain my dental health. Zhanna completed her dental courses at Bellingham Technical College (BTC) so I knew that BTC was the college for me, and I decided to pursue a career in the dental field. I aspire to provide the same type of experience to others and to continue my professional growth in the dental field.

I faced multiple barriers to attending BTC. In my traditional Slavic community, I was expected to marry, be a homemaker, and settle for less than my version of my full potential to include education and professional efforts. My goal is to be independent and not rely on someone else to provide stability for my family and me. Having a career empowers me and makes me feel like I have a purpose in society. I received my associate degree in dental assisting from BTC in 2015 at age 19, became a certified dental assistant, and started working in the field. Later, I got married and returned to school to become a dental hygiene student with the full support of my partner.

To face the challenges of college, I reduced my work hours to focus my efforts on academics. I started working on my prerequisites in the fall of 2017 and completed them in the winter of 2020. To motivate myself, I kept a calendar where I checked off the months and quarters towards completing my goal. I stayed determined to keep going and not give up on myself every quarter because I knew my worth and capability. I had a set goal that I wanted to achieve.

I studied at the tutoring center daily, joined a study group, and stayed after class to ask questions and discuss the material with the instructors. I made my testing reviews, filled out stacks of flashcards, and memorized my workbooks from cover to cover. I implemented new techniques from my instructors, which vastly improved my grades. Lastly, I obtained testing accommodations from my school, allowing me to take my time during tests. I applied for the dental hygiene program and was accepted to start in the fall of 2020. I knew at that point that all of my hard work, long hours, and emotional days paid off.

I’m currently in my fifth quarter of the Dental Hygiene program at BTC with all A grades, and I’m loving it. I’m on track to graduate in the spring of 2022 as a registered dental hygienist with plans to transfer and receive my bachelor’s degree in dental hygiene.

My main goal is to serve as a dental hygienist for my community. I hope to eventually become a dental hygienist or assistant instructor and provide dental education to students. I believe education is powerful and can give a person wings to prosper.

One must strive to meet their goals and live out their career dreams. For me, BTC is more than just a place to receive education; it’s my second home; it’s the foundation that aids me towards my future. Each day instructors, students, and staff provide support and genuine care to my classmates and me. Attending a community or technical college is great. Just go for it! Try your very best, and you will do great!
Zackery Zyskowski  
*Big Bend Community College*

When I heard about Running Start allowing me to earn my Associate in Arts and Science while still in high school, I was immediately intrigued. I could take college-level courses while still in high school. There was no way I could pass up the opportunity. I found a professor at Big Bend, Dr. Palumbo, who has helped me tremendously as a writer and as a student. Dr. Palumbo has been there every step of the way.

My high school, Ephrata High School in Grant County, doesn’t offer any AP or IB courses. The most I could hope to take was honors English. The variety of classes for other subjects was also quite slim. There are many subjects I want to study, but I’m especially interested in biology and psychology. Without the opportunity at my high school, I’d be behind the rest of my peers nationwide. Big Bend gave me a chance to take college-level courses equivalent to AP and IB courses and allowed me to study subjects I am passionate about.

Taking the right classes was one thing but Dr. Palumbo’s guidance helped provide my direction. They spent time reviewing my admission statements as well as providing letters of recommendation as I applied to four-year schools. This kind of hands-on support made my own efforts rewarding. Dr. Palumbo, an English instructor, didn’t just give me advice on how to write, they mentored me on how to advance in higher education. What I’ve also come to believe during Dr. Palumbo’s mentorship is that I have the power to make a difference. My goal is that no matter what I will take opportunities I find and turn them into a career in medicine and into a life that has a positive impact on those around me. I come from a small town, this perspective is a big shift for me.

The biggest obstacle for going to Big Bend was myself. When I learned that I would have to take online courses, and be considered an essential employee at the same time I was terrified it would be too much. I felt like I wasn’t ready for college. But I didn’t let fear win. I reached out to my counselors to find out what was possible. Now I’m finishing my final year of community college and I haven’t stepped foot on my high school campus in two years. I will graduate with my high school diploma and with my Associate of Arts and Science.

I am a first-generation college student. I will be the first one in my family to receive a bachelor’s in science, and I will also be the first one to receive their doctorate in medicine. I am confident I would not be here today if I hadn’t pushed myself to go to Big Bend. I will continue my studies in Pediatric Cancer and Hematology so I can become a pediatric hematologist-oncologist. I want to be someone who can make a difference to a family during their most challenging and heartbreaking times.

I want to change the idea that community college is for people who don’t get into a four-year college. Community college is not just a second chance at higher education, it is an opportunity. If somebody is struggling with access to education or access to finances, community college provides a space for somebody to get their feet on the ground. You not only become an independent learner but you also discover who you are and what educational direction makes sense for you.
Matt Wilson
Cascadia College

I never did well in school and was very anxious to get out. My experience in school was a struggle to say the least. College was something I tried and failed my first quarter when I was 18 and told myself I was never going back. I found quite a bit of success in the construction industry and was happy with the life it provided me. It was hard but rewarding.

In 2019 my wife and I had our Gracie, our second daughter and then surprise, in 2020 we had our 3rd daughter Abbey. Just before Gracie was born I suffered a severe back injury that made any type of physical labor impossible and threatened the future security of my young family. I also just lost my dad to cancer in June of 2019 and then in September of 2019 my older brother lost his battle with PTSD and took his own life.

Out of all this loss, chaos, and uncertainty I decided I would face my fears and go back to school for computer networking in hopes of finding a new rewarding way to give my family the security they deserve. I wasn’t sure if I could be successful in college; as I mentioned I always struggled in school and am diagnosed ADHD. However, I learned to manage that the best I could over the years and thought if I ever have a chance at transitioning into a less labor-intensive career it’s now.

I started at Cascadia in winter quarter of 2020 and finish my AA at the end of winter quarter 2022. It has been quite an exciting journey. Through Cascadia’s Networking Infrastructure Technology degree I have found a rewarding career path that has captured my intrigue and therefore has me looking forward to the challenges of the days to come. I’m currently employed part time while I finish school and plan to start my BS degree in cybersecurity in the spring.

For 20 years I told myself that I could not be successful in college due to my ADHD and that I am very much a hands-on learner and not much else sticks. I wish I would have done this when I was 18 instead of waiting for my life to catch fire as a 37-year-old grown man. It was necessary for me to overcome my fears and my long-reinforced beliefs about myself so I could see my true potential and find the motivation to make it a reality. The obstacles of education that I overcame were ADHD, low self-esteem, emotional loss and grief, dramatic life events like 2 babies back-to-back, 2 spine surgeries, the death of loved ones and a long deeply engrained track record of poor performance in school.

Now, I love the work that I do, I’m excited about pursuing a bachelor’s degree, I’ll make more money than I used to, and I have an increased sense of self-worth due to completing my AAS. I am very pleased with the education I received, and it turns out I have natural gifts that compliment this career choice, which I just take as further confirmation I’m on the right track.
Crystal Wright  
*Centralia College*

We moved frequently and eventually relocated to a community near Centralia. One day I was driving on Harrison and saw a sign that pointed to Centralia College. Immediately, I was inspired, excited, and determined to finish what I started many years ago. I went to enrollment services, and they gave me the information I needed. 

I owe so many Centralia College employees a thank-you for helping me move forward. I would not be giving the college enough credit by listing only the specific individuals who supported me along the way; the individuals I personally worked with, dealt with, and asked advice from. What about the individuals who are unseen that contributed to my success? The maintenance department who salted the parking lot so I could safely get to class, the custodian who refilled the toilet paper and napkins, the cafeteria employees who served me with a smile? It helped me countless times, and the caretaker who rocked my daughter to sleep at the Child Lab School while I took an exam in class. These people, the unseen, are equally important to the contribution of my success. You know the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” I believe it takes an entire college campus to raise a graduate.

College was not easy; it took time and sacrifices. But attending college improved my vision of who I am; it helped me realize my value and worth. Attending college makes me a credible candidate within the workforce.

My education was put on hold because we needed to relocate across the country and then to many states thereafter. The desire to continue my education never faded. I was a mom when I decided it was time to go back to school. I wasn’t sure if I could do it all. I was encouraged to give it a go and try. I knew college would be hard work, but my family supported and encouraged me. My family knew I could do it; I had to believe it too. Initially, I signed up for one class and by the next quarter I enrolled in three classes. For the remainder of the programs, I attended full time. I also became involved with college committees, clubs, and civic engagement projects. It has taken me 20 years to earn my bachelor’s degree. I did that with the support, encouragement, and confidence I received from Centralia College.

Centralia College offered a bachelor’s degree in Business. I was able to continue my education and take care of my family at the same time. I was also planning on earning my Master’s in Business after graduation. I learned that Centralia College and Washington State University (WSU) have a transfer agreement which made the transition seamless.

In high school I told myself I wasn’t good enough or smart enough to receive a scholarship and never filled out the scholarship application or wrote the essay. After I enrolled at CC, I realized that my past belief about myself was a lie. I filled out the scholarship application, wrote the essay, and submitted it. I received my very first scholarship in the mail. I stood in the driveway reading it over and over; the letter confirmed their belief in me and reaffirmed my newly held belief in myself. I tell everyone to believe in yourself and then anything will be possible.

Centralia College impacted me and my family’s life beyond measure. Thank you to all the seen and unseen who show up and put the work in.
Montzerrat Pantoja  
*Clark College*

As a first-generation student, leaving the high school bubble can be overwhelming. There were different paths I could take but I wasn’t sure which to choose. Guidance counselors would always push community college as a cheaper option for post-secondary education, so it seemed like the best option for me after graduation. I enrolled in Clark College in the fall of 2019.

Navigating online classes was one of the biggest challenges in my time at community college. In the middle of all the uncertainty and turmoil surrounding the pandemic, I felt disconnected. I was missing the human connection that comes with the college experience. One day, I got an email inviting me to join Phi Theta Kappa, the honors society at Clark College. I decided to join, and that was the best decision I could have made.

I served as the Public Relations Officer for our chapter. We held biweekly Zoom meetings, where we would connect with other members, play games, and share resources and opportunities. The highlight of my time in PTK was the connections I made. I am still in contact with my fellow PTK leaders and our advisor, Darci Feider. We bonded over our shared sentiments regarding our feelings of isolation and mental health struggles, so we used our experiences to make something positive for other students. We organized the Honors in Action project, which focused on college students’ mental health during the pandemic. We gave out over 70 self-care packages to students and raised awareness about mental health in our community.

I graduated from Clark College in the summer of 2021. I am currently enrolled in WSU Vancouver, and I am working on my bachelor’s degree in biology. Down the road, I plan on getting a master’s degree in biostatistics. Community college taught me the power of making connections and the importance of reaching out to others. The biggest piece of advice I would give to a fellow student is to ask for help. Navigating post-secondary education, especially as a first-generation student, is challenging. There is no reason to do this by oneself because there are always people that will be willing to support students and help them be successful in community college and beyond.
Nicholas Mckinney
Clover Park Technical College

As the first person on either side of my family to receive a college degree, I got a chance to thrive in the college environment because of the unique support offered by both community and technical colleges.

My first college experience was in Running Start at Pierce College’s Fort Steilacoom campus. My advisor was experienced in guiding first-generation students and helped me to navigate the new world of scheduling, registration, and prerequisites. In pursuing my associate degree in Liberal Arts, I enrolled in classes from Political Science to Oceanography. These courses broadened my horizons and improved my understanding of how the world we live in works.

This year, as I returned to school for my license in practical nursing, I chose Clover Park Technical College because of their resources tailored for students who are not from academic backgrounds. This approach is prevalent in everything from faculty who recognize that students are balancing school with full-time work, and who accommodate and support students in those efforts, to advisors who take the time to ensure that the students they advise are prepared for whatever challenges their programs may entail.

My own advisor, Kemble Bray, has repeatedly gone above and beyond to make sure I was thoroughly prepared for this quarter, following up regularly with valuable advice on how to get ready. Thanks to his guidance, I had completed all of my requirements early enough that when a position opened, I was able to enroll a quarter earlier than planned. Kemble’s influence has shown me how careful preparation can reduce the stress of challenges. It is a lesson I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

One of the toughest barriers for me to overcome was a lack of funds. While Running Start covered my associate degree, the rest of my college tuition has been paid out-of-pocket. Generally, this involved me taking time off from school to save up funds for the upcoming quarter. This quarter I have been blessed with a job that has been generously flexible with my hours. My advisor encouraged me to apply for scholarships, something I hadn’t considered before. Thanks to these factors, I hope to continue school without having to take breaks to save up money.

If I had one piece of advice for people who are unsure of their ability to attend college, it would be to discuss your barriers with your advisor. The advisors want to see students succeed. They often have knowledge of resources that can help a student overcome whatever barrier is keeping them from pursuing an education, and if they don’t, they will likely know someone who does.

After graduation I intend to work as a licensed practical nurse (LPN) in communities that are often neglected, and in particular to support patients who struggle with their mental health. Thanks to the support community and technical colleges give students like me to overcome barriers, I will be able to achieve my goals.
Richard Kemp
*Columbia Basin College*

My name is Richard Kemp, the eldest of six kids raised on the mean streets of Salinas, CA, Steinbeck Country. You may have seen Salinas featured on *PD Live* or *Cops*. Our next-door neighbor was featured on an episode. Our home was broken into while my mom was at the hospital at my dying father’s bedside. My mom used to pay me a nickel each time I walked my brothers and sisters to and from school. My siblings told my parents, years later when I was in federal prison, that I earned every nickel as we were harassed nearly every week.

My father was very strict and wore a thin leather belt that he wasn’t afraid to use. The environment I was in, both at home and on the streets, led me to fall in with the wrong crowd. I was abusing drugs and alcohol and didn’t make the best decisions. By the time I was 20, I was committing felonies and landed in a maximum-security federal prison. I wasn’t in the cell block for two weeks when someone was stabbed to death outside my cell in an argument over floor wax.

I quickly learned life was so cheap. At this time, a grizzled old con invited me to “spin a lap” with him in the recreation yard. He told me I needed to sever ties with my current crowd because they were doing life on the installment plan, and if I wanted to get out in 20 years, I needed to stop being “felony stupid” and go to school. At the time, college was being offered at the prison for free all I had to do was sign the papers.

Of 1,200 inmates at our facility, only 35-40 of us enrolled in school. Suddenly, I was leading a monastic life. I went to my work detail in the morning and school every evening. After school, I would lock myself in my room and do homework or read while chaos ensued outside my door. Guys would tell me I was wasting my time because everything I was learning would be obsolete, or I wouldn’t get a job in my chosen field; yet I never caved. I earned an AA in General Education and a BA in Social Science. I picked up some vocational training as well.

After 25 years, I was released, and the naysayers were right; I didn’t find employment in my chosen field, but I knew how to study. I earned my CDL. I became licensed to set monitor wells in three states. I learned how to operate heavy equipment. I made a great living and provided for my wife and three kids until I was severely injured in an industrial accident.

Five surgeries and three years of recovery had me so depressed. I had to ask for financial assistance. Our car was repossessed twice. We went on EBT and had to go to food banks. We almost didn’t have Christmas for our kids. It was time to reinvent myself, but how could we afford school?

BFET and Worker Retraining made it possible. I returned to school at age 57, and I am excelling. I am president of DECA. I am a member of PTK, the Honor Society, and NSLS. Through CBC, I have volunteered for various activities in the community. My confidence has been restored, and I am well on my way toward a BAS degree in Project Management.

I wish to thank Professor Azhar Zaheer for nominating me for this blessing. I am so grateful to have this opportunity to give you a condensed version of my story and hope others can be inspired to overcome whatever hardship they may face and pursue their dream.
Jessica Davila  
*Edmonds College*

I was compelled to attend Edmonds College because of their reputation for having an amazing program in Addiction Studies. After researching many schools, I found that EC’s program is filled with instructors who have personal experience in the field. I wasn’t wrong in my decision, however, I cannot choose just one instructor who made the biggest impact, because every single one has contributed to my success.

It almost sounds too good to be true. But they each have a passion for the field, they all have a passion for teaching others, and they also have the experience to guide students’ transformation into professionals. Academically they are great, and personally they act as cheerleaders, mentors, and an overall support system. I’ve never had confusion as to what I needed to achieve; even when the pandemic hit, they were prepared and there for me every step of the way.

I faced many barriers and had to overcome many obstacles to attend college. I was a teen mom, which caused me to never step foot into high school. I completed 7th grade, and managed to get a GED® through a community college. I also grew up in a family that struggled with substance use issues. My father was in and out of the prison system, passing away when I was 17 due to health issues caused by his addiction. My mother wasn’t around much either, but even when she was, she wasn’t a healthy role model. I eventually followed in my parents’ path and became addicted to alcohol, and later prescription narcotics and heroin. Addiction took everything from me, even my children. It didn’t end until I finally landed a prison sentence.

While incarcerated, I got the opportunity to take college classes, and the instructor’s helped me apply for financial aid, and admissions to local colleges where I was being released. I have been clean for almost 6 years and regained custody of my children. College was a big part of what helped me stay clean. People in early recovery need to stay busy, and college did that for me. It also allowed me to pursue a degree that means something, and that I’m passionate about. I used all the resources the college had to help me prepare academically for college. I was worried I wouldn’t be smart enough to attend college classes, and was embarrassed that at 30 years old I couldn’t do high school math. I learned quickly that colleges have patient, compassionate people wanting to help. I used the writing center and math tutors to help me prepare for college level courses.

Currently I am taking the pre-practicum course at Edmonds College. Next quarter I will be starting practicum, which means one of my goals will be fulfilled. I am now a certified Substance Use Disorder Professional in training through the Department of Health. I will be working in the field to gain experience that will prepare me for the state test. Eventually, I will be a fully licensed counselor and hope to work with youth, as I can relate to the struggles they are going through.

The best advice I would give other students is to not let your history predict your future. It doesn’t matter where you came from, or how you were raised, you can control the outcome of your own success. Colleges are filled with many resources that can help you academically and personally. I will be graduating next quarter, and I have faith that if I can do it, many others can too.
Natasha Stewart  
*Everett Community College*

In the later part of high school, I began to hang around with people who were making poor choices. I knew I wanted to help people but had no clue where or what that was going to look like. A high school counselor got me a job shadow spot with an RN at Harborview, and from that moment, I knew I wanted to be in the medical field.

Then ... BOOM, the summer before my senior year, I found myself pregnant, and knew that I would have to do this on my own. I can remember exactly where I was when I told my mother. Her words to me still bring me to tears: “If you graduate high school, I will always be there for you.” Everything I thought that I was going to do changed. I needed to complete school and get a job. So I did: I stayed in my “regular” classes. After school, I would come home to be with the baby, then go to work in the evening. I quit thinking big because it wasn’t what was planned for me.

I worked various jobs, from cashier to debt collector to DSHS helping me pay for CNA training, to CNA. I depended on state assistance. I gave birth to three more children and took on three children that were not biologically mine. (Yes, a total of seven children). I LOVED my work as a CNA in long term care, but the work took a toll on my body.

In 2013/2014, while out on leave due to a back injury, I realized that I was going to hurt myself to the point of permanent damage if I did not rethink what I was going to do for the rest of my life.

I drove to Everett Community College, and my life changed forever. College was such a foreign thought, and I had no clue, but I was guided throughout the process. I started college at 31 years old. I chose to major in Nursing. EvCC has a top-of-the-line RN program that can be challenging to get accepted into.

I joined a program called TRIO that added assistance to first generation college students. TRIO organized study sessions to help me and other students as we prepared to apply to nursing school. All I had to do was ask if something could be done, and it was. I needed resources for clothes for job interviews, and it took one day to organize that for me.

When I failed out of RN school after one quarter, the first person I called was my TRIO advisor. She found time for me right that moment. She helped me refocus. She encouraged me to not quit, but let me know that if I wanted other options, they were there. In the end, I appealed to repeat my first quarter of nursing and was accepted back into the program.

When I graduated Nursing school, my TRIO advisor was in the audience cheering me on. When I passed my NCLEX state license exam, she was in the top five I told. When I got hired at Providence, she was top five to know. When I was asked to step up as a team leader on the COVID-19 unit, she believed in me. I guess what I’m trying to say in all this is, I never had the examples to introduce me to higher education and the career opportunities that follow. The help of the TRIO program has been so amazing. I will always be grateful for the opportunities provided to me.
Shelly Hoffman  
*Grays Harbor College*

Prior to Grays Harbor College (GHC), the highest level of education I completed was 9th grade. I struggled with addiction for many years, and I was never involved in school. I have been on my own since I was 15 years old. Many times, I tried to go back to school, but I was not successful in attaining my goals due to personal circumstances, especially finances. For the last 10 years, I have been raising a daughter who is not my own. I have been with her since she was eight months old. Once she came into my life there was not any other choice for me except to be there for her, because her welfare came first.

At 48 years old, I started college for the final time after being laid off. I knew that it was time to fight for a better life for myself and my daughter. Once I returned to college, I decided that I wanted to be involved beyond just taking classes, so I signed up to be a Senator with student government. At that time, I did not realize how important that choice was going to be for my future. It has shaped and transformed me into a better version of myself. Through this small experience, I found my voice and my calling. I am humbled by my great fortune and the person that I am now in comparison to that first day in the winter of 2019.

In 2020, I decided to continue serving GHC students as Vice President. Now, I am in my second term as President. I am actively involved with our campus food pantry and mental health initiatives. I also serve as the president of Phi Theta Kappa, and am a Regional Coordinator for 13 colleges at the Washington Student Engagement Network. I truly feel that everyone I have worked with at GHC has saved my life, especially Student Life. My life is forever changed. This experience has allowed me to see my true potential and worth. I will never again be the same person I was two years ago. I am stronger and braver than ever and I owe that to the people and programs at GHC.

I have been touched and helped by those that surround me in one way or another at GHC, even if that is just moral support. I won’t say that the journey has been easy. To continue, I have done everything I could to achieve my goals. I have taken out personal loans, borrowed from family, worked, and applied for scholarships. Even in those times that life was hard or finances were too difficult, I leaned on those around me.

I am currently in the Bachelor of Applied Science in Organizational Management program, and I plan to continue my education to earn a master’s degree. With eight months left I have finally decided that I want to go into leadership. I want to empower others to see their worth and value, and I want to give more to the world than I take. I want to be a part of the solution in making sure everyone has the opportunities they deserve in life. I am so blessed and thankful to have made that life-altering decision in 2019 that re-invented my life and my soul. If I could share any advice with other students, it would be: it is never too late, it is never impossible, and give yourself the chance to be whomever you want to be. With support from people and programs available at community and technical colleges across the state, you can succeed.

Transforming Lives Keynote Speaker
Madiera McQuade-Hopkins
Green River College

My name is Madiera McQuade-Hopkins. I would like to tell you the story about how one choice altered the course of my life. I was determined to have a better future regardless of what it’s like, or what the process was like, and that compelled me to start my journey at Green River College. Prior to college, I only had experience in food service, retail, and warehouse work. I was working part-time during the first year in college as a cashier in the mall to support myself.

The Medical Office Administration and Medical Coding program opened a door of opportunity for me with new career paths, endless opportunities for professional credentials, and a new network of colleagues in nationally recognized associations. Most importantly, throughout the course of my time at Green River College I had an outstanding faculty adviser who doubled as my instructor. She provided me with all the tools that I needed to be successful and prepared for my new career path.

Previously, I stated that I made “One choice that altered the course of my life.” I have faced many obstacles that prevented me from enrolling into college. Homelessness and drug addiction were huge obstacles that stood between my plans of going to college. During my addiction, I was admitted to many hospitals and psychiatric units, but upon release I would end up repeating the same cycle of insanity and abandon any idea of cleaning up my act and getting my life together. Until I finally came to the realization that everything that I wanted in life—a solid future, a higher level of education, a normal life, and to not disappoint my family—wasn’t going to happen until I made a decision between all the things I hoped and dreamed for instead of the things that were keeping me tied to a toxic and dangerous life. But, for the Grace of God I made the decision and gave up everything I knew when I admitted myself into inpatient treatment 200+ miles away. Upon re-entering society, I relied heavily on public transportation to get from Burien to Auburn for class. My passion for reinventing myself was stronger than any obstacle in my way!

Fast forward three years later to January 2021 when I officially became a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society. By August 2021 I had completed my course of study and graduated receiving an Associate in Applied Arts in Medical Office Administration with a concentration in Medical Coding. Also, I am now a Certified Professional Medical Coder through the AAPC (American Academy of Professional Coders), and I am currently working remotely as a Claims Processor for a health insurance company that is well-known throughout the United States, capitalizing on all the skills that I’ve gained during my time in college. Furthermore, Green River College made learning new concepts enjoyable even though they were complex subjects. The resources and benefits offered to students helped me attain everything that I have, and I could not express enough gratitude towards each faculty member who has helped me along the way. Being able to learn and grow in such a supportive environment has transformed the way I think, live, and handle situations in the workplace and in my life today.

Finally, my one piece of advice to those unsure about their ability to attend college is: “Have faith and go for it. Have courage and ask for help, use the resources available to you at the college, and don’t doubt your ability to do anything. You can do it!”
Emily Hamilton  
Highline College

When I decided to go back to college, I was healing from a Traumatic Brain Injury, so having the support of Access Services has been important to me. I was referred to Highline College and my experiences here have been transformative. The Access Services department has helped me to be able to succeed in college with the help of accommodations. To be honest, there are many instructors and departments that have helped cultivate my success. I do not believe I would be where I am without their guidance, encouragement, and support.

During my first quarter I took part in The Arrive Program, which was paired with Laura Manning’s Communication class. This program helped provided me with the knowledge of the departments and programs available on campus. The Arrive Program is a large part of my academic foundation and Laura’s mentoring helped me to learn I was worthy of a college experience.

Another instructor who greatly influenced my experience here is Susan Rich. Her Creative Writing course and being an Arcturus Editor both pushed me outside of my comfort zone. Susan Rich encourages nothing but the best from her students; her influence helped me to relearn how to work with others and to gain new skills I never imagined having, let alone enjoying. Her courses have helped me be open to the idea that there is still much I have to learn, and that I can excel at anything I choose to do.

I believe everyone has their own obstacles to overcome. I had my share of barriers as well; I grew up in a church that didn’t prioritize college and as a first-generation student, the importance of college was never discussed. After my injury, I experienced housing insecurity and homelessness for a good part of seven years, during this time I escaped a domestic violence situation. I was accepted into the WISH program for homeless students, during my first quarter at Highline. This has helped provide the stability and motivation to stay in school. Being a student at Highline, working on my education, and being around other inspiring individuals in our community, have all helped me to learn past the conditioning I had earlier in life.

After graduating in June with my AA, I recently began my BAS in Global Trade and Logistics here at Highline. It’s not a degree I was previously aware of, however I have learned that I will do well with whatever I choose. I’m thoroughly enjoying my program and am excited where it will take me. I hope to pair it with a graduate degree in Environmental Science to help discover more environmentally friendly ways we can all conduct business. Wherever this degree and the future take me, I wouldn’t have been able to get there without Highline College and the phenomenal instructors and staff.

We have a very diverse student body here at Highline, all who may experience some very difficult times. My first piece of advice would be to take it step by step; you never know where one step will take you, or what you will discover. I never believed myself capable or worthy of the things I have accomplished the past year and a half. If I had considered it before enrolling my first quarter, it would have been too intimidating with where I was starting from. My second piece of advice is that you’re worthy; no matter what anyone has told you, no matter what experiences you have endured, no matter what you are healing from, you are absolutely worthy. We all are.
Olga Okhapkina  
Lake Washington Institute of Technology

I’m pleased to be able to share my journey with you. I grew up in the Ukraine, and ever since I was a child, I have always dreamed of working in the medical profession. My parents both worked in the field, and I wanted to follow in their footsteps and work in a career where I could help people. I have always wanted to save people’s lives and become like them. That is why I decided to attend LWTech.

When I immigrated from the Ukraine I found LWTech. At first, it was difficult for me to pursue my dream since I couldn’t afford the tuition, but with the help of social programs and scholarships, I started at LWTech. I wanted to go right into a program, but my English language skills weren’t strong enough yet, even though I had completed the highest level of English language courses at another college. So, I started as an IBEST student, where I worked my way through the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes and was then accepted into the BAS in Public Health program. I studied diligently to get scholarships. It was challenging, but I was thrilled at the thought that studying would help me to become closer to fulfilling my dream. It was during this time that I was also suffering from postpartum depression and had to take a one-year break from my studies to take care of myself and my family. I didn’t give up on my dream. I came back to the program, and last Spring I graduated Magna Cum Laude.

The Public Health program at LWTech gave me a life-changing experience because it helped me realize that people’s lives can be saved, even when you are not working directly with patients. Experiencing postpartum depression myself led me to choose that focus as my primary research topic.

When I think about the barriers or obstacles that I encountered, the biggest one was the language barrier when I first started at LWTech. I thought because I had already completed the English courses at another college that I would be ready to go right into my program. I didn’t give up and walk away from my dream. I took classes as an IBEST student and kept going. And, when I needed to take time off, I did it, and I still came back to finish my program.

In the future, I want to publish my work and raise awareness about it. Moreover, I am eager to make a difference in the healthcare field. I want to work in policies review, and draft rules and legislation, particularly as they relate to parental leave.

I would like to tell all the students who are hesitating about attending a technical college, first and foremost, you need to decide what you want to do. Sometimes it is not easy to distinguish something you were told to do and something you want to do. You might find yourself lost at one point or another. At times like these, you will need to ask yourself: Will doing this kind of work make you feel not just happy, but powerful and energetic? If the answer is yes, it means that you need to go for it. And if attending college is one of the necessary steps to get to do what you truly want, then you will know what to do.
Brittany Lovely  
*Lower Columbia College*

When I was in prison, I reluctantly attended a required “job skills” course that was focused on the foundations of job readiness. While I now can appreciate the programming offered to me, I was less than ecstatic in the moment. On the second day of class, the instructor brought in a list of employers known to hire people with criminal records, which was meant to be encouraging, but looking at that list I was demoralized. I felt trapped with no room to grow. Not knowing that this would be the catalyst to redirect my path, I begrudgingly asked, “how is this supposed to change my life?” In response, the instructor sat down and started exploring the possibilities with me.

At that time, I didn’t believe school was a real option for me as I didn’t think I could fit in or succeed, but she was the first of many who saw something in me that I couldn’t see in myself. She helped me fill out my FAFSA and school application to turn in upon release. This was the beginning of the new support system that formed around me along my academic journey. I released on June 16, 2015 and started at Lower Columbia College that fall.

After my first two quarters, I was referred to the TRIO Student Support Services program where I sat down with an advisor and opened up about my past for the first time since I released. I remember recounting the trauma and decisions that preceded my prison stay, yet she was writing things like “resilient, resourceful, determined.” I didn’t understand how she picked those traits out of the ugly truth I was sharing. This was the first glimpse I got of myself that wasn’t riddled with shame. I found TRIO to be my home. They were not only fully accepting of who I was and where I’d been, but celebrated each tiny win with me. Slowly, they helped me shed some of the stigma I was carrying around and trade it for bits of confidence.

I remember thinking that the world of academia wasn’t going to be a welcoming place for people like me, but I was wrong. Education transformed my life. It helped me build a foundation for a future I never could have dreamed of. I graduated with highest honors from LCC a few years post-release and went on to graduate summa cum laude from WSU-V with a Bachelor’s in Public Affairs and a concentration in Justice. I worked for the TRIO program, giving back the support they gave me, the WA State House of Representatives where I fell in love with public policy, and currently work for the Statewide Reentry Council where I use my story to effect reentry legislation.

Today, I get to think about my life with endless possibilities. I plan to continue engaging in criminal legal reform at the state and federal level and sharing my story to shed light on the humanity behind these policy issues. In all aspects, representation matters, so the voices of those most impacted should be centered in this work. “Those closest to the problem are often closest to the solution but farthest from the resources.” The end goal is a more just society; I am just contributing where I can.

If anyone is hesitant about their ability to attend a community or technical college, push that doubt away. There is always a place for you with someone to meet you where you’re at and cheer you on as you succeed. Education can and will change your life.
Chanette Purser-Smith  
*North Seattle College*

I am Chanette Purser-Smith, a Navy veteran and current student at North Seattle College (NSC). My life transforming experience began upon my discharge from the US Navy. When I left the military, I left the community that I had gotten to know, love, and serve with. Entering into the civilian sector, I found myself without that sense of community. I began working at a restaurant, here within the Puget Sound, as one of the chefs. It was during this time I met a fellow veteran who was working at NSC as their Vet. Corps Navigator. Through this connection, I found myself going through the motions of applying to become a student at NSC, with the use of my GI Bill. After a year at NSC, experiencing community and connection with other veterans, I applied to become the Vet. Corps Navigator. It was this decision that continued to transform my life.

During my time as Vet. Corps Navigator, I made it my goal to create a space, within the North Seattle College Veterans Lounge, that was welcoming, inclusive, and a kind of home away from home. I got to know the student-veterans, and I supported them through the challenges and adversities they faced, but also got to celebrate the victories and triumphs, both large and small with them. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I began the work to increase our grass-roots food pantry. This idea of adding some additional storage for the food pantry grew into a full remodel of the space. With support from partners, both within the college and outside in the community, we were able to secure a grant from King County. We also identified partners, such as Team Depot with Home Depot and The Mission Continues.

Our work began with the conversation around how we wanted the space to look and feel. Knowing our student-veterans, I know the struggles they experience with diagnoses like post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries, and other physical or mental disabilities. We sought out promising best practices that influenced the design of a space that was calming, low-impact, accessible, and inclusive. We had great momentum with the project, until COVID-19 turned our world upside down. Though it had created a hurdle or two, it did not stop the commitment to the project. During the middle of 2021, work really began to transform the space. New flooring, fresh paint, new window treatments, cabinet installation all occurred. New furniture was brought in, with finishing touches that elevated the look and feel of the space — the work was completed. A new official food pantry was put into place, through a partnership with the University District Food Bank.

As I stand in that space and look at where we were to where we are today, I can’t help but view the transformation that took place as something similar I went through in my own life. I went from working to find community and purpose, to knowing where and who I am. In my final few quarters of obtaining my degree at NSC, I feel extremely fortunate to be in the position that I am, with helping to transform the lives of others.
Julie Thompson  
Olympic College

A barrier I have overcome in order to achieve a higher education is I have been out of school for 33 years. This is intimidating because I did not know what the expectations would be and if I could manage both a full-time career with a full-time school schedule. The Olympic College staff in Bremerton made my transition to college surprisingly smooth.

I am a US Air Force veteran with a disability that, in time, will prevent me from continuing to do the job I love on US Naval submarines. As an On-Site Installation Coordinator for a Department of Defense agency, I oversee electronic communication installations and upgrades. The disability with my knees, however, will eventually prevent me from climbing up and down into the submarine. In order to advance in management, I need to be competitive and the biggest thing I lack with my fellow peers is a degree. For 26 years I have advanced with no issues, but a degree separates me from competing for the same position.

In discussion with my branch manager, my local Veterans office, and a friend, I made the decision to get my degree in Organizational Leadership. The Organizational Leadership Technical Management Program (OLTM) degree would help me be competitive amongst my peers seeking the same management advancement opportunities. A key factor was that I could also earn my associate’s and bachelor’s degree at the same college.

The people I recognize as having a large impact in my success at Olympic College since I started in January of 2019 are Ben Tapang, my branch manager, and the following personnel at Olympic College: Dr. Karen Bolton, Douglas Zeno, and Jill Turocy Seid. Each person supported my decision, pushed me in the right direction, and gave me the confidence that I was doing well and to continue that path. These individuals believed in me enough to continue to push me. This path has been pleasantly surprising for me because I have done much better than I had ever given myself credit for in the beginning. I have made the dean’s list and had scholarly mentions several times.

Throughout my studies, I have pushed through obstacles while still maintaining great grades. While I didn’t know if I could complete college studies at my age and had personal hardships that at times made my concentration very hard, I persevered. Going through a divorce, moving my parents to an assisted living facility because both suffered Alzheimer’s and dementia, and enduring the COVID-19 pandemic, I still managed a study routine and stayed accountable.

My goal is to become our first female branch manager overseeing our team here in the Pacific Northwest where we serve our US Naval fleet in Bremerton and Silverdale. I have earned my Associate in Applied Science for OLTM in one-and-a-half years and I am currently working towards my Bachelor of Applied Science for OLTM.

My advice to those unsure of whether or not to attend a community college is simple: do it, you will not regret it. Starting in a smaller atmosphere that offers the same opportunities as a larger college is rewarding because you will receive more individualized attention and not become lost amongst a large environment. It is a close community and still offers great programs and degrees. I am so grateful that Olympic College is here and one of the top community colleges that is right here in my own backyard.
**Michael Huddler**  
*Peninsula College*

In 2019 we moved, along with my grandparents, to Port Angeles, my wife’s hometown, to create a better quality of life for my family.

I grew up without a mom. My father struggled with addiction and passed away when I was 26. My grandparents took me home from the hospital. I wanted to help take care of them and give them the opportunity to watch their great-grandchildren grow up.

I had to leave my union job behind when we moved. My wife got a job so I could stay home with the baby and help take care of my grandparents, but I knew I needed to do something long term to get back into the work force.

My mother-in-law works for Peninsula College, and suggested school. My wife knew people who went through the welding program, and I decided that is what I wanted to do.

Shortly after I started, I faced a series of personal challenges. My grandfather became ill and found out that he had cancer. I had to take Papa to the cancer center two times a week, traveling to the hospital in Bremerton frequently. My grandmother already had health issues, and I had a six-month-old baby at home. My wife has epilepsy, and at the time couldn’t drive, so any errands or appointments were my responsibility. Even in the face of all of these challenges, I never gave up.

I was motivated because I wanted my wife to achieve her educational goals, and to teach my kids to never give up. When I would have to miss class to take my grandpa to the cancer center, or be a little late because the daycare didn’t open in time before class, I would communicate with my instructor, Eoin Doherty.

In October 2020 my grandfather passed away, which lead to a downhill battle with my grandmother’s physical and mental health. In July of 2021, she passed away tragically. Before she passed, there was a lot of trauma in our family and I was able to confide in my teacher. It helped me through some of the hardest times in my life. It was because of Eoin’s support, understanding, advice, and knowledge that I was able to be successful. He worked with me knowing all the stuff I had going on at home, and gave me the tools I needed to get started in the work force. He saw the potential in me even when I didn’t see it myself. I started a quarter behind everyone, and was the first to get out in the work force. I handled all of these obstacles by not giving up. My advice to other students is to decide what you want, utilize the resources available to you, and never give up.

Prior to graduating, Eoin recommended me for a job with Brix Marine. I was hired as a fabricator, and they worked with Peninsula College to ensure I graduated. Within six months I became a lead in building the cabins for the boats. In this role, I get the blueprint and lead a team to get the work done. My future is continuing to grow within the company, or to one day have my own fab shop, provide for my family, and give my wife the same opportunity to go back to school.

The only way to fail is to give up. Obstacles create opportunities. All the obstacles I went through gave me the opportunities to become the man I am today. Don’t give up and you will accomplish your goals.
Tammy Thorpe  
**Pierce College Fort Steilacoom**

At the age of five, my family unknowingly bestowed upon me Pandora’s Box. I felt my young self buckle under the weight of this gift, as my adoption story spilled into the universe.

Social norms of my birth era had marginalized unwed mothers, children born out of wedlock, and women unable to conceive. In response, stigma birthed a cocoon of secrecy around this triad, naming it “closed adoption.” It was a social structure born of loss, severing bonds with birth family, and creating a primal wound. These intimate strangers held answers to mysteries as simple as my blue eyes to life-altering health history. Through no fault of adoptive family, my DNA band would be deeply missed; I would spend a lifetime searching for them, in the faces of strangers and my own reflection.

Being nurtured by the unknown fostered an already inquisitive nature that baffled my well-meaning adoptive parents. I yearned for books, in a home devoid of a bookshelf, and hungered for answers tucked between pages of library encyclopedias. As high school graduation approached, I shared my hope for a psychology degree with my mom.

The societal framework she was reared in quickly pounded out a box for me: *Girls don’t need an education,* she patiently explained, *they get married and have children. It’s a waste.*

Six months later, I found myself wed, one month out of high school. For thirty years, I took joy in the children my mother predicted, often traveling their newborn faces for a glimpse of those lost to me. In precious spare time, I read insatiably, devouring cast-off, outdated, thrift-store textbooks. I was a sleepwalker, willing myself awake, but questions of identity created an obstacle of self-doubt that was impenetrable — until 2018, when the miracle of DNA testing revealed a little brother, whose blue eyes mirrored my own. Soon, I found my early inclination for college confirmed in a birth mother who spent her life as a psychologist and a missing family of readers, thinkers, and learners. Bits of identity began to fall into place, and these simple yet profound reflections of my self propelled me into higher education.

As a returning student, I stepped, terrified, into the unknown of Pierce College to find a community striving to help students flourish. Still existing inside the margins built for me, I felt like a fraud but, slowly, came to recognize my unique strengths and embrace possibility.

Within this environment of higher education at a local community college, soul hunger was tended and nourished by educators who encouraged me to explore my lived experience through lenses of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and more. It was a second chance, and with each course, I watched margins of an outdated social framework fall away, leaving me free to explore new opportunity. It has been a transformative ascent to wholeness that shaped a fresh perspective and helped me see societal forces that affected the lives of my mothers and myself.

My education at Pierce College brought personal healing and, with it, a passion to work within the realm of adoption and family therapy. This comes at a time when DNA technology is rapidly connecting biological family, creating a unique demand for professionals who understand the emotional intricacies of adoption and reunion. I deeply desire to fill that void, as a therapist educated to walk beside adoptee, birth, and adoptive family.

Life presents each of us with unique barriers that can hold us back or drive us forward. I have found it’s the process of learning that equips us to break free of them. Inch forward, and leap.
Jillian Menchaca
Pierce College Puyallup

Nine years after graduating from high school, with two small children and a full-time job, I decided to go back to college to pursue my dreams of becoming a nurse. Being overwhelmed with navigating the ins and outs of the college world, I did not know where to start or what to do first. All I knew was that I was determined to make this dream a reality, and I would do anything to make it happen. Knowing that Pierce College was local to my community, the application was submitted. I was excited that I would be able to utilize this community college to become one step closer to becoming a nurse.

The first person that welcomed me in was my academic advisor. She was able to lay out all the information I needed to make my dream a reality, and helped me to stay focused on the classes I needed and what was next. The student success program was always something I could lean on to make sure I understood what was next and how to best achieve my academic goals. There were also so many teachers who taught me valuable skills that I would use in my nursing education and future career.

I had every excuse to quit and not complete my educational journey. I am a mother of two children, I worked full-time, I had a house to maintain, children to raise, dinner to cook, and bills to pay. No one would blame me if I quit college. After all, it had already been almost 10 years since I graduated from high school. The barriers to my education I faced included exhaustion, financial stress, work commitments, lack of personal support, and the continuous juggling of life, work, family, and school. These barriers continued to stare me down, day after day. I would have to break these barriers down, and pick myself back up, to continue my educational journey; a decision that would need to be made daily, sometimes even multiple times a day. Instead of choosing to give up, I adapted my life to fit college. I took night and online classes so that I could still be home with my kids, cook them dinner, read them a story, and tuck them in. I utilized these classes so that I could still work full-time while my kids were in school and focus on my schoolwork after the kids went to sleep. I adapted, instead of giving up, even though giving up would have been easier.

If Pierce College was not there for me, to support my educational journey, I would never be where I am today. After two years of prerequisite classes at Pierce College, I am excited to say that I am now a current student at the South Puget Sound Community College, ADN, Nursing program, expected to graduate as a Registered Nurse, in the spring of 2023. Anyone can do what I did, I am not any more special than the next aspiring nurse. The only thing different is that I never gave up, and you shouldn’t give up either. Take it one day at a time, and break down those barriers, day after day. Remember that you deserve an education, and to achieve your education goals, just like I did.
Gabriella Cotogna
Renton Technical College

My name is Gabriella Cotogna and I would like to share the educational journey that has led me to find personal success at Renton Technical College. Going to college was a dream of mine but I wasn’t sure when it would become a reality. My parents told me I didn’t need a degree and that I wasn’t good enough for most colleges, at one point saying “your aspirations are stupid”. I placed my dreams on hold, knowing that I would pursue higher education someday.

Ten years after I got my GED® I finally decided enough was enough and I started applying to colleges in my area. Originally, I wanted to pursue a degree in writing since I enjoyed doing it, but cartography and map-making were always something I was intrigued by. The process of finding the right college became more and more negative. I was told to pursue other careers, I couldn’t find answers to my questions, and the thought of college was becoming more and more discouraging.

I chose RTC because it finally felt like college would be possible. I met people who were caring, loved their jobs, and wanted to help me launch my educational journey. Choosing the Land Surveying Program was part of my plan to turn my dreams into reality. I had no idea that taking the certificate program would land me in a world that I love and feel passionate about. I have since found a job in the field and no longer work a dead-end retail job. I never imagined I could do something even remotely close to this. The Land Surveying Program has shown me a career that is filled with incredibly kind and passionate people. I have never met a group of people who so love what they do and delight in sharing it with others.

My instructors Jim Coan and Martin Paquette deserve my thanks and gratitude for this newfound career and passion. Jim Coan inspired me to learn more about the history of the field when he helped me learn to use my antique Theodolite. He has also helped through his videos in the Public Land System Class to teach me more about a subject I knew nothing about and was struggling to understand. Martin Paquette has been a wellspring of knowledge, helping me understand and find a love for Land Surveying and its related fields.

Receiving this scholarship would help me be able to pursue a higher level of education by relieving the stress of finances. The ultimate goal is to get my master’s degree in Geographic Information Systems. This money would help me to have a better footing when saving for and paying for school, and eventually transferring to a university.

Going to school can be scary and daunting at times, especially at a slightly older age but it is very well worth it. I have been a happier and more empowered feeling person since starting school. If I could pass something along about my experience it would be, don’t doubt yourself, “you are your best champion” and know that there are so many people willing to help you achieve your dreams.
Myron Curry  
*Seattle Central College*

During my incarceration I was highly focused on education and self-improvement. I planned on continuing my education but never thought it would have been such an amazing experience. I am from Seattle, so deciding on Seattle Central was the natural decision pre-release. I will never forget how skeptical I was when I first walked into the Student Support Programs door at Seattle Central. I came back every day and sat at the same desk I took my entry test at in their office. I came to find that they just wanted to help, and I loved that. I began to help students coming through that same door and shortly became a Re-Entry Peer Navigator. It was natural for me because I was just extending all the resources and connections I used myself. As I began taking classes and becoming a prominent member of Seattle Central, I would become good friends with all the people who helped navigate many obstacles. During my first year, I received support and made a connection with various departments within Seattle Central. I would not have made it without the support of my Seattle Central community.

All the community members encouraged and supported me like I was their blood relative. I can’t express the love shared between the entire Seattle Central community and myself. The support was there financially, emotionally, academically and personally (housing, food, etc.). I quickly came to realize that it was just the connection and relation of one another and myself that made it organic to receive help and gain success. I am that same support system for other students now.

I have had a tremendous amount of success from launching a successful designs/art company, being a strong community supporter and now a graduate with my associate degree. As a re-entry student, it would have been near impossible to attend Seattle Central without the strength and consistency of Seattle Central and Student Support Programs. They made it possible for me and many others in my situation. There are constant battles to achieve basic rights. They are not given without a fight. The Student Support Programs team fight that fight relentlessly to fend off the oppression and inhumane actions of them all daily. I of course would not be able to afford to attend college. I was homeless, had no income and no means of transportation. Seattle Central’s Student Support Programs, Financial Aid, Workforce, Springboard8, scholarships and other great opportunities that extend stipends has made that possible for me.

I am now focusing more time on my design company, M.Curry Designs, and the other corporations I have now developed. I will venture into property development and government contracts as well. My goal now is to continue scaling my access to capital and acquiring income producing assets to begin building generational wealth. My goal for the future is to reach and support all the other community members who want to change their lives as I have. I am a beacon for assisting my community with resources and any knowledge I may have or learning the things I do not know together.

If I would be honored enough to share one piece of advice for other students who are unsure about their ability to attend a community or technical college it would be, “don’t be afraid to ask for help and express your appreciation to those who have supported you so they know their actions have made an impact.”
Sunshine Cheng  
*Shoreline Community College*

I always wanted to go to college and especially, to attend a four-year university. Due to challenges at home and at school, I never considered that either was a viable option for me. Growing up in Idaho, a mixed-race individual from a single-parent home, I encountered much bigotry and discrimination at school from fellow students and even from some adults. Due to limited resources, I did not receive any guidance in my college search. From a financial standpoint, I soon discovered that community college seemed like a better option for me. Nonetheless, funding continues to be a struggle as I am financially independent and don’t rely on anyone for assistance. I appreciate that I can attend Shoreline Community College and recognize that there are many who are unable to attend, or remain, in college. Community colleges in Washington state are not sufficiently funded by the Legislature, and therefore, much of the cost is shouldered by students who attend these institutions. Additionally, information about resources for students to overcome or navigate such challenges are not always easily identifiable, thus making access to such information a significant barrier. I spent a considerable amount of time doing research on the internet and was ultimately able to find the information that I needed, but it was a challenge that not everyone knows how to navigate. Due to that experience, I joined *Communities for Our Colleges* — a coalition that helps to advocate for college affordability while connecting students from marginalized populations with important resources to help make college more accessible.

The Office of Student Life at Shoreline Community College has made a tremendous difference in my personal, educational, and professional journeys. Getting involved on campus allowed me to establish relationships with staff and other students — key to my success. As student body president, I can engage in conversations about the student experience and perspective, which has helped to reaffirm my interest in educational policy. Through my job as a Public Policy Fellow at *Disability Rights Washington*, I’ve had the privilege to work with great mentors who have encouraged my social and emotional learning. Learning that has not only helped to make me a better professional, but also a better person.

The next step in my educational journey is to apply to and attend the venerable four-year university, the University of Washington. I hope to stay involved there in some facet of student leadership, ideally as a student member on their Board of Regents. Regardless of my role, I will continue to serve as an advocate for students to help those who are or have been in situations like mine so that they can access the necessary resources to achieve their dreams.

As I reflect on my experiences at Shoreline Community College, the best piece of advice I would give to other students is simply ... to reach out. I spent so long telling myself that college wasn’t going to work out for me, but I never actually talked to someone about it. I am proud of what I have accomplished through the life transforming opportunities I have experienced at Shoreline Community College — facilitating important discussions, coordinating engagement opportunities, empowering students to advocate for themselves. And I know that I am where I am today in part because the people at Shoreline genuinely care about students (like me) and are there to help each one of us to find our way. Everyone on campus that I have ever talked to has been on my side and has wanted me to succeed. Their doors are always open, you just need to take the first step to walk through it.
Shiann Reed
*Skagit Valley College*

My name is Shiann Reed, and I am on the path to greatness. I have overcome much adversity in my life and I will continue to do so. I am a single mother of a 1 year old and put my heart and soul into bettering my future, and his. I spend every day trying to climb out of the poverty I grew up in. It's not easy, but I can say wholeheartedly my future is on the up and up.

Two years ago, I was sitting in a prison cell. All I was then was DOC #405063. I finally hit my rock bottom. I had fallen deep into heroin addiction and no longer recognized myself nor did others. I dropped out of high school my senior year due to that addiction. I survived on the streets and many abusive relationships. Luckily, I had a wake-up call and started moving in the direction my life was meant to go. Ever since then, I have been off and running. I am working toward a degree in Substance Use Disorder Counseling, so I can share my strength and hope to others struggling. It is my passion to offer some light to people in their darkest times.

SVC has gone above and beyond to support its students. I have felt nothing but love throughout my time here. Not only does the college offer many programs aimed to create an inclusive environment, the staff here are some of the most loving people. The Breaking Free Club is a unique club offered within our school for people like me and is designed to help those who have been incarcerated know they have a place in education. We work with those in recovery and those coming out of jail by showing them that they are loved. Currently, we are trying to lobby our governor regarding changing laws about barriers people with a criminal background face.

My time as a student hasn’t been easy. Nothing good is ever easy but keeping the end in mind gives you the power to push through. Exactly one year ago, I was a victim of a road rage incident. I was badly injured in a car accident on the freeway and broke my neck among other injuries. I couldn’t care for myself or my baby for months. I had to withdraw from my classes. I could have left my education and found the excuse to quit, but quitting isn’t an option. I had been homeless pretty much all of my time here at SVC. I was living at a hotel and a shelter and struggling to find housing. Quitting wasn’t an option. Persevering through the hard times as a student just makes walking across that stage that much more meaningful.

I believe personal growth happens every day. I choose to learn and grow with each lesson in life and set that example for those around me. I am an active member in my church. As well as at our local domestic violence agency. We help those in crisis receive the resources they need and offer support. To my surprise I received the Soroptimist Live Your Dream Award from our local chapter. It was such an honor to be recognized by them for the work I do in our community. I also run my own small business out of my home.

My advice for those thinking about taking the leap into their education is, just jump. Don’t overthink it and just do it. Do it for you. Do it for your future. If you want to do something, don’t let fear win.
Tracy Abesamis  
South Puget Sound Community College

After the tragic and sudden death of my basketball coach during my senior year of high school, I did not have the season I intended to have. With no offers, I was certain I lost my chance to ever play college basketball. It was a dream of mine ever since I was young. It was a heartbreaking experience to have to walk away from a sport I devoted years of my life to, due to the lack of opportunity. However, one month before graduating high school, an old teammate told me about SPSCC’s women’s basketball program. It was my only offer and a chance to fulfill my dream of playing college basketball. However, this came with a cost. Being born and raised in Las Vegas, this meant I had to leave behind my home, friends, and family to take on this opportunity alone in Olympia, Washington. At 17 years old, this was as exciting as it was terrifying.

Learning my way through a new environment felt overwhelming, but I knew I was taking this opportunity to better myself. My team was my support system that helped me through times I was homesick and struggling mentally. They also kept me accountable in the classroom to ensure I was growing and succeeding as a student.

Halfway through my freshman year at SPSCC, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. This happened during basketball season, so I had to miss two games for my mother’s surgeries. This was a huge obstacle for me mentally. I missed multiple days of practice and struggled to complete my school work. There were times when I didn’t know if my mom would be okay and if I would have to quit the team and move back home. Communicating this with my coaches and professors, they supported me through this tough time, believed in me, and gave me all the help I needed as a student and person. I ultimately decided to stay and finish out the school year. By the grace of God, my mom was able to beat cancer. I then went on to finish winter quarter on the Vice President’s list and spring quarter on the President’s list.

There are so many life lessons I have learned in my two years here at SPSCC. I have grown and matured so much as a person in such a short amount of time. I owe a lot to my coaches; Darah Vining and Chantel Dixon, as well as my former coaches; Mike Moore and Kathy Kravitt-Smith. These people have changed my life forever. They all have accepted me for who I am, never gave up on me, and believed in me at times when I didn’t believe in myself. They have taught me so much about life; how to treat others, respond to adversity, make meaningful connections with others, and much more. They have prepared me for so much beyond SPSCC. I am forever grateful for their impact on my life and transforming it for the better.

In present day, I am a returning sophomore here at SPSCC with my Associates in Arts degree. I am returning for my third year to fulfill my 2nd year of playing eligibility due to COVID cancelling the 2020-2021 season. I am dual enrolling at SPSCC and Grand Canyon University to obtain a bachelor’s degree in Sports Business. If I could give advice to those who are unsure about their ability to attend a community college, it would be to believe in yourself and take chances. You’ll never know where it can lead you if you don’t try. If I were to call it quits on my dream after my senior year, I would not be in the position that I’m at today. Life moves so fast and can change in a blink of an eye. If you want something, go after it, work hard, and believe in yourself. The rest will take care of itself and fall into place!
Darryl Harris  
*South Seattle College*

As a young parent and Veteran transitioning from my military to civilian career, I was totally focused on working and providing for my family. As my children graduated high school, I wanted them to continue their education in college, so I worked a lot to support them and their higher education. After they graduated college, I decided it was my turn to gain more education. The importance of education has been passed down from my grandparents.

I was working at a Veterans Affairs hospital as an electrician in my mid-50s when I realized I wanted to shift my career into more of a leadership role in facilities management. To do this, I would have to gain more education and knowledge about various trades and building components, were my first thoughts.

I started exploring options, then reached out to Mrs. Hercules at South Seattle College to find out more about the Sustainable Building Science Technology (SBST) Bachelor of Applied Science program. This is when I met Steve Abercrombie, Vicky Hardy, and Alex Steele (faculty and staff in the program), and decided this was the right path for me. They have all been very encouraging and thoughtful about my success throughout my time in the program.

The most important thing that impacted me from taking a program with Steve, Alex, and Vicky was their connection to the human side of me in the way I was communicated to, and the time spent with me after hours to help me understand the materials. As a Veteran with disabilities, the efforts displayed by the staff were essential to my success. My PTSD gets in the way often while trying to study and concentrate. The challenge was, at first, to try and keep my learning style to myself. That changed as I began to trust faculty more.

This program was the beginning of my transformation, from being an electrician to becoming a manager. I needed to continue working full time while earning my bachelor’s degree, which meant long hours for my occupation and long hours for homework. Graduating from the program would not have happened if not for the encouragement and support of my family and staff of the SBST program. I also had to be vulnerable and ask for help of reasonable accommodations, which I received. I am proud of the relationships that I have built along the way with my peers and faculty.

When I graduated in 2021, I was even more encouraged to continue when I saw the excitement in the earlier mentioned staff and faculty members of the program. Having that support in your corner means a lot as you enter a new phase in your professional life.

Today, I am on special duty assignment with King County Metro as a Power Chief for the next year. My goal is to become a career status Power Chief, then to become a Superintendent of Power Distribution within the next year and a half. I have been encouraged to apply from a current superintendent.

My advice to other students would be, don’t be afraid to be vulnerable and communicate openly with your staff and faculty to let them know how you need help. Then trust that they have a genuine concern for your success. Don’t be afraid to stay open and ask a lot of questions. Use all resources available through student services, even if it means requesting reasonable accommodations. It is also never too late to start or continue your education for course work or degree study. There are people that care about your education. Believe it, try it, celebrate it.
Ilya Alekseev  
Spokane Community College

My name is Ilya Victorovich Alekseev I am 24 years old; I have a 7-year-old son, Kayden Alekseev. Before attending college, I was a high school dropout detailing RVs for minimum wage. My coworker once said, “at your age you have the world in your hands, and you’re smart enough to accomplish anything.” His words encouraged me, and many people supported me through my process of earning my GED®. At the time the money I was investing into the GED® tests was hard to give up ($150) knowing it can be used for my bills. However, that money was an investment into my future which changed my life.

After I got my GED®, I knew this was my key to college, and I no longer had to be jealous of my friends with a high school diploma. My father went to college at 35 years old and received his degree in nursing. During the beginning of my process our relationship was disconnected for two years. I wanted to be a nurse just like him, we are now best friends. I wanted to prove my negative thinking wrong, to see that I am no longer a failure of life. I failed my whole life and enough was enough, I deserve to earn my father's respect.

College was the time for me to collect all the fruit from the seeds I was planting through my life. Dr. Lori Hunt and Professor Carmen Green played a huge roll to my college success; first quarter of college I was wrapped up in fear and disbelief. I will never forget the moment when they told me that they did not see why I would not make it in college and get accepted into the nursing program; simply because I work very hard. Their words took my spirit to a whole new level of working HARD!!! They both spoke words of encouragement and the Universe allowed me to transform to the best version of myself.

The biggest barrier was negative thinking, I truly thought I did not have what it takes to succeed in college. My first few days of college I felt as if I was not good enough. Driving towards Spokane Community College I saw these huge signs that said, “You Belong Here!” This kept me coming back! Only later did I find out Dr. Hunt was the creator of the encouraging signs! This made me realize this all happened for a reason, and that I truly do belong at school no matter the trauma of my past. Moreover, after receiving my GED® paying for my son’s daycare until he started kindergarten was a barrier that made me put attending college away for a year.

But I never let the idea die, so when the right time aligned in the atmosphere, I was in for academic success. In order to keep the spark of attending college I stumbled up on listening to motivational speakers. My all-time favorite is Dr. Eric Thomas!

Next for me is graduation from SCC’s nursing program. I plan to move my son and I from our apartment into a house. My advice for people that are in disbelief of themselves becoming successful is to start believing in yourself even if it's for five minutes a day, believe it is possible. We are humans we can learn anything we put our minds to. Most of the time all it takes is encouragement from others, that is why positive interpersonal communications are so important.
Eliza Johnson  
Spokane Falls Community College

This winter I will graduate with an Associate of Biology transfer degree, and in fall of 2022, I will attend Washington State University’s School of Molecular Biosciences in junior standing in their genetics and cell biology program, on a path toward a graduate degree and career in genetics research. This will be my last year attending a community college, and this time I will leave proudly, with degree in hand and a plan for the future.

My family never supported me financially through school. Paying for my own necessities (including rent) meant working full time. Whenever I thought I had a flexible employment arrangement around my schooling, I was wrong. Twice I gave up on college to accept work that I would otherwise lose, which would lead to housing insecurity. I felt jealous of my friends who could live at home while attending university that their parents funded. I could barely afford to live on my own and attend community college. My father has been homeless or housing-insecure since I was a child; I need to succeed in my career to support him as he ages. My mother was unable to keep promises about paying for school or books. Beyond that, my mother is not my biggest cheerleader as I enter the field of medical science, since science generally does not align with her personal beliefs.

Two individuals working at Spokane Falls Community College have made a huge difference in my life. Michelle Pearson, PhD, generously allowed me to shadow her in the laboratory during the summer and is advising me on an independent study in mycology this fall. After attending her biology course online, Dr. Pearson offered me this opportunity. After a few training sessions we found we got along great and started planning an independent research project for fall. Dr. Pearson was also a non-traditional student and was able to identify my struggles and offer advice. Our research project is meant to get me up to speed on good biology lab techniques, so that when I enter WSU as a junior I will have better chances of joining a research laboratory. She has taught me about microscopy, including staining and photography techniques, about aseptic techniques like flashing or flaming with ethanol, demonstrated the process of autoclaving, and shared as much information as I could handle about mycology, biology and science parody music. Janae Carrothers is the Math Engineering Science Achievement (MESA) director at SFCC who has acted as a counselor and friend, and has helped me find scholarships, grants, research opportunities, and access to the resources MESA provides. By always being someone I can drop in and talk to, she’s helped me through a lot of stressful times by offering advice or just listening.

By helping get my books paid for and taking a personal interest in my graduation plan, Janae helped me in ways I wished my mother would have. As a strong female role model, Dr. Pearson has set a great example that I hope to follow in her academic achievement and passion for science. Their confidence in me means the world and has changed my life for the better. Neither have shown any doubts that I can earn a graduate degree and career in medical science.

I hope students entering community college know that the staff and professors are here to help you. Asking for help here always leads to a better situation. It’s been a new experience to have people really care about my success, and has helped me care about and believe in my own dreams more than ever before.
Candice Wheeler  
*Tacoma Community College*

A new mom, married, and a military spouse, at 17, I thought I would be able to continue my education via night school. I had to sacrifice my long sought after education to raise my family when my husband was deployed to Afghanistan as 9/11 happened right after finished Basic Training.

Having been in ROTC training for three years in high school in Washington, DC, I had hoped to join the military, go to college and climb the ranks. These dreams had to wait. After multiple military installations, my growing family and I were stationed in Washington state in 2006. Frequent moves created a barrier to being able to enroll in school.

In 2014, after being left a single mother, I was receiving TANF and looking for resources to obtain my high school diploma. Because I already had so many high school credits, I was able to complete the diploma within five months at Bates Technical College. I then decided to continue my education at TCC because of the LLLT and Paralegal Program. Although I wasn’t able to obtain the LLLT Certificate as it was being phased out, I thrived in TCC’s Paralegal Program. I was impressed by how it was clearly organized and easy to navigate.

Adam Meyers in the Workforce Education department and the ABE/ESL office were very knowledgeable and offered great advising. I quickly became a work study student in this department, which helped me navigate campus resources. I enjoyed providing support to other students, working on a clothing closet initiative, and being trained as a proxy tester.

My success at TCC was also due to being heavily involved on campus outside of classes particularly with the Black Student Union and the Office of Student Engagement. I assisted in coordinating personal hygiene drives and establishing the first annual Ebony Ball. I also participated in multiple Identity, Culture, and Community EDI Leadership Trainings and volunteered at collegewide events with the Muslim Student Association and the Puerto Rico Disaster Relief Fund.

Being at TCC gave me an outlet from the stressors in my personal life due to domestic violence. College provided me something to work towards, and TCC was a supportive environment where I found some footing despite the challenges life was throwing at me such as childcare; health; and finances. Being on campus I had uninterrupted time to work on my academic and personal growth in a place where I felt valued and useful.

I now work as the Coordinator of TCC’s Titan Food Pantry where I implement new strategies to reach more students. I am continuing to pursue my dream of a Bachelor of Arts in Law and Business at The Evergreen State College, Olympia. I am interested in family law and have professional goals including business in the real estate, dining, and fashion worlds. I continue to be active in my community and am gaining a lot of professional experience through volunteering with the Black Collective as interim chair of the Political Advocacy Committee, the Institute for Black Justice CHIMES program on Child Welfare, and Operation Home Front, earning a medal from the Infantry Battalion at JBLM. I am still a very proud single mother, now of seven, the youngest of whom was born during finals week. He is now four.
Kody Rooper  
Walla Walla Community College

I was very unsure about whether I could succeed at college. All I’d ever done was blue collar, factory work. And I struggled with school.

I failed most of my classes except PE during middle school and most of high school. In my sophomore year, my counselor told me I wouldn’t graduate with my class because I’d fallen so far behind. I dropped out of my social circle in order to pull myself together. I started reading philosophy books. I even got my first “A” when I was a senior; it was in my English class. I did graduate with my class.

There is a long list of barriers that I’ve confronted. Every day is one for growth and, at times, setbacks.

Born two months premature, I grew up in a house where drug use was prevalent. By the time I was four, both my parents were in prison. My brother and I went to live with a grandmother but we fought regularly, and I remember running away from home when I was still in the first grade.

I believed for a long time that my shortcomings were essentially out of my control. It was my destiny to fail. This culminated in struggles with school, relationships, emotions and cognitive functions.

Then, I got custody of my daughter when she was just four. My significant other also has two children, ages four and nine. I felt compelled to make something of my life. If not for me, then at least for them. I could metaphorically pass the torch of continuing education onto these minds who have yet to define their future.

After I visited Walla Walla Community College, I saw an opportunity and a situation where I could begin my journey toward some level of success. I first met with Claire Kirkpatrick with the TRIO Program. She believed in me, even when I didn’t believe in myself. In fact, just about every member of the faculty treated me like I was human, instead of someone who was just going to screw up. It was this compassion and degree of humanity that I believe allowed me to flourish in settings that had previously brought me adversity.

I decided that I wanted to become a nurse after talking with my significant other about her family member, who is in the medical field. Being in health care will make it possible for my life to make a difference — to be a positive impact on society and to set an example for my daughter.

Going through science and biology classes solidified my choice. I love how the human body works as well as the psychology of being human. I intend to finish my RN, get my BSN, and continue to a graduate-level program in nursing. Long-term, my goal is to become a certified nurse anesthetist.

The one piece of advice I would share for a student, a person unsure of making the jump to continuing education, or to anyone in general: Life is hard. We, as humans, tend to do our best to stand in our own way whenever possible. Look at your situation, step aside and open yourself up to myriad of possibilities that are available. Pick something — anything — because there are no failures worse than inaction.
Stacey Menley
Wenatchee Valley College

I am enrolled in my second year in the Business Computer Technology (BCT) program at Wenatchee Valley College and serving as the secretary for ASWVC. I plan to graduate with my Associate of Technical Science in BCT in summer 2022. The people at WVC who have contributed to my success are my advisor Professor Sompheng Batch, TRIO SSS and ASWVC Senate. Professor Batch’s class has taught me how to troubleshoot technology issues during COVID and prepared me to use Microsoft Office. The skills I am learning will make me a great asset to potential employers. Mrs. Batch has taught me to “work smarter, not harder” and encouraged me to be a lifelong learner. Sandra and Jenna from TRIO Program have become part of my support system. They have opened up discussions on transferring and program options. In student senate, I’m learning leadership skills, hard skills for the work environment and collaboration. I appreciate Erin and WVC for being inclusive and helping me find my place on campus.

I have overcome many barriers that could have interrupted my college aspirations. I lost family members and have had to face breast cancer on my own. My support system fell apart after my mother passed and I bounced around from state to state seeking purpose and seeking a support network. Last October, Zoey, my 154-pound Great Dane passed away. She was the love of my life, and my biggest support. It was a difficult loss for me while battling cancer and taking classes online.

Despite these challenges, I focused on my goals and decided not to let any barriers stop me from fulfilling my dreams. I have started working out at the student rec center and meeting with a physical therapist to improve my health. I had reconstructive breast surgery, and I created my support system so I won’t be alone.

My future goals include applying for the Cybersecurity program at Central Washington University to obtain a bachelor’s degree. I’ve met with an advisor from CWU for assistance with planning out the classes I need to complete my degree at WVC and transfer to CWU smoothly. I have laid a good academic foundation and will be able to obtain a bachelor’s degree within a year and a half. While at Central, I will complete the remaining cancer surgeries that lie ahead and then apply for an internship to get on-the-job training and experience. After completing my degree, I will be seeking a forensics and computer security position to protect my community from technological threats. I plan to move into a safe neighborhood and get another dog. I have always wanted to give my Great Dane a better life and a yard to play in, so I want to pursue that goal in her honor. I will always be an advocate for animals and start volunteer work at the Chelan County Humane Society this November. I donate the money that I would have spent to feed Zoey to the Human Society. My success will always be given back to my community and the animals and people that live in it. I want to thank my instructors, doctors, friends, and my community members for believing in me.

My advice for other students who are unsure about their ability to attend college would be to always believe in yourself. Through passion and determination, you will persevere. I encourage students to take advantage of resources in the community and on campus. These programs are available to help you navigate your way to success. Best wishes to all of you on your future endeavors.
Carlyn Finerty  
Whatcom Community College

When I decided to return to Whatcom Community College as an adult, I planned on enrolling in the nursing program to expand my skill set as a caregiver. I didn’t know at the time that this would be the official start of my journey to self-discovery and a better life. I grew up in a family that was heavily impacted by generational abuse, mental illness, and addiction; my parents and most of my relatives had to choose survival over their education. My view of the world and the people around me was based in fear. As a result, I had internalized deep feelings of shame and worthlessness. I felt like I didn’t have a purpose and believed that I didn’t deserve safety or success. Now, I hope to show other people facing similar circumstances that they can break away from the cycle of abuse and thrive again. We can use these experiences to help others and bring change.

My journey at WCC has been life-changing and transformative. I’m encouraged to make and embrace my mistakes through self-compassion. I’m pushed to think critically and challenge myself past my comfort zone. I’ve become part of a diverse community of people with unique experiences, strengths, and stories of their own. For the first time, I feel accepted. I finally feel safe to find my voice and identity.

With the support of my instructors, I sought out help for my mental health and started to recover from complex trauma and untreated mental illness. In the process, I found out that I’m neurodivergent and connected with Kerri Holferty for Access & Disability resources. Kerri helped me see my differences as strengths and supported me through some of the most difficult times of my life. She has inspired me to keep growing as an advocate and student. Kerri and the Access & Disability Committee provided me the space to speak up for change on campus, which motivated me to apply for a position in student government. I have the immense privilege of representing the student body this year as ASWCC President, and I will continue to fight for the representation of disability and neurodiversity in positions of leadership.

The connections that I have with my peers and mentors at WCC have provided me with the healthy role modeling and love that I needed to feel safe as my whole self. I don’t know where I would be now without the people who continue to support and believe in me, even when I sometimes didn’t believe in myself.

My biology and chemistry courses helped me realize how much I thrive in the academic environment. This ignited my desire to study the brain-based science behind the human experience and pursue a career in research. I believe we need to do more to nurture the dreams and uplift lived experiences of disabled and neurodivergent students across all intersections of identity. By removing barriers and reducing stigma around mental health and neurodiversity in the STEM field, we are expanding critical research that leads to further advancement in all areas of science. This impacts our collective capacity to take care of each other and the world around us.

I’m graduating from WCC this spring with my biology transfer degree and plan on transferring to WWU to pursue my studies in Biochemistry & Neuroscience. My goal is to earn a Ph.D. as a scientist and scholar. I am passionately dedicated to helping combat systemic inequity within the biomedical sciences. I hope to one day help build a research team led by women and non-binary scholars of diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.
Michael Schantz  
Yakima Valley College

I was compelled to attend Yakima Valley College due to the stellar reputation of the nursing program, the convenient location and affordability of tuition, and my ability to further my career while raising my children.

Many individuals have contributed to my success at YVC, including Shannon Hopkins in the English department, and Carol Milliron in the Nursing program. Shannon and Carol both have made a difference in my life as a student. Each have high expectations of their students and both were able to motivate myself and others through their unique and caring teaching styles to work hard, and to understand what we learned.

I have had a lifelong learning disability and have support through Disability Support Services. Carol was very willing to work with me and my disability, she noticed a few things on my exams and discussed them up with me. She encouraged me to go back to DSS and to get a few new accommodations she felt would benefit me on taking her and all future exams.

A major barrier I had to overcome to begin my Nursing journey at YVC was a medical condition that no longer let me stay in my original career field. I was in the maritime industry as a deckhand/engineer on tug boats, traveling when I became suddenly ill. I progressively got worse and I ended up having surgery to correct the medical issue. I recovered, but this injury made it so I couldn’t stay in the industry. When I lost the ability to stay in the maritime field, after an initial adjustment period, I decided to work toward a dream I had always had, to become a nurse.

My immediate plan is to finish my second year of nursing school by June 2022. After taking the NCLEX exam, I will become a Registered Nurse, pursue a position locally in the medical industry and apply to the WSU Nursing program to work toward a Bachelor of Science-Nursing. I want to gain as much knowledge as I can to have a great career and to become a great nurse to serve my community.

The one piece of advice I would share with prospective community college students is to have a plan in place first before starting community college-know what you want to become. Have a really good idea on what career you want to pursue and start taking courses in that field along with the Gen-Ed courses you have to complete for your degree. YVC’s amazing advisors can assist with what the requirements are, and even with choosing a field. An academic map can be a great tool, guiding you through your educational career. I would also like to advise new students to search for grants and scholarships, or if you’re working- talk to your company about tuition reimbursement.
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