

Student Support  
**(Re)defined**

Equitable  
Integrated  
Cost Effective

# What students say they need to succeed

Key themes from a study  
of student support



Kathy Booth, Darla Cooper,  
Kelley Karandjeff, Rogéair Purnell,  
Eva Schiorring and Terrence Willett

## Student Support (Re)defined

Student Support (Re)defined is a three-year study (2011-2014) funded by The Kresge Foundation where the RP Group will:

- Ask students what factors are most important to their success, paying special attention to what African Americans and Latinos cite as critical to their achievement (Year 1)
- Engage practitioners in assessing their own colleges' approach to support based on what students say they need to succeed and identifying opportunities for related institutional change; profile examples of colleges that have pursued coherent institutional change to improve student support (Year 2)
- Promote dialog and action at both the college and system levels about how to encourage institutional approaches that strategically improve student support and increase completion, particularly for historically underrepresented populations (Ongoing, focused in Year 3)

## Introduction

As California's community colleges (CCC) respond to the state's [Student Success Task Force](#) recommendations, many constituents are considering how student support can be implemented to improve completion. College practitioners, policymakers and advocacy groups are all exploring how to preserve delivery of existing supports, while at the same time, rethink ways to effectively engage more students with the assistance they need to succeed. To inform this dialog at both institutional and system levels, the RP Group **asked nearly 900 students from 13 California community colleges what *they* think supports their educational success, paying special attention to the factors African Americans and Latinos cite as important to their achievement.**

The RP Group performed this research in Year 1 of **Student Support (Re)defined**—a study designed to **understand how, in an environment of extreme scarcity, community colleges can deliver support both inside and outside the classroom to improve success for all students** (for more information, see sidebar at left). This brief highlights key themes and implications resulting from this exploration of student perspectives.

## How We Think about Student Support

### Student Perspectives Research Framework

In Year 1, we gathered students' feedback on what generally supports their educational progress as well as their perspectives on the relevance and importance of "six success factors" to their achievement. We derived these success factors based on a review of existing research on effective support practices and interviews with practitioners

and researchers. During this literature review, we paid particular attention to the outcomes different strategies and approaches intend to accomplish with students. By exploring what outcomes these practices aim to achieve—rather than simply documenting how structures like learning communities or student success courses are delivered—we intend to begin shifting the conversation away from how to replicate entire programs to how to feasibly achieve these student success factors at scale.

The six success factors are listed below in the order of importance according to students participating in our study:

- **Directed:** students have a goal and know how to achieve it
- **Focused:** students stay on track—keeping their eyes on the prize
- **Nurtured:** students feel somebody wants and helps them to succeed
- **Engaged:** students actively participate in class and extracurricular activities
- **Connected:** students feel like they are part of the college community
- **Valued:** students' skills, talents, abilities and experiences are recognized; they have opportunities to contribute on campus and feel their contributions are appreciated

A full definition of these factors can be found in the study's literature review brief at <http://www.rpgroup.org/content/research-framework>. The RP Group will also produce an inquiry guide in spring 2013 that will offer colleges a step-by-step process for using this six-factor framework to strategize institutional change. For project resources and information, visit: <http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/student-support>.

## How You Can Use This Brief

### Reader's Guide

This brief presents five key themes that (1) synthesize what students say about the six success factors and (2) share strategies that students suggest may improve their achievement. The RP Group designed this report for those interested in advancing student success, including community college leaders, faculty and instructional administrators, student services professionals, staff and students themselves. University practitioners, advocacy groups and policymakers may also benefit from these findings when considering policy and funding decisions that impact efforts to improve completion and/or the delivery of student support. We intend for this document to:

- Share high-level analysis of what the student perspectives research findings collectively mean
- Promote a dialog among community college leaders about the how these implications can inform change in policy and practice
- Lay the foundation for Year 2 research focused on engaging community college practitioners in discussions about how to feasibly deliver and scale supports that work

After a brief overview of the study's research design and methodology, we present and describe each of the five themes (including the findings that support the theme). We follow this section with a series of discussion questions intended to stimulate high-level practitioner reflection on how your college currently approaches support and to instigate exploration of related institutional strategies for advancing student success. **Readers can also find an extended report of our Year 1 research—including what students say about each of the six success factors and their suggestions for what the people serving in different roles at the colleges can do to improve support—at <http://www.rpgroup.org/content/reports-presentations-and-resources>.** This full report provides additional discussion questions for more in-depth reflection on and dialog about how these individual factors relate to your college's own delivery of student support.

## How We're Studying Student Support

### Research Design & Methodology

The RP Group purposefully designed Student Support (Re)defined to bring student perspectives to the growing body of research on how to increase completion through strategic support. To start, we engaged 13 colleges that represent the broad geographic and demographic diversity of the California community college system (see map,

*Participating Colleges*). Using a mixed-methods approach, the RP Group reached 785 students through phone surveys (current students, leavers and completers) and 102 students through focus groups at four of the colleges (current students only). Survey participants originated from a random sample that oversampled African Americans and Latinos from each college in order to ensure substantial representation from these two groups. The research team additionally linked quantitative data from the CCC Chancellor's Office to their survey responses—including students' demographics and academic history—in order to examine the results of different subpopulations.

For a full description of the study's methodology, including how the colleges were selected, criteria used to create the student sample and the data analyses performed, please visit: <http://www.rpgroup.org/content/research-framework>.



# What Students Say They Need to Succeed

## Key Themes & Strategies for Colleges

When speaking to students about their efforts to achieve their educational goals, five distinct themes emerged that can inform college initiatives to increase completion through targeted support. Collectively, these themes:

- Acknowledge students as key agents in their own educational success while highlighting that the motivation learners bring to college may not be enough to guarantee completion
- Speak directly to the need to teach students how to succeed
- Highlight the value of providing support that helps students experience multiple success factors
- Underscore the importance of comprehensive service delivery to particular populations
- Recognize the important role the entire college community plays in student success, but emphasize the need for faculty leadership

Implicit in these themes are strategies for colleges to consider when planning for support initiatives.

### 1 Colleges need to foster students' motivation.

This research suggests that relying on student motivation alone will not lead to improved completion. Certainly, students must be committed to setting and reaching their educational goals. Across the board, those participating in this research strongly recognized the role they play in their own success; students most frequently cited their own motivation and dedication to their education as a critical factor in their achievement. However, they also acknowledged that **while many students arrive to college motivated, their drive needs to be continuously stoked and augmented with additional support in order for success to be realized.** Moreover, participants reported that students who begin college without a clear motivation for attending may need extra help clarifying how postsecondary education may benefit them in the short and long term. Like those who arrive motivated, these students also need

support that will keep them focused and committed. Students reported that colleges can foster their motivation by:

- Helping them develop a clear educational plan and assisting them in monitoring their progress
- Making direct links between their educational experience and their goals for career mobility and a better life
- Engaging them with course content in meaningful ways
- Providing them with opportunities to connect with other students and instructors through both formal and informal means
- Fostering their sense of place and belonging on campus
- Facilitating their achievement of early and frequent successes

These findings also suggest that colleges may need to reflect on institutional policies, processes and practices and interactions with students that may inadvertently erode their motivation.

I formed a relationship with my counselor. She's just on me, like, checking up on me here and there. If you don't have a relationship with your counselor, you're not going to make it.

—Focus Group Participant

## 2 Colleges must teach students how to succeed in the postsecondary environment.

This research also indicates that many students do not always know how to translate their motivation into success in the postsecondary setting. Specifically, **students spoke of their struggles to understand what they needed to do to succeed in college.** For example, some focus group participants recalled having a hard time selecting a goal and establishing a plan to reach their desired end-point when they first enrolled. Moreover, others questioned how certain successful factors contributed to their achievement at all. For example, some asked how feeling connected had any impact on their success and questioned the value of extracurricular involvement. Survey findings echoed these focus group insights. Completers—those who earned a certificate or associate's degree—largely recognized all six success factors as critical. On the other hand, leavers—those no longer enrolled at their college—had yet to arrive at this place of appreciation, generally indicating that none of these factors was as important to their achievement as completers found them to be. **These findings imply that colleges should educate students about how to navigate their community college and**

### **thrive in this environment.**

Colleges can help learners understand both why and how to choose a goal and stay focused, develop connections, engage both inside and outside the classroom and make contributions on their campuses. Students suggested several ways colleges could help learners see the benefits of these activities:

- Require that first-time students enroll in a high-quality student success course
- Widely advertise services, supports and activities designed to facilitate success
- Have faculty inform students about assistance, resources and extracurriculars available both at the college and in the local community
- Encourage faculty and staff to share with students their own success stories and what makes them feel connected to the college

I have friends that did not take [a student success] class and they don't feel connected because they don't really know what's going on. They ask questions like, "What's happening at the student services center? Do we even have a transfer center? Do we even have a counseling center? Do we even have EOPS or DSPS?" They don't know because they never had an opportunity to sit in a class where they go over these services and what happens on campus.

—Focus Group Participant

## **3 Colleges need to structure support to ensure all “six success factors” are addressed.**

In addition to teaching students the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in higher education, this research suggests that colleges must also offer students the chance to experience all “six success factors”—directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected and valued—throughout their time with the institution. In both the survey and focus groups, **students described how different factors interacted with each other to contribute to their success.** Participants acknowledged that some learners might not require all of these supports, or that they may need to experience them in different combinations and intensities at varying points in time. Yet, **they also identified relationships between the factors and noted how experiencing one factor often led to realizing another, or how two factors were inextricably linked to each other.** In response to a question asking what makes them successful, most students did not just mention one factor, but usually two or three. Since students do not experience these factors in isolation, colleges



cannot expect to provide these factors to students in silos. These findings imply that colleges should consider solutions that can help students attain multiple factors at once. For example, students indicated that being asked for their feedback helped them feel engaged, valued and nurtured and that completing an education plan empowered them to develop direction and stay focused on their higher education experience. Moreover, colleges are likely to realize efficiencies when implementing strategies that promote many factors at the same time. This research indicates that colleges should:

- Ensure all students have the opportunity to experience each success factor
- Coordinate efforts to address specific success factors
- Build opportunities that intentionally integrate multiple success factors
- Tailor the combination of interventions based on the needs and strengths of the student population and stage in their educational journey

You have to know what you want and how to get it. After that, you're able to engage with extra-curricular activities and be connected to the college. It's a matter of having a solid base first.

—Focus Group Participant

## 4 Colleges need to provide comprehensive support to historically underserved students to prevent the equity gap from growing.

Survey responses from African-American, Latino and first-generation college students indicate that these groups would particularly benefit from experiencing comprehensive support that addresses their academic, financial, social and personal needs. When compared to other participants, these student groups were more likely to cite the lack of academic support, the absence of someone at the college who cared about their success and insufficient financial assistance as reasons for them not to continue their education. These students were also more likely to indicate that contributing on campus and receiving recognition for their contribution was important to their success. Given the specific needs identified by these student groups, this research suggests that **colleges should consider investing in structures that connect more African-American, Latino and first-generation learners to existing services.** In particular, African-American, Latino and first-generation students in this study highlighted the following as key to their success:

- Connecting with necessary and available financial assistance
- Receiving explicit insight about how the experiences provided and approaches taken by their instructors, programs and institutions contribute to their achievement
- Experiencing opportunities to connect with others, including peers and educators, both during and outside of class
- Receiving academic assistance outside of class through either formal tutoring and mentoring programs or informal study groups and peer networks
- Feeling their success mattered to others
- Having their family history and culture valued in the educational setting
- Taking part in their campus community and feeling recognized for their contributions

I feel that whenever someone wants me to succeed and is supportive of me, then I am motivated to work harder and be successful. The motivation they provide for me is vital to me pushing myself and being focused, engaged and directed towards success.

—Focus Group Participant

While it may not be feasible to expand existing special populations programs, **colleges must find a way to provide a significant proportion of these student groups with comprehensive support—at scale.** If they do not, the equity gap will likely continue to grow.

## 5 Everyone has a role to play in supporting student achievement, but faculty must take the lead.

Students cited many individuals who influenced their success ranging from counselors who helped them choose classes to staff who assisted them in physically and logistically navigating the college to family and friends who offered ongoing support and inspiration. Their responses highlight how everyone on a campus can affect their achievement. **These findings underscore the importance of colleges promoting a culture where all individuals across the institution understand their role in advancing students' success.** At the same time, **students most commonly recognized faculty as having the greatest potential impact on their educational journeys.** Time and again, students underscored the ways faculty taught, challenged and engaged them, both during and outside of class, and described how these efforts made a critical difference in helping them reach their goals. **This research indicates that because faculty are at the center of every student's educational experience, they have a significant opportunity**

**and ability to influence their students' success not just in, but beyond, their own classroom.** Instructors can support student achievement by finding ways to incorporate elements of the six success factors into course content and delivery. Faculty can also work with others across the college to integrate different types of support into the classroom and help connect students with any assistance they might need outside their coursework. Students specifically argued that faculty have a primary hand in helping them:

- Find direction by providing discipline-specific insight and advising
- Stay focused on their goals
- Develop a connection to and actively engage with their peers
- Link to resources and supports across their campus
- Feel that their success is important to their college
- Both contribute to and feel valued by their institutions

Clearly, students in this study are asking faculty to assume a larger role in their success both inside and outside the classroom. These findings imply that college administrators will need to work with instructors to establish the professional development, supports and incentives necessary to fulfill this expanded role.

A teacher's engaging when they're not just writing on a board or showing you a PowerPoint, but really talking to the class, when they make the eye contact and ask questions. Don't just give us the answer. Talk to the class. Engage people. Make them answer questions. Pick on somebody a little bit. Make a joke here and there. And, connect us to outside resources and extra tutoring. I have teachers who go the extra mile to create workshops, like my chemistry teacher. The hour before the class starts, she does a workshop and I think that's an extra thing that teachers can do [to help us be successful].

—Focus Group Participant

# What You Can Do with This Research

## Discussion Questions

Given current and anticipated future budget constraints and increased calls for reform, **now is the time for colleges to redefine support in a way that aligns with what students say they need.** The key themes generated by this study supply a framework for (1) reflecting on the outcomes colleges want for their students and (2) identifying how support can be strategically integrated across institutional divisions and into students' experience both inside and outside the classroom, from entry to exit. **We encourage colleges to use the results from this research when reimagining student support and working to advance the completion of *all* learners.** This brief offers many ideas for change—including actions that individuals and programs can take immediately to improve your students' achievement. That said, reaching more students with necessary assistance will likely require faculty and instructional administrators, student services professionals, staff and administrative leaders and students to collaboratively explore and develop new structures that lead to *systemic* change.

The following questions are designed to help initiate this reflection and planning. Several natural venues exist on campuses to hold these conversations including the president's cabinet; student success, basic skills and/or accreditation committees; the academic senate; joint meetings of instructional and student services deans and directors; and department and division meetings. The RP Group recommends that **the primary ingredient for productive discussions is the inclusion of people who interact with students at all points in their college journey** (from outreach to enrollment, through progress and completion). Moreover, involving students in these conversations can add critical perspectives about how your learners currently experience support and how prospective changes might impact their efforts to achieve their educational goals.

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- ▶ When thinking about the need to continuously foster students' motivation, when and where does your students' focus begin to fade? Based on what evidence? How do you currently intervene to stoke their motivation? What more can you do either individually or as an institution? Are there policies, processes or practices at the college and/or interactions the college has with students that may be inadvertently eroding students' motivation?
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▶ What policies and practices currently exist on your campus to ensure students know how to succeed in the postsecondary setting (e.g., mandatory orientation or student success courses)? What more could your college do to ensure all students have the skills to navigate and achieve at your institution?

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▶ In what ways do offices, programs and departments work together to ensure students have the opportunity to establish a goal, create a plan of action and continuously connect not only with needed resources but other students at the college? How might your college scale these efforts to reach more students?

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▶ Which populations on your campus need the most comprehensive support to persist and complete? When and where is support needed? Given what evidence? How does or how can your college strategically invest in supporting these student groups?

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▶ How does your college develop a culture where all people—faculty, staff and administrators—feel responsible for students’ success and are aware of how their individual work at the college links directly and/or indirectly to students’ achievement?

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▶ What policies and practices does your college embrace to empower classroom faculty as primary supporters of student success, in their classroom and beyond (e.g., faculty advising)? What support do classroom faculty need to more fully inhabit this role as the primary champion for students’ success?

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# Where We Go From Here

## Next Steps

We recognize that the Year 1 student perspectives research may raise many questions about how practitioners should act on these findings. The next phase of our research will focus on engaging college practitioners in a dialog to explore answers to some of these questions and collecting concrete examples of programmatic strategies designed to help students experience the six success factors at scale. To begin, we will develop an inquiry guide that helps practitioners (1) use the key themes and findings presented in this report to assess their own college's approach to support and (2) identify opportunities for feasible institutional reform. We will pilot this inquiry guide with colleges participating in the study and then make it widely available through various presentations and meetings with community college educators throughout the state. Next, given that many of the Year 1 key themes and findings imply the need for structural and systemic change, we will examine and profile examples of colleges both in California and across the nation that have pursued coherent, strategic institutional initiatives to improve student support and increase completion. The RP Group will likely release the results of the study's second phase in between fall 2013 and spring 2014. Readers can find the most current project results, resources and updates at: <http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/student-support>.



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The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) strengthens the ability of California community colleges to undertake high quality research, planning and assessments that improve evidence-based decision making, institutional effectiveness and success for all students.

### Student Support (Re)defined Project Team

Darla Cooper

Kelley Karandjeff

Eva Schiorring

Michelle Barton

Michael Large

Vinod Verma

Kathy Booth

Nathan Pellegrin

Terrence Willett

Priyadarshini Chaplot

Rogéair Purnell

Adore Davidson

Rob Johnstone

Diane Rodriguez-Kiino

Loann Solem



### For more information...

Contact Dr. Darla Cooper, Director of Research and Evaluation,  
[dcooper@rpgroup.org](mailto:dcooper@rpgroup.org).

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