

A SERIES OF FOUR  
BRIEFS EXAMINING THE  
SUPPORT NEEDS OF  
DIFFERENT COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE STUDENT  
POPULATIONS

# EQUITY IN DESIGN FOR HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS



## What We're Learning



Achieving  
the Dream™

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# Serving Today's Community College Students

Eleven years ago, Jenae Parker graduated from high school and went off to college. The child of a single mother who never graduated from college, Jenae arrived on campus with the same hope and passion for her future that millions of other students bring to their college journey each year. However, Jenae also brought with her enormous responsibilities. She recalls arriving on campus “without any money—not even a comforter for my bed.” And like many other college students across the country, Jenae resorted to working three low-paying jobs to help pay for the true cost of attending college, including housing, food, and transportation.



Jenae Parker and her daughter prior to testifying before the House Committee on Education and Labor about the burdensome cost of college

Ultimately, after accruing over \$20,000 of educational debt in her first year alone, Jenae dropped out after two years. A few years later, Jenae would return to college after going through a divorce. Shortly after she re-enrolled, her mother passed, and she became responsible for her two younger brothers in addition to her own child, Journey. Ultimately, the

financial pressures led her to drop out a second time. As she puts it,

*I was working hard for a better life for myself and my daughter, but the bills got so tight that more than once we found ourselves short on money for food. This was no simple matter of not having enough ramen to eat. We lacked sufficient money to have food to eat on a regular basis. Then, as if things could not get any worse, we were evicted from our home.<sup>1</sup>*

Jenae's story is not unusual. Each year, countless students abandon their studies, not because they couldn't succeed academically, but because the serious, often overlapping, financial and family challenges faced by students like her are difficult to overcome in a system of higher education that was not designed to provide access, resources, and supports for an increasingly diverse student body.

Community colleges today serve a more diverse student population than ever before. The average age of community college students is 28. Sixty-three percent

attend college part-time. Twenty-nine percent are the first in their family to go to college. And 59 percent receive some type of financial aid.<sup>2</sup> These students represent veterans, working parents, caregivers, career changers, and young and mature adults without the financial resources or family support to navigate college. Many of these students are the first in their families to attempt to earn a college education while struggling with food and housing insecurity. These students increasingly find themselves trying to find an entryway and foothold in careers that offer upward economic mobility while balancing the realities of life.

The complexity and scope of the challenges today's students face explain why community and technical colleges across the country are reexamining the student experience and the support services they provide. As open access institutions, community and technical colleges by their very existence open the doors of higher education and workforce training programs to students who may otherwise not have the opportunity to pursue. Yet, even as the beginnings of these colleges were rooted in the ideal of making education less exclusive, colleges are struggling with how to design a supportive learning environment that helps all student populations they serve—many of whom experience food and housing insecurity, along with financial and family challenges—to realize their goals.

Through our work with over 150 colleges, Achieving the Dream is deeply committed to supporting institutions in designing a holistic student supports approach that ensures all students receive what they need to achieve their goals.<sup>3</sup> We know from this work that colleges not prepared for the magnitude of the changes required to meet the needs

of an increasingly diverse student body can often end up struggling to make real progress. Common missteps include:

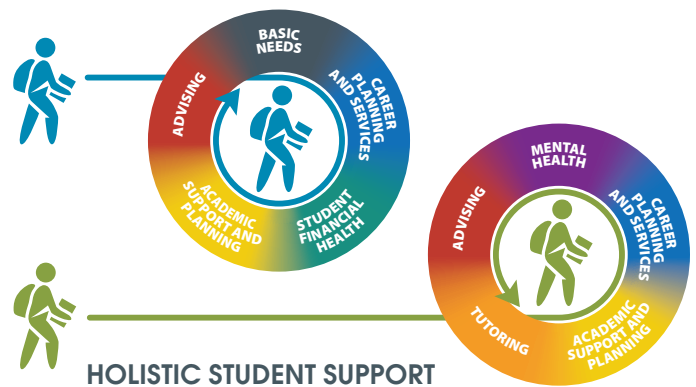
1. The institution rushes to “fix” student-facing services like advising without understanding the institutional systems, design, and processes. This results in plenty of activity, and work, but little impact on the student experience or outcomes.
2. The institution rushes to create programs and services to address equity without a thorough understanding of its unique student population and community service areas. This often results in boutique equity initiatives that do not address the systemic causes of inequity.
3. The institution attempts to mobilize faculty and staff around structures and processes without a common understanding of definitions and jargon and without a guiding vision for their work, resulting in minimal progress.

In Achieving the Dream's work with colleges across the country, we are often asked for the ideal model for delivering and scaling holistic student supports. The truth is, there is no one correct way to deliver holistic student supports. For some colleges, centrally locating myriad services in a physical “hub” is the way they choose to improve the experience for student. For other colleges, this is not possible due to limited space or the recognition that a hub isn't a solution that addresses the core problem or opportunity they are trying to address. The key is for colleges to be clear about what problem they are trying to solve and to intentionally design solutions that address the problem at its core, rather than deploying college resources and faculty and staff around fringe solutions.

# Core Design Principles

While each college may work to address differing problems, there are five core design principles identified through research into the practices across dozens of colleges and universities that, when thoughtfully and intentionally adopted, yield the most promising results. These five principles define the core components of a holistic approach to student supports and provide direction for the development of comprehensive and sustainable redesign efforts. These design principles are referred to as the SSIPP approach. In the SSIPP approach, student supports should be:

- 1. Sustained:** In an ideal experience, students are supported throughout their journey at an institution, particularly at key momentum points. Every student should not only have access to the support resources they need whether it's their first semester or their fourth, but policies and practices also should be designed to ensure students use those resources at critical times along their path.
- 2. Strategic:** Students are connected to the specific supports they need, when they need them, and in the delivery mode that is most effective and efficient. Students who arrive on campus well-equipped to achieve their goals with minimal support receive support in less resource-intensive ways, whereas students facing greater obstacles to achieving their goals experience more intensive support.
- 3. Integrated:** Students are seamlessly connected to information, resources, and services without being bounced around from one department to another. When they have a question, answers are consistent no matter who provides them; if students first ask an individual who does not know the answer, they get connected to the right person quickly and efficiently. Ultimately, support services function as interconnected tools rather than as standalone interventions and, when used together, create a strong support structure.
- 4. Proactive:** Students are connected to supports at the first sign of trouble, not after a situation builds to a crisis point. Students enter a college prepared to meet them where they are with a growth mindset for students and the institution itself. Every student's first semester is filled with the appropriate intensity of academic, career, and financial planning to get them off to a strong start with the end not only in mind, but visible to the student.



- 5. Personalized:** Every student receives the type and intensity of support appropriate to their unique strengths and needs. Students have at least one faculty or staff member on campus who they trust and who knows their name and goals. Through every interaction, students are addressed by their name, not their student identification number, and services are designed and delivered in a culturally responsive way.

These design principles serve as a compass that can help colleges reach true north, yet they do not provide explicit directions on how to operationalize the ideal student experience. And while a college may be committed to the idea of improving programs, processes, policies, and support structures to improve student success, they may not be clear on how to. The rest of this brief explores how to implement holistic student supports and offers three key strategies often overlooked in the search for solutions in student support redesign:

1. Move beyond the initiative mindset
2. Know your students
3. Practice facilitative leadership

# Move Beyond the Initiative Mindset

Supporting students holistically does not require colleges to bolt on new boutique services or programs to the plethora of support services already offered on college campuses. Instead, a holistic student supports approach should prompt colleges to reimagine the work they already do to support the success of their students and the role they play in the broader system that affects their students' lives.

Colleges like Amarillo College (Amarillo) in Texas are leading the way in this work. Amarillo's nationally lauded No Excuses Poverty Initiative has transformed the way the college sees its responsibility in supporting the students they serve. The college's "culture of caring" is an example of transformative change and a testament to a clear unifying purpose with college faculty, staff, and administrators committed to "loving the students we have." By focusing on understanding their college community and designing support systems that address the core issues that impede student success, Amarillo College has intentionally worked to ensure it is a college ready to meet the diverse needs of its student population. A key to Amarillo's success has been the integration of existing and new support services into a hub that offers students legal aid, personal counseling, childcare, career guidance, and food and housing supports, known as the Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC). Advisors and faculty have also become more relational in their approach, not afraid to talk to students about aspects of their life that might impact their studies and how the college can help.

Yet Amarillo is not taking on this herculean effort alone. Recognizing its role in a system that impacts its students' lives, Amarillo has set up partnerships with more than 60 local nonprofits to fully meet the needs of their students, many of whom experience intergenerational poverty. These partnerships help students pay utility bills when they're at risk of being disconnected and provide stable housing to students who experience homelessness or housing insecurity. Another partnership with the local university provides additional staffing for the ARC in the form of social work interns.

Columbus State Community College (CSCC) in Ohio, which is where Jenae ultimately completed her studies, also found it can do more to support its students when working with community partners. After the success of its Central Ohio Compact, a coalition of more than 50 school districts, universities, and employers that collaborate on



Amarillo College graduation ceremony

student success efforts, the college is creating a similar community advisory board to facilitate community responses to students' nonacademic barriers. This will build on existing partnerships—such as CSCC's partnership with a local nonprofit on the Columbus Scholar House effort that provides students with housing, financial management support, childcare, and other services—to address an even wider array of student needs at scale.

It's this systems approach to supporting students that truly makes the work at Amarillo and CSCC holistic. These and other colleges committed to a holistic approach understand that student success is not simply a measure of academic preparedness or personal commitment to achieving a goal, but the culmination of addressing the academic and non-academic needs of students through a systemic approach and deep commitment to making student success "whole college" work. After decades of student success initiatives that require high effort and have had less impact than anticipated, moving to a holistic student supports approach that addresses student needs seen by many as outside the scope of a college can seem daunting. A systems approach challenges the college to ask itself "what piece of this problem do we own that is within our power to address?" and then act to make changes within its sphere of influence and build partnerships beyond it to more fully meet student needs.

# Know your Students

Too often, students like Jenae fall through the cracks because they aren't connected to the services they need when they need them. There's a plethora of reasons why this happens, including:

- The student isn't aware of the service
- The student may not know how to access the service
- The student may be fearful or ashamed to access the service
- The service may not be scaled to serve enough students
- The student may have had a bad prior experience with the service
- The student may not see the value in the service

discussing data and programs related to student needs that were once considered outside the scope of a college's role, such as food or housing insecurity, whether they have parental or caregiver responsibilities, how many hours they work, or the intergenerational poverty or trauma many of their students face. Data that illuminates this level of information about its specific students is critical if a college wants to create a holistic student supports experience and address systemic inequities that result in differential student outcomes.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) recognized the importance of truly knowing its students early on in its student success efforts. Through one particular effort, focused on advising and student support redesign, the college aimed to "inspire students to fulfill their dreams by engaging in personalized success plans and completing their pathway credentials." To achieve this, knowing the students they serve in depth was paramount. So NWTC set about creating a simple set of questions that students would complete as part of their application to provide the college with critical information such as the reliability of the students' transportation, whether they are caring for children or providing care for a relative or friend, how many hours they work, and their comfort level using computers. NWTC used these data to connect students to proactive support services upon entry to the college by establishing clear protocols delineating internal responsibility and collaborative practice. The intake survey

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“The students really helped us identify what their experiences were on our campuses, and frankly, we were shocked and changed by their answers.”

**Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart,**  
**President, Amarillo College**

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What all these reasons have in common is that the college has greater control over them than is typically acknowledged. A student-ready college flips the old—yet persistent—statement “students just don't use the services we offer” and asks instead “how do our policies, practices, communications, and culture contribute to students not getting connected to our services?”


To answer this, and to design a support experience that embodies the SSIPP principles, colleges need to really get to know their students. The typical demographic data collected by colleges and used to disaggregate student outcomes is a good start but should never be considered enough. If race, ethnicity, Pell eligibility, and gender are all we look at, we lose the complexity of our students' lives, resulting in solutions that are designed for simplicity, not our students' reality.

More recently, college personnel, policymakers, and others in higher education are now more openly

not only provided a window into students' needs before the first day of classes, it also provided the college with data to inform internal workflows that resulted in integrated and responsive work practices.

The college also worked to improve the level of student readiness by setting up an early alert system and redesigning advising to be more personalized to address career and financial needs as well as a student's academics. Advisors, faculty, and other support staff raised alerts, made referrals, and shared praise or feedback with students via their early alert tool to ensure students were connected to relevant supports.

Similarly, at the beginning of its work, Amarillo recognized it didn't truly know what was standing in the way of their students succeeding and how to address those barriers. In the fall of 2011, Amarillo held a college-wide summit for all faculty and staff to analyze data on their students. From this came a realization that there was a contradiction in how they understood their own effectiveness—that poverty, not academics, was the most powerful barrier to student success. Faculty and staff went straight to their students to learn more about what most interfered with their progress. For a college that had up to that point only focused on their students' academics, it was somewhat surprising to see food, housing, transportation, childcare, and mental healthcare topping the list of obstacles that throw students off their path. "The students really helped us identify what their experiences were on our campuses, and frankly, we were shocked and changed by their answers," says Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart, president of Amarillo since 2014. To help students succeed, Lowery-Hart adds, "we had to come to terms with who they really were, not who we thought they were, or wished they were."





*I am the first one in my family to attend college.*

*To complete, I will overcome not having transportation.*

*I am a future forensic pathologist.*

*Mercedes Rivera*

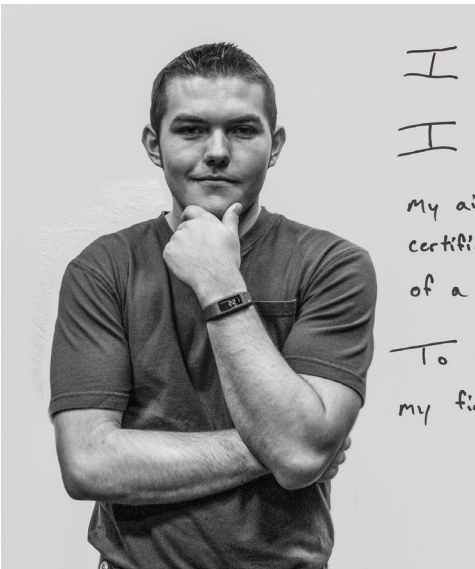



*I am an immigrant, 1st generation college student.*

*To complete, I will overcome all fears and negative self confidence that will prevent me from achieving my dreams. I will push, dodge, and jump as many times as necessary to prevent myself from completing college and making my parents, but most important, MYSELF proud.*

*I am a future Physical Therapist.*

*Lizeth Herrera*




*I am a self-sufficient student.*

*I am a future Aircraft Mechanic.*

*My airframe + powerplant mechanic certificates and achieve my dream of a career in aviation.*

*To complete, I will overcome my financial struggles to obtain*

*Ty Adams*



Amarillo College student profiles advertising campaign.

# Practice Facilitative Leadership

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“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.”

John Maxwell, author

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Holistic student supports redesign is a people-driven, adaptive change effort that demands effective leadership at all levels of the institution. Leaders with influence are just as important for institution-wide changes to structures, process, and culture as leaders with formal authority.

Yet the leadership approach of those with the most authority sets the tone and culture that will define the success, or lack thereof, of the redesign. Too often, senior leadership sees its role as setting the vision and then moving out of the way for others to take the work forward. This ‘blessing of the fleet’ leadership approach is typically well-intentioned, with leaders wanting to recognize the expertise of their faculty and staff. However, in practice, it often leads to student success college teams not having the resources, skills, or formal authority to make decisions that address the root cause of the issues they are trying to address.

Facilitative leadership is a practical and effective approach to leading transformative change that embraces the hierarchy built in to the college organizational structure while leveraging the power that lives at the top to create the conditions that enable others to contribute their own skills and qualities to achieve their shared vision. Facilitative leadership requires a few core elements to be effective:<sup>4</sup>

- **Trust.** Trust must permeate the culture of the college—trust of senior leadership, trust in peers, trust of one’s immediate manager, and trust of those who will make the vision a reality on the ground.
- **Active listening skills.** This includes the ability to hear what others are saying with humility, knowing that your biases and experiences mean you may never truly understand the experience and perspective of others while still recognizing that they are valid.
- **A culture of inquiry.** The ability to craft meaningful questions that get to the heart of the matter at hand without leading the responder towards a certain response is essential to inviting people into the vision and work rather than imposing a decision.
- **Clear, fair decision-making processes.** Trust can be built through the existence of processes for decision-making that are considered clear and fair. A fair process encourages faculty and staff to step into leadership positions in the work. It invites and values the expertise and perspectives of all stakeholders, particularly those most affected by the change. And it focuses on the ‘why’ behind any decisions made and ensures all stakeholders know what is expected from the work.

At its best, facilitative leadership lays out a compelling vision and empowers everyone on campus to own their role in making





Amarillo College graduation ceremony

that vision a reality for students. President Lowery-Hart’s leadership at Amarillo inspires personnel across the college to make decisions in the best interests of students. An example he shares often is of a night custodian, Robert Adams, who allowed students to seek shelter in a college building while he was cleaning it and worked with the ARC to provide these students with food. All of this was done, according to Lowery-Hart, without seeking permission “because he just knew he was empowered to love students.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, at NWTC, President H. Jeffrey Rafn has created a culture that embraces all aspects of facilitative leadership. He consistently and deftly communicates the ‘why’ behind the decisions made towards a holistic student supports approach and how it connects to the core mission of a college—to

educate, elevate, and empower students to contribute to a thriving community. Yet facilitative leadership is evident across the college at NWTC, just as it is at Amarillo. It’s evident in the way the college implements its redesign work. For example, the intake survey NWTC launched in 2016 has been through multiple iterations as the team works to enhance it every semester with feedback from students as well as the faculty and staff who use the data. Another example can be found in the way the college is working to reimagine how it communicates with students after flipping the common refrain “students don’t read their emails”, taking ownership over what they can control by examining the sheer volume of emails, the quality of the message, and the methods used for communicating with students.



The front door of Amarillo College’s ARC facility

# Conclusion

Moving towards a holistic student supports approach is more than just the right thing to do for students. It also is critical if institutions are to meet both their present-day student success objectives and their historic role as open-access institutions that effectively serve all students. When Amarillo College joined Achieving the Dream in 2011, its three-year graduation rate was 13 percent; today it is 22 percent. Amarillo College has made equity gains in three-year graduation rates as well. Between cohort years 2011 and 2015, three-year graduation rates for Black/African American students moved from 4 percent to 20 percent, Hispanic student rates moved from 15 percent to 22 percent, and first-generation student rates went from 12 percent to 21 percent.

Similarly, Jenae's alma mater, CSCC, has seen significant improvement in its student outcomes metrics thanks to its own extensive work towards holistic student supports. The college has seen the biggest gains in semester-to-semester retention of students who participate in three or more of their success initiatives among Black students. From fall 2014 to spring 2015, the retention rate was 68 percent for Black students and 83 percent for White students. Three years later, the rates were, respectively, 81 percent and 84 percent, and a 15 percentage-point gap had narrowed to 3 points. Furthermore, its IPEDS graduation rate have increased more than 2.5 times the 2010-11 rate, from 8 percent to 21 percent.

Eleven years after first stepping onto a college campus, Jenae is now one of CSCC's success stories. After four years in the workforce caring for her brothers and daughter, Jenae went back to CSCC one last time to achieve her career goals and improve the prospects for her and

her daughter. This time, Jenae decided to attend part-time so she could continue to work multiple jobs to keep up with the ever-mounting bills. In testimony to the House Committee on Education and Labor in 2019, Jenae acknowledged that it can be easy to internalize the conditions so many students face:

*I remember thinking that these problems were my fault. I thought this was happening because I had made bad choices or was not trying hard enough. But now I know that as many as 50 percent of college students are also dealing with food and housing insecurity. Even students attending elite private colleges are facing these challenges.<sup>6</sup> More than 1 in 10 students are homeless.<sup>7</sup> Are we all just not cut out for college? Have we all done something wrong?*

When asked by a member of Congress if the challenges she and other community college students face stem in part from not understanding the value of money and treating it like "Monopoly money,"

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“Columbus State Community College helped me realize that I could make it. In my darkest hour, I found my way to a Jobs and Family Representative on campus and she helped me get assistance with childcare by enrolling me in the Title 20 program, a subsidized child care program that helps low income families pay their childcare fees. She also helped me, right there on campus in between classes, to complete the application for SNAP (food stamps).”<sup>8</sup>

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Jenae clearly and concisely laid out just how critical CSCC’s nonacademic supporters were to her ability to complete her degree during her third attempt at college:

*Columbus State Community College helped me realize that I could make it. In my darkest hour, I found my way to a Jobs and Family Representative on campus and she helped me get assistance with childcare by enrolling me in the Title 20 program, a subsidized child care program that helps low income families pay their childcare fees. She also helped me, right there on campus in between classes, to complete the application for SNAP (food stamps).<sup>8</sup> She also helped me sign up for medical insurance. TRIO Student Support Services also connected me to other resources, including Scholarship Opportunities for Success, a local organization that helps “women of low income with financial aid for education.” Fortunately, I also found housing at the Columbus Scholar House. Scholar House is a unique model of providing housing for lower income college students with children. Thanks to a partnership between area colleges and universities, social services agencies, and the Columbus*

*Metropolitan Housing Authority it helped me with affordable housing and other supportive services, including financial literacy coaching and a mentorship program for my daughter.*

Holistic student supports ensure that every student, like Jenae, gets access to the support they need to achieve their dream. Doing so requires more than offering a wide menu of student programs and services. It requires that colleges operate with an intentional student-centered design that allows for the maximization of limited resources in support of student success and equity at scale. The numbers of students facing significant out-of-classroom challenges like Jenae, who told Congress she was “taught to survive” before attending college, are growing. Addressing these needs in new ways will be critical if community colleges are to live up to their historical mission as open-access institutions committed to helping all students succeed.

*Other briefs in this series examine how colleges are supporting the success of other student populations that have been historically underserved by higher education, including transitioning and part-time students, and student mothers.*

## Endnotes

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