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Research • Planning • Professional Development  
for California Community Colleges

# Cuyamaca College

## Equity Focus Groups:

Perspectives of Students, Faculty, and Staff

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# Executive Summary

In spring 2017, Cuyamaca College engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of focus groups on the topic of equity with students, faculty, and staff at the college. A total of 12 focus groups, which included 57 student and 11 faculty and staff participants, were conducted. This research study aimed to gather information to increase the college's understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Cuyamaca students, faculty, and staff regarding matters related to equity in general and the college's efforts to close equity gaps. Topics discussed within these focus groups included a discussion of the Cuyamaca culture, the challenges participants face and how students and Cuyamaca address those challenges, factors that motivate students to succeed, and recommendations to the college.

Overall, key themes that cut across focus groups include a **generally positive experience of student life on the Cuyamaca campus and its appreciation of the student, faculty, and staff diversity**. However, while most students expressed this sentiment in terms of the overall campus culture, **several participants representing students from underserved populations described uncomfortable interactions with faculty where they felt discriminated against or that their instructors lacked empathy and an understanding of their background and the challenges they face**. Students across focus groups also described **financial challenges that manifested for students as struggling to manage the work-life balance**, and were mainly compounded by transportation issues and the high cost of textbooks. Further, first-generation student participants as well as students from particular underrepresented racial minority backgrounds expressed how **family and cultural expectations impact their educational experience**.

When asked what drives them to succeed, student participants pointed to their **desire to overcome negative stereotypes as well as being motivated by their family**. Students' perspectives on support services focused around **wanting Cuyamaca to provide a more concerted effort in connecting students to resources**. The majority of the student focus group discussions of support services revolved around counseling and drawing a **distinction between the strong and reliable relationship students have with counselors in specific program areas compared to the unreliable and inconsistent information and support they received from general counselors**. Lastly, across all student focus groups, participants described interactions with two types of faculty. While students stated that **most of their instructors are engaged and understanding, student participants were able to draw on experiences with instructors who did not practice effective teaching habits and/or did not seem to have a command of the material**.

To address challenges reported by student, faculty, and staff participants, we offer a set of recommendations that align with the RP Group Student Support (Re)defined six success factors: directed, focused, engaged, connected, nurtured, and valued. Firstly, Cuyamaca may consider **scaling-up and institutionalizing what works within programs such as FYE and EOPS to ensure that all students are properly directed and focused**. Further, to ensure students receive consistent information and support with their counselors, **we recommend Cuyamaca explore assigning counselors for every student based on specific academic programs**. Efforts must also be made to determine how to help all students, we therefore recommend that **the college**

**clearly and broadly communicate available resources at Cuyamaca to ensure all students know where to go for support and are connected to available programs and services and find opportunities to engage with the college.**

Students consistently described facing a financial burden of required textbooks that were often not utilized effectively by their instructors, to address this concern, the college needs to **inform faculty about the impact of their textbook decisions, and encourage them to investigate how their decisions affect students.** Relatedly, **Cuyamaca needs to find additional ways to help students afford their books.** Further, students described negative interactions with faculty/staff who lack cultural sensitivity, and therefore make students feel misunderstood and undervalued. The college would benefit from providing **opportunities for faculty/staff to engage in cultural sensitivity training designed to increase empathy and understanding of how to support these students.**

While Student Support (Re)defined was a student-focused investigation, we have found that the success factors apply to faculty and staff as well. One stressor underlying the themes emerging from the focus groups with Cuyamaca personnel was the sense that **the college provides its students with an engaging and nurturing environment, but that this environment does not necessarily exist for Cuyamaca faculty/staff.** The college needs to **recognize the instrumental role faculty and staff play in supporting equitable student success and provide personnel with the resources to feel valued, nurtured, engaged, and connected** at Cuyamaca. In order for students to feel supported both academically and socially, **the college must promote a culture in which all faculty, staff, and administrators feel a shared responsibility for student success.** To accomplish this goal, the college needs to **provide professional development and assistance that enables personnel at all levels and in all roles to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support students,** as well as to continually practice these new skills. To that same end, we recommend that Cuyamaca provide a **robust new year-long faculty orientation that includes a teaching academy as well as professional development that is specifically designed to help enhance equity awareness and cultural sensitivity for Cuyamaca's disproportionately-impacted groups.**

Lastly, student, faculty, and staff participants expressed an appreciation for being provided the opportunity to speak. These focus groups thus marked an important beginning for making student, faculty, and staff perspectives more visible at Cuyamaca College, and we recommend the college **regularly conduct focus groups to gather their points of view.** Further understanding these experiences could help evolve the campus culture into one that effectively promotes equitable student success.

# Introduction

## Project Overview

In spring 2017, Cuyamaca College engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of focus groups on the topic of equity with students, faculty, and staff at the college. This research study aimed to gather information to increase the college's understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Cuyamaca students, faculty, and staff regarding matters related to equity in general and the college's efforts to close equity gaps.

In May 2017, a total of 12 focus groups were conducted with students, faculty, and staff from specific groups who were likely to be particularly impacted by equity issues and/or be in a strong position to offer insight into equity-related challenges at Cuyamaca. In total, 57 students and 11 faculty and staff members participated in this endeavor.

## In This Report

This comprehensive undertaking enabled the RP Group to collect a wide range of feedback addressing numerous topics across an extremely diverse group of Cuyamaca students, faculty, and staff. A number of consistent themes emerged that spanned a significant portion, if not majority, of the focus groups, while some of topics also arose that were specific to particular groups of students or college personnel.

This report is organized as follows. The first three sections describe the overall methodology in conducting these focus groups. Section 1 outlines the key research objectives used to learn about students' experiences and briefly discusses how college administrators, faculty, and staff can meaningfully interpret the findings from the focus groups. Section 2 presents an overview of the outreach and recruitment process implemented by Cuyamaca's Instructional Effectiveness, Success, and Equity Office to engage students, faculty, and staff in the focus groups. Section 3 describes the characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups.

The next two sections of this report explore the key themes that emerged across the 12 focus groups and students', faculty's, and staff's perspectives on these themes are shared in their own words. Specifically, Section 4 summarizes the key themes emerging across the focus groups in terms of the perceived Cuyamaca culture, the challenges its students face, how Cuyamaca students go about addressing those challenges, and suggestions from participants on what Cuyamaca can do to improve the educational experiences for all students. Each theme is summarized and a selection of quotes from focus group participants are offered to provide additional insights.

Section 5 then highlights challenges specific to each targeted student group followed by Section 6, which discusses the challenges emerging from the faculty/staff focus groups. Next, Section 7 offers a set of recommendations regarding how Cuyamaca might address the challenges and difficulties identified by focus group participants on the level of institutional culture, policy, and practice. These recommendations are directed by the six success factors discovered through the

RP Group's Student Support (Re)defined project. While Student Support (Re)defined was a student-focused investigation, in work subsequent to this study, it was found that these success factors are not limited to reaching students, but can apply to faculty and staff as well. Lastly, the report concludes in Section 8 by offering possible next steps for college leadership to consider as it continues its work to improve the experiences of students, faculty, and staff.

## Section 1: Areas of Inquiry

### Research Objectives

Student focus groups followed a protocol focusing on these primary topics:

- (1) How they would describe the culture at Cuyamaca to someone who is unfamiliar with the college, and how might the culture differ for a particular group of students at the college,
- (2) Challenges the students face at Cuyamaca, particularly with respect to their demographic status,
- (3) Approaches employed by the students to address these challenges,
- (4) Assistance they have received at the college to help overcome these challenges, and
- (5) Students' recommendations to the college on how to address equity issues and/or improve the overall educational experience at the institution.

The first set of focus group questions for the Cuyamaca faculty and staff followed a similar protocol to the student focus groups though it included questions that sought to obtain both participants' perspective as a staff or faculty member as well as their perceptions about the experiences of Cuyamaca students. The following topics were primarily discussed in the faculty and staff focus groups:

- (1) How they would describe the culture at Cuyamaca to someone who is thinking about applying for a faculty/staff position at the college, and what it is like for faculty/ staff at the college.
- (2) How they would describe the culture at Cuyamaca to someone who is thinking about coming to the college as a student, and what is it like for students at the college.
- (3) Challenges faculty/staff face at the college.
- (4) What they perceive to be the primary challenges students face, and if particular groups have unique challenges.
- (5) What they perceive as helping students overcome challenges.
- (6) Faculty/staff 's recommendations to the college made by in order to better serve students and/or assist faculty/staff in their work.

The second set of focus group questions for the Cuyamaca faculty and staff were designed to understand faculty's and staff's awareness of equity within an educational context and how equity is being addressed at Cuyamaca. However, the time allotted for these focus groups did not

afford enough opportunity to address each question related to equity. Participants were therefore provided with all the questions upfront and then asked to respond to any specific question(s) or discuss what the college's equity efforts were in general. The equity topics included:

- (7) Their definition of equity within an educational context.
- (8) What equity looks like at Cuyamaca, and if there is a shared vision for equity at the college.
- (9) What faculty's/staff's responsibilities are when it comes to the college's efforts to close equity gaps.
- (10) What has worked well and what can be improved in regards to the college's equity efforts.
- (11) Faculty/staff recommendations to the college on how to increase awareness about the college's equity efforts and involvement in these efforts.

Transcripts from each focus group were collected and analyzed for emerging themes by RP Group researchers.

## Interpreting Focus Group Findings

These focus groups are an important tool that will provide Cuyamaca with direct feedback from students, faculty, and staff regarding their personal experiences at the college. Listening to the voices of the stakeholders from each of the groups targeted for this project is essential to developing a true understanding of how to best promote equitable student success.

At the same time, it is critical not to inflate these focus group findings into a generalization about Cuyamaca students, faculty, and staff. Firstly, 57 students and a mere 11 faculty and staff members participated in focus groups—in comparison to the total number of students, faculty, and staff at Cuyamaca, this sample size is small. In addition, individuals who agree to join focus groups are a self-selected group that often comprises of people who are motivated, interested, and/or driven to provide feedback about their experiences. While their perspective is both important and valuable, one cannot ignore the fact that the perspective of all Cuyamaca stakeholders from these invited groups who chose *not* to participate remains absent. The limitation arising from self-selection may be particularly the case for these focus groups given that the majority of students who agreed to participate were recruited through the First Year Experience (FYE) program, student government, and other clubs and organizations on campus (see Participant Recruitment Process). These students therefore may be more engaged and well-resourced compared to other Cuyamaca students. Similarly, the classified staff who participated in the focus group noted that they were currently serving on various committees and in other leadership roles. These participants, then, may also reflect perceptions of more engaged classified staff members and thus will not reflect the perception of all classified staff at Cuyamaca.

Finally, the nature of focus groups themselves limits the degree to which findings can be generalized across an entire population. While the focus groups were structured around a specific set of questions, the discussions can take different directions based on the individuals who

participated. Furthermore, group dynamics and group composition can also influence what the participants say, or do not say, during discussions.

As such, it is important to take the findings in this report seriously while simultaneously keeping in mind that they represent only a small slice of how students, faculty, and staff perceive the culture at Cuyamaca. The more feedback from these constituencies is regularly solicited through focus groups or other forums, the more complete the picture that emerges will be, empowering the college to develop strategies and make decisions that best foster a positive and effective culture at Cuyamaca, and provides staff and faculty the opportunity to effectively assist in enabling each and every student to thrive.

## Section 2: Participant Recruitment Process

Cuyamaca's Instructional Effectiveness, Success, and Equity Office led the participant recruitment process, and provided the following description.

### Student Recruitment

The Student Success and Equity Committee Tri-Chairs identified target populations of students based on the College's Student Equity Plan. These populations included the following student groups:

- African-American students
- Chaldean students
- Latino students
- Native American students
- Pacific Islander students
- First-generation college students
- Non-first-generation college students
- Students with disabilities
- Student veterans
- Former foster youth

Announcements regarding the focus group project were made at various meetings on the campus, and a notification (see Appendix) was sent to the campus-wide email distribution list describing the focus group project and requesting faculty, staff, and administrator support in recruiting students for focus group participation.

In addition, the Student Success and Equity Committee Tri-Chairs worked with key points of contact for each of the above student populations to recruit students for focus group participation. Key points of contact for focus group recruitment included:

- A DSPS counselor recruited students with disabilities to participate in the project.
- An Arabic Studies instructor recruited Chaldean students to participate in the project.
- Staff in the College's first-year experience program, the Pathway Academy, recruited students to participate in the Latino and first-generation student focus groups.

- Native American students were recruited for participation by the Student Affairs Office staff and Native American Student Club advisor.
- Pacific Islander students were recruited to participate by the Student Affairs Office staff.
- Lastly, former foster youth were recruited by the College’s Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Education Support (CAFYES) program coordinator.

Students (or their recruitment point of contact) were asked to register for focus groups via an online registration form. It should be noted that there was difficulty in recruiting non-first generation college students. For this focus group, College staff recruited students directly from the Student Center leading up to the focus group scheduled time.

Students were informed through their point of contact and via the online registration form that participation in the project was voluntary and that they would be provided with refreshments and a \$10 gift card to campus dining services as a thank you for their participation in the project.

## Faculty Recruitment

College faculty were notified about the focus group project via announcements in various meetings on campus and through a campus-wide email announcement (see Appendix). A Student Success and Equity Committee Tri-Chair contacted each academic department chair to request faculty participation in the focus group project. Furthermore, flyers were sent to the academic senate president for distribution to full-time and part-time faculty. Faculty were informed they would be provided with refreshments during the focus group.

## Classified Staff Recruitment

As with faculty, classified staff were notified about the project via a campus-wide email announcement. In addition, the Classified Senate recruited staff for the focus groups. Classified staff were informed they would be provided with refreshments during the focus group.

# Section 3: Participant Characteristics

The nine student focus groups included 57 participants comprised of 27 females and 30 males, and were grouped<sup>1</sup> per the following:

- African-American students (six participants)
- Chaldean students (11 participants)
- Latino students (seven participants)
- Native American, Pacific Islander, and/or Filipino students (seven participants)<sup>2</sup>
- Students with disabilities (five participants)

<sup>1</sup> Student racial/ethnic backgrounds were self-reported during the focus groups.

<sup>2</sup> Based on participatory observation and comments shared by students, the Native American and Pacific Islander focus group was comprised of all Pacific Islander students.

- First-generation students (six participants)
- Non-first generation students (four participants)
- Former foster youth students (four participants)
- Veterans (seven participants)

The majority of student focus group participants had been attending Cuyamaca between one to six semesters (or three years). The only exception were participants in the students with disabilities group who had been enrolled at Cuyamaca for at least four years. Further, among the veterans, several students had already transferred, but were still at Cuyamaca through the Veterans Affairs work-study program. While a number of participants described having to work part-time, several of the students work on campus.<sup>3</sup> Most of the participants stated a transfer goal, however, among the Chaldean student population more participants expressed a goal of obtaining a job upon graduating from Cuyamaca. Lastly, students shared a broad range of career interests and were pursuing majors such as accounting, American Sign Language, behavioral science, bioengineering, biology, biological sciences, building design, business administration, child development, criminal justice, engineering, environmental health and safety, graphic design, information systems management, kinesiology, marine biology, nursing, paralegal students, political science, psychology, social work, sociology, and water and wastewater technology.

The three faculty/staff focus groups included 11 participants comprised of seven females and four males, and identified themselves as:

- Classified staff (five participants)
- Adjunct faculty (two participants)
- Full-time faculty (four participants)

The faculty/staff focus group participants represented a wide range of time employed at Cuyamaca from one year to over 25 years though several described short tenures at Cuyamaca relative to the overall number of years working in the community college system. The classified staff focus group included participants from student services while the adjunct and full-time faculty participants taught in a number of academic divisions such as Liberal Arts; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM); Business, and Professional Studies. . Several participants identified their involvement in Cuyamaca from the classified senate, adjunct faculty union, and college committees. Lastly, a handful of participants also noted that they had worked at the college prior to their current positions either as student workers or hourly employees, or were able to transition from adjunct to full-time faculty.

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<sup>3</sup> Students' employment status is an approximation based on comments shared by students during the focus groups.

## Section 4: Overarching Themes across Focus Groups

### Student Life on the Cuyamaca Campus and Experiencing the Campus Culture

All the focus groups that were conducted discussed to some degree participants' perceptions of the college's culture, with students, faculty, and staff each offering their own perspective. The discussions emerging across nearly all focus groups and a significant proportion of participants were positive in describing the Cuyamaca culture. Notably, Cuyamaca student, faculty, and staff participants commented on Cuyamaca's campus setting in terms of its natural beauty and small community feel, and described a deep appreciation of the diversity in the college's student and faculty/staff population.

However, while the campus seems to embrace its diverse population and offers several cultural events on campus, students from historically-underserved populations commented on situations where they felt unwelcomed and discriminated against in class and in some interactions with their faculty. Student participants also discussed the need for greater student outreach and engagement, while similarly, faculty/staff participants commented on the overall lack of involvement among their colleagues.

All these issues play a direct and indirect role in how students experience life and the campus culture at Cuyamaca. For one, students' interactions in the classroom with their instructors and outside the classroom with their peers and staff, directly impacts whether students feel embraced or neglected by the college. Secondly, how faculty and staff experience work life at Cuyamaca influences how effective they are in serving and supporting students, and therefore, indirectly affects students' likelihood of success. The Campus Setting

Focus group participants described Cuyamaca's campus—especially in relation to other community colleges—as beautiful, serene, and comfortable. Three participants commented:

*It's a beautiful campus too. Like there's so much more green here... (student)*

*[F]rom a student's perspective, one thing I do keep hearing is it's a beautiful campus. The landscaping, the trees, the grass. You go to many other city-type community colleges, it's a concrete jungle and here we have landscaping, trees and lawns and bushes and flowers and the students seem to enjoy that serenity. (faculty/staff)*

*[W]hen I came here, it was so beautiful because of all of the grass and the trees, the mountains behind us and just the atmosphere was a little bit more comfortable and casual. (student)*

Student participants also appreciated what a small college, like Cuyamaca, offers in terms of personal attention compared to its sister-college, Grossmont.

*That's because [Grossmont is a] much bigger campus, so it's not as personal...Since [Cuyamaca] is smaller...they pay more attention to the students because there's not as many.*

*I'd say it's very homey. It's [a]tight-knit community. Even if you come here and you don't know anyone, you still feel like you're a part of a bigger community. I've never been to Grossmont, but from what I've heard from family members and friends that go to Grossmont, [faculty at Grossmont] are not as understanding and welcoming as the Cuyamaca faculty. I think that's because since Cuyamaca is such a small community college, it builds that community type feeling, which is real nice.*

*Compared to other colleges in the county,...I've done research on this, Cuyamaca has a much bigger staff to student (more staff for each student) ratio than other schools... in San Diego.*

Though student participants expressed finding it easier to connect to Cuyamaca given its size, one negative side effect to the college serving a smaller number of students is that its services' hours of operation may be more limited. Student participants, for example, discussed the inconvenience of having limited food options and a cafeteria that closes at early hours. Two participants described:

*[The cafeteria is open from] 9 to 2...And what sucks was having a 12 to 3 class.*

*With the food thing it's really important that [the cafeteria] should close later [than 2 o'clock], like 10 because I've been here for almost two years and those coupons that they have, I have them stacked up this high already...I've never been to the cafeteria.*

While the comparisons participants make between Cuyamaca and Grossmont provide important insights into their experiences at each college, it also highlights the fact that students, faculty, and staff may attend class, access resources, and teach and work at several community colleges in the region, and therefore may expect similar policies or want resources that are available at other colleges to be available at Cuyamaca.

## **Appreciation for the Diversity at Cuyamaca**

Overall, students described a deep appreciation for the diversity at Cuyamaca both in its student population as well as its faculty and staff. Students described a high level of diversity within their peer groups and a feeling of inclusion rather than isolation or “sticking to their own group.” In the words of three participants:

*[A] lot of groups [are] compris[ed] of... many ethnicities. Like, for example, my group contains like Caucasian people, Mexicans, African Americans, Arabic and, you know, it's just very diverse the way I see it,...they're very open too... When I see each group, they don't seem to just be with their own people, they welcome everyone else, whoever they see. Whether they're a classmate in a class or whether they've known each other ever since high school. They're just very welcoming I guess.*

*I see that on other campuses there's always...people saying racist remarks. Just being really mean to other people, but here on this campus everybody just wants to be united. They don't like to be segregated or anything like that.*

*One thing about the campus I'd say helps a lot is the diversity of the staff. Like you have your Caucasian staff, the African-American staff, your Hispanic staff, your Asian staff...[E]very class I've taken has had [teachers from] different [ethnic backgrounds]...I had a White teacher, Hispanic teacher, African-American teachers, and I like that because I can relate [to] all of them.*

Participants also noted that the college embraces this diversity and demonstrates an appreciation of it through cultural events, which invites the Cuyamaca community to show pride in their own culture and learn more about other cultures. As three participants noted:

*[A]t this college,...we're very embrac[ing] and welcoming [of] all the diversity...that attends here on this campus. [W]e celebrate a lot throughout the school year, so we give...each ethnicity...acknowledgement and I just think it's well informed and well fit for any person that wants to attend this school. (student)*

*I say this school has a lot of diversity and there's like many cultures here. And they do a whole bunch of events out in the quad. And I would highly recommend that they come here because I really like this school. I think it's good for others to know about this school to come to this school. (student)*

*I would say the institution has done a really good job of being very inclusive with our students...we embrace culture and diversity and...try to represent that well in the activities that we have for students. (faculty/staff)*

Not only did participants discuss how Cuyamaca takes pride in its diversity, but one participant also described feeling protected by Cuyamaca. Within the current political climate and subsequent fear in which many undocumented immigrants live, one student expressed gratitude to Cuyamaca for portraying a culture of caring and belonging:

*One thing I personally like about this school is sometimes I'll be receiving emails from the school that [say] they will not expose the illegal background [of students]. It gives me a feeling that "I'm permitted." I'm legally permitted, but like [the school's policy] gives me confidence that here is a school that cares about the students and I think it's good for cultural aspects.*

## **Lack of Cultural Sensitivity**

While the majority of student focus group participants described very positive interactions with their instructors and noted their level of engagement and understanding of their students, several participants also described a lack of cultural sensitivity among some instructors. Students' experiences with cultural insensitivity were especially highlighted among Cuyamaca students who face unique challenges because of their disability or being a veteran, and with historically-underserved ethnic backgrounds. Further, participants from African-American and Chaldean backgrounds described instances where they felt discriminated against in class and noted that

their instructors clearly did not understand the challenges faced by members of their ethnic group. As several students commented:

*I would say 98% of the [Cuyamaca faculty/staff] I have had encounters with are very helpful, very caring, [and] they just want to go out of their way to help you with extra advice and then, of course, you have that 2% that they just forget I think that we are students and that not only do we have jobs that we have our own personal stuff and I think that... especially at the DSPS area...they need to be a little bit more compassionate when we're taking tests or just even making an appointment for counseling or something like that. They just need to be a little bit more compassionate with us because we are going through our own stuff and stuff is progressing and we have to handle that, plus learn how to adapt to things.*

*[S]ometimes these teachers it's like you say you're a veteran you might as well say you're a Martian because they completely do not understand your situation.*

*[O]nce [my professor] realized where we're from, like we're Middle Eastern, I realized [that]...every time you start to ask him questions, he wouldn't answer them fully. He would just give [me and my Chaldean friends] a really short cut of the answer...and then I hear [other people] asking him questions and he answers them. He gives them a good explanation...Yeah, so there was some racism in there and me and my friends, we dropped that class.*

## Lack of Student Engagement and Faculty Involvement

Several student focus group participants expressed the difficulty in engaging and connecting to the Cuyamaca campus. Yet, as the below quotations illustrate, each participant described different perspectives of why they or Cuyamaca students in general do not engage with the campus, with reasons ranging from the commuter culture, to lacking attractive options or opportunities for engagement. As three students shared:

*I think there is culture, but it is a lack of participation. There's a lot of groups on campus. If you walk around, there's a tremendous amount of invites to come join our group, be at our meeting. I think there's something for everyone ... But [people see the] community college [as], you're in, you're out, it's laid back, it's easy, it's simple, it's not really complicated like a bigger campus. There is a lot of [activities and groups] here, but it's just lack of participation is what I see ... Even at graduation, last year we had a tremendous amount of kids graduate, but the support for those kids wasn't there. It's like you saw just a bunch of kids in caps and gowns and not a lot of people in the stands. So I think participation is an issue too.*

*[Cuyamaca] is a young campus. And, it's definitely laid back, but almost to the point where if [students] were looking for a strong affiliation with a club or some type of movement, organization, on campus, this wouldn't exactly be the best place. They don't have much going on over here. ... This campus doesn't really have any culture.*

*All the clubs suck... There's not a whole lot of options to be honest. You see... you have to go on the website and every time you go on, you see the clubs and they don't look interesting. They don't appeal to you.*

Some student focus group participants attributed the potential lack of student engagement to a lack of advertising to the student body regarding clubs and events where students can engage and connect to the college. As two students informed:

*Yeah life on campus should be really more supported ... should be more open to the student body ... not a lot of people are aware that there's like a golf team on campus or a volleyball team... Or a club or an organization.*

*I feel like compared [to] Grossmont,... there's little things that help them get informed about what's going on and everything. There's a TV screen that tells them this event happens on this day and this happens on that day. I'm like, "Gee, I wish we can have that much advertisement."*

Faculty/staff focus group participants also commented on the lack of faculty/staff involvement. Though participants described a very collegial and friendly environment for faculty, focus group participants noted the difficulties in trying to get faculty to be involved in the college. Moreover, staff focus group participants described a “crisis mode” culture where there is too much work to do with too little time, leaving no time to be more involved in the campus. In the words of three participants:

*I know the culture to be really collegial. People are generally really nice to each other... I will just say I'm noticing that faculty aren't showing up for things that I would expect them to show up for ... It can be hard to get faculty involved. (faculty)*

*[Cuyamaca is] a very friendly place to work... [O]nce in a while [I will] attend an academic senate meeting and only the senators are there, no one else really attends... [T]he population of [full- and part-time] faculty is... in the hundreds ... But you go to even convocation, there's like 120 people there. Where is everyone else? So I do agree that it seems to be a challenge to get faculty to be involved. (faculty)*

*[Classified staff are] so worried about just getting this done that they don't have time to sit and really think about our success factors and what equity means and how we can be more inclusive and all these other things. They just don't because they don't have time. And they can't get away to serve and really be more engaged. (staff)*

## Financial Concerns

Although there was no explicit focus group with low-income students, one commonality, among focus group participants was financial challenges. Focus group participants identified being low-income as a significant factor in their ability to be successful college students. Specifically, most of the students reported having at least one part-time job to help pay for college, and support their family, which leads to difficulties in finding the right balance among their family, school, and work obligations. The financial cost of attending college also played a significant role in

challenging students' success from the transportation costs and limitations, to the high costs of textbooks with limited viable options in accessing their required textbooks.

## Struggling to Manage the Work-Life Balance

Across focus groups, one of the primary challenges student participants discussed was the difficulty of finding an appropriate balance between the demands of school and those of work and home life. As three students noted:

*I take care of my family. I work a lot, so finding time to study and going to classes is very difficult. I have to drop classes sometimes in order to pay the bills sometimes and it kind of sucks sometimes, but it's like you got to do what you got to do because having a roof over your head is a little bit more important than going to school. So for me, that's my biggest issue. This is my second time trying to go to school. The first time it didn't go too well. I had no books, but I had to work and I had to study...I mean I had to go to school, but I had no books, but I had to work like all the time.*

*Even on Section 8 and even getting my financial aid from school, [my family and I] still have like no money at the end of the day. I'm still living paycheck to paycheck. There's 13 people living in my house and it's hard to come home and study because there're so many people there.*

*I study on the job. I have three jobs... I'm studying on the job and I'm on the job at night. I do security, so anytime I have time to study and I do it, but mostly while I'm working.*

## Transportation

Across student focus groups, a substantial number of participants stated the bus as their primary mode of transportation commuting to and from school. Participants noted that aside from the commuting time and financial cost associated with taking the bus,<sup>4</sup> taking the bus limits the classes that are available to them. As two participants described:

*I can't take a class at 8 a.m. or earlier because I take the bus and the only bus that comes is [at] 6:20 and it takes like 50 minutes. Or if the bus is full then [I] have to take the 7:30 bus [so]...I don't get here 'til 9.*

*I take the bus and trolley...and usually it's hard to get good classes that are at either super early in the morning or super late at night. [Though] you can't get that many [classes at night] because the bus stops running...So I have to [take] early classes [and]...wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning to get here, [because] all of the transportation...takes about three hours each way.*

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<sup>4</sup>Though bus vouchers are available through Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), students mentioned that the demand for these vouchers outweighs their supply.

## Textbook Costs

Among the student focus groups, one of the most widely discussed issues was the impact of textbook costs on their educational experience. The frustration students expressed in having to buy expensive textbooks was compounded by the fact that their instructors did not utilize the books or that what was being taught in the classroom contradicted what was in the textbook. Further, many students complained vigorously about the high costs of textbooks at Cuyamaca, which made it difficult for students to secure the instructional materials needed to succeed in their courses, perhaps in ways that Cuyamaca leadership and faculty had not taken into consideration. Four students described the range of obstacles they have encountered in this area:

*I've bought like \$200 books and it's like [teachers] don't use it or the teachers that say to use [the book], [the information in the textbook] does not match up with what [they're] teaching you.*

*And I told [my professor that] the book doesn't match up with what you're teaching us and...the tests are based off the notes and even if you try to look through the book, it doesn't match up with anything.*

*[M]y challenge was the struggle finding a job to pay off my books...that are more expensive than what you think and then the other [challenge] is like when you buy a book and the professor tells you, "I'm not going to use it" and the challenge is like I just wasted my money.*

*I don't think teachers fully understand [how the cost of books affects students]. [The faculty] say, "Buy the book" because they're supposed to, but for the most part I wish they'd be honest with us [if] they're not going to use the book. Some say, "I want you to mostly go off my source material that I give you." Most of the time, the teachers are pretty nice and they'll say, "I have the book from the library and I [will] upload the links onto Blackboard, you can go there and this is exactly the parts we need because half of the book you won't need."*

While financial aid is available, some of the institutional policies make it difficult for students who are balancing work and school to receive their financial aid in time to purchase textbooks. And when students finally obtain their financial aid, the money goes further in supporting their household rather than towards purchasing a textbook. In the words of two participants:

*I think one of the problems with financial aid is when they distribute the money, when you need the books and you can't get them. Or when you're [trying to pay for school],...you don't have the money yet, so [you] have to drop out of the class and then wait 'til later on to take the class.*

*I had a biology professor, she was really sweet and she seemed really empathetic. It was already five months in the semester and she's, "Why don't you have your textbook?" I said, "Your textbook is \$278." I don't get my financial aid until another month from now and when I do get my financial aid I'm probably going to have to spend [it] on rent and my mom's car payment and my car payment and our lights and electric [bill], you know? She [replied], "Well, get it. I don't know how you're going to get it, but get it."*

Lastly, alternative ways to access textbooks, like through book vouchers or the library, are only available to a portion of students as the demand is much greater than the supply. Further, though the book rental program provides prices lower than buying the textbooks, the cost to rent is still quite high and out of reach for many students. Three participants describe:

*They do offer book vouchers. But, they are limited because there's a lot of people in programs because everyone's broke.*

*[T]here's probably one copy [of the textbook in the library] and there's five students already probably checking them out.*

*I rented the book and it's still 70, 80 bucks to rent it for the semester.*

## Family Obligations and Cultural Expectations

First-generation student participants as well as students from particular ethnic minority backgrounds expressed how family and cultural expectations can impact their educational experience. Sometimes, for students who are first in their family to attend college, their family members may not inherently or fully understand the time and effort it takes to succeed in college. In the words of one first-generation student:

*I work two part-time [jobs]...I try to be a good student, I really try, but sometimes when I work and try to help my family, [and]...have to sometimes babysit for my little brothers and [all] that takes a long time. But I try to put my full effort to school because I know that's the best way... I know that school's important, it seems for me [that school is] always...last on my list. Like it's always family, work, take care of everything else and then school.*

Students participating in the African-American focus group also described the challenge in needing to balance school with family obligations as well as having to combat the low expectations their family may place on their pursuit of a college education. Two African-American participants described:

*The only job I have right now is taking my nieces and nephews to school. Sometimes I don't have time to do last night's homework or I don't have time to study if I have a midterm, I can't study for that midterm in the morning because I was taking [my nieces and nephews] to school and it's back and forth; it takes maybe an hour and a half taking them and bringing them back and that cuts into my schedule. But if I say, I can't take them anymore because I need to study, I don't get that \$100 for my gas. I can't quit. I wish I could, but I can't.*

*I remember ninth grade and 10th grade; I got straight Fs and it was just horrible. A bad time for me. I was "When I graduate." [My extended family was] like, "If you graduate" because [of the horrible grades] ... I just talked to myself, "I'm gonna prove you guys wrong" and I got straight As. I kept going and that's what keeps me going too. I'm not going to drop out. I'm not going to be a drop out because a lot of my family are drop outs. [My other family members] would go to college for a year or two, community college, but they would never go to a university. I went to community college. I didn't go*

*to university, but I made sure [I was in community college] only two years and [then] I go get my Bachelor's in four. That's what motivates me a lot of the times. "I'm going to prove you guys wrong."*

Latino men and women are also significantly challenged to balance the requirements and expectations of their courses, family pressure, and cultural expectations. This balancing act is especially true for Latino men who often face financial pressures to support their families; in some cases, influencing their decision to leave school or attend part-time to get a job. As one Latino male participant shared:

*I don't want to generalize, but my experiences in Latino families, [is that] studying can be seen as a [waste of time]. Whoever [is] your guardian, your elders or your parents, they would rather you start working and making money now because for some of them the education process is overwhelming and it's a long shot. They're not sure if the investment is going to be worth it. Some of my uncles and some of my parent's friends would prefer their kids once they graduate from high school [to] start working multiple jobs rather than give education any kind of importance.*

Having familial obligations and expectations also emerged as a key challenge among Chaldean student participants. For one, time is even more limited given the closeness students expressed among their extended family members. Further, participants described feeling pressure from their family to be “perfect.” One Chaldean participant noted:

*Family [can be a challenge] because you have to manage your time between studying, working, and taking care [of] the family. It's not just for kids, husband or wife, and at home all of them around you. It's relatives. [Our] families [include] relationships with other families. So you have to manage all that time and [you are expected to] always feel happy because you are out at school and [then] when you are in the school, you are so stressed. You have to keep your grades perfect. Your life is perfect, all that, it causes stress.*

## Motivations to Succeed

Most of the students responded to the topic of motivation, discussing what drove them, both internally and externally, to attend and persist in college despite the challenges that many encountered at Cuyamaca and in their personal lives. Students described personal characteristics, such as self-motivation and overcoming stereotypes as keys to driving their educational pursuits. Moreover, many participants identified their family as providing motivation to complete their goals.

## Overcoming Stereotypes

A number of students, especially from historically-underserved populations expressed a pride in their culture and a sense of motivation and drive to overcome the negative stereotypes associated with their group. Two participants described:

*I think breaking down stereotypes of what people think you are [is a motivator]. Because people always have these ideas that Hispanic people are lazy, Black people are lazy, Middle Eastern people are lazy. [B]ut all of us are here doing something.*

*Well, for me it's knowing where I come from like my roots and my culture. That's what pushed me to personally try my best to do whatever I can to succeed in many areas in my life. And school specifically because I wanted to [overcome] the stereotype saying, "Immigrants are this, immigrants are that." So that's what [has] pushed me a lot...that's how I've tried to overcome a lot of obstacles in my life.*

## Family

Though managing the demands from their family was a challenge to many students, a significant number of focus group participants also cited family as their motivation to succeed. Student participants described how their family motivates them in two key ways: wanting a better life *compared to their family*, and wanting a better life *for their family*. As three participants describe:

*[S]omething that motivated me to come to school is my uncle's job. Because he works in construction of the pools. And it's pretty much like he goes to rich people's houses and all I see is a bunch of Mexican immigrants just working out there and he works like almost 10 hours... the full day, basically in the hot sun...but he loves it...And he keeps telling me that, "You should just join me." I'm like, "Yeah, right. Like, bro, no way. That's why I'm coming to school. I don't want to be like that."*

*You always have to remember...where you came from to know how it felt and to keep going, to keep being a better person because being that poor at that time, like at one point, we were homeless...[T]hat was rock bottom for me because I told myself, I'll never do that again. That would never happen to me or...[my] family, ever again. So ever since then I've been working my butt off...I know that if I get this degree more doors will be open. That's more money in my pocket and more money... [for] my family.*

*My mom has been the biggest supporter for me to go to college and still is to this day, so for me, [I want to] give [my family] a better life...[M]y only goal in life is to make sure my family is well taken care of...So for me, my family is my biggest motivation.*

Several student participants also described that sometimes their family *not* believing in them motivates them to succeed and prove their family wrong. In the words of one participant:

*I remember ninth grade year and 10th grade year I got straight Fs and it was just horrible. Like a bad time for me and a lot of the times...I was like, "Well, **when** I graduate." [And my family] was like, "**If** you graduate," because I [had] horrible grades...And I just talked to myself, and I was like, "Well, I'm gonna prove you guys wrong" and I got straight As next year...[A]nd I kept going and that's what keeps me going too. Like, okay, I'm not going to drop out. I'm not going to be a drop out because a lot of family are drop outs. They would go to college for a year or two, you know, community college, but they would never go to a university, you know. And I'm like, okay, I [am going to] make sure [I go to community college for] only two years and I [will] go*

*get my Bachelor's in four, so like that also pushes me too. That's what motivates me a lot of the times. Like I'm going to prove you guys wrong.*

## Perspectives on Support Services

Cuyamaca College, like the rest of the community colleges in California, offers students a range of support services and resources to help them meet their educational goals. However, the mere existence of these services does not guarantee that students will benefit from them. First, students need to know about what is available to them. Second, those services need to be both accessible and capable of providing the assistance that students need. Within the student focus groups, there was a clear distinction in the awareness of resources and experiences with support services between students who were and were not already connected to Cuyamaca resources. One clear example was the difference between how students described their impersonal experiences with general counselors compared to the trusting relationships students were able to establish with their assigned, program-specific, counselors.

### Accessibility and Awareness of Resources

Student focus group participants who were part of the FYE program described the significant impact this program had on starting their educational journey at Cuyamaca and being informed of the available resources on campus. As two participants described, the FYE program helped them navigate college, be involved, and be informed:

*[P]rograms that you join sometimes require you to go to certain events and I feel like there's where the connections form, you know. And at least that's how it happened for me, through the first year experience program, I got to meet more students and then from there they made us go to this event or go to the Black History Month event and like from there you just meet more people. And I feel like that's what's gotten [us students] a lot closer together at least in my experience.*

*I had to do the [FYE] application, a counselor from there helped me. I don't remember how I learned about the FYE, but I just remember interviewing, getting in... [E]veryone is assigned to a specific counselor... groups of cohorts type thing. And so my counselor helped us out, kind of understanding what we needed to know like the basics ...Then I got a job as a student ambassador and that's when it kind of opened my eyes, how many programs and services we have here. Now, I go to the high schools and I'm like, "You know what? You need to look into this program or you need to go into this office and you need to... ask them for their resources." Just because I know that it's kind of hard for high schoolers, you know, transitioning... But I'm really... appreciative of how the [FYE] counselors here are willing to help you and kind of show you how to navigate through here.*

The experiences of students who were part of the FYE program greatly differed from the experiences of the student focus group participants—mostly identifying as non-first generation students and recruited at random through the Student Center—who were unaware of the FYE program as well as other programs available to them. One student described seeking out a group

on campus, but was turned away since she was in an early stage of her Cuyamaca educational journey:

*I wanted to join the counseling group that they have down here... [but] you got to at least be here more than one semester.*

Other student participants described students' lack of awareness of the available resources on campus, and brought up the need for Cuyamaca to improve their outreach efforts in connecting students with campus resources. Participants provided examples where groups of students from targeted populations, like veterans, are unaware of the resources available to them, and more generally, being new to campus and uninformed of what resources are available. Two participants commented:

*Well, I was thinking about when I first got here, I felt like there was an issue of [advertising] resources. You really have to let go and scour and find if you need something. And it was usually by word of mouth that you find out they have EOPS or CARE or whatever it was. So I felt like for students who maybe are too shy to go look for it or don't know that they need to go look for it, I feel like that's something the school could have done better.*

*The problem is the only people we get to see are veterans who are using their benefits. There's a ton of veterans out there who aren't even using benefits. You come across some of those guys, they don't even know that there is a VRC.*

## Counseling

In discussing interactions with support services, most students referenced their experiences with counselors. Several students drew a distinction between their experiences with the general Counseling Center, which felt impersonal compared to their interactions with their assigned counselors—through programs like EOPS, FYE, DSPS, and CalWorks—with whom they have been able to build a trusting relationship. Three participants noted:

*I [had] to go to maybe five different [general] counselors and I would get frustrated because all of them will tell me different things and I would feel frustrated because I was like, "Okay, but I'm just trying to get one thing"... [I]t seemed like it had to be their way. And I've heard it from...my peers. And they're like, "Oh, no. We don't go to the Counseling Center anymore."*

*I usually go to one specific [counselor], but I did go to another one...one semester because the other one was too busy. ...He asked me what my plans were. And I was like I don't want to get a Bachelor's. I just want to get an Associate's and go and work wherever I can, just because I don't really have the resources to keep going after community college. I don't feel like I would be able to do it personally and so what kind of threw me off was that he didn't really listen. He was just like filling out the... requirement paper for going into CSU and I was like, "But I don't want to go into CSU. I want to just complete my Associate's." And he just kind of sent me on my way with that paper and I just threw it away because I was like this doesn't really help me, you know.*

*So I feel like if people were to be a little bit more understanding that not everyone is a university type person. Some people kind of have to end a little bit earlier. Just that would be helpful too.*

*[T]he EOPS Office [has] counselors. So I go to the counselor, I [have] only [had] one counselor from...when I started [college] until now. She's the only one that I go to and she knows me really well right now and I think that helps a lot.*

One participant juxtaposed his experiences with a general counselor compared to his FYE counselor:

*[My FYE counselor] was the one who registered me, so he became my counselor and he really helped me. Having that personal counselor is such a big deal because before I was in FYE, I [went to general counseling] one time and there was this one counselor [who] just tried to get me into any math class, no schedule or nothing. He didn't even know if I was free at that time. I didn't even have a chance to check Rate My Professor and to see if that math class was good or not. [The counselor said,] "Don't worry about it you're in." I went to FYE and [the FYE counselor] took his time. He's my personal counselor, which is really great. FYE has helped me a lot. I wouldn't be on track, on top of my classes, getting into the right classes without FYE. I was doing [my education plan] with [the FYE counselor] I had the schedule that had been made up by the other counselor and he [said], "Why would you take this class?" He looked at my AP scores, "You're already done with these." He cut down my time here [at Cuyamaca]. [The FYE counselor] understands. This semester I was supposed to take a calculus and then a chem class and then a sociology class. "You don't want to do both [chemistry and calculus] at the same time. They're both really heavy studying classes and you're probably going to fail both if you take them at the same time." He put me in a history class instead. The programs help you stay afloat.*

## Experiences with Academics

Participants discussed at length their experiences in class and interactions with their instructors. On the instruction side, students discussed the expensive textbooks that were required by their instructors though many did not teach with the textbook (described in the Financial Concerns section), a perception that the instruction provided leaves students unprepared for the tests, and not trusting their instructor's knowledge of the subject matter. On the instructor interactions side, students described their experiences with seemingly two types of faculty at Cuyamaca. Student participants drew a dichotomy between extremely positive experiences with some of their instructors and negative experiences with other instructors. Focus group participants differentiated between these two groups of faculty by the level of engagement and understanding with which faculty approach their interactions with students.

## Disconnect between Teaching and Testing

Several students described their challenges in the classroom as a disconnection between what their instructors are teaching in class and what instructors put on their tests. Since students who are attending their classes perceive a divide between how teachers are instructing them to prepare

and on what they are actually being tested, students may garner a sense that instructors do not care or want students to be successful. Two students described:

*So the biggest problem I've had so far is teacher wise. The teacher has trouble teaching us I think, so the entire semester they're teaching us what's 1 plus 1, but then when the final exam hits us, it's how to build a rocket. That's how I feel.*

*I have a teacher... who doesn't understand the book. So we're all going based on her notes and what she knows... [S]he says that the study guide is going to be like the test. Not even.*

Similarly, students described lack of teacher engagement in class and with the course material. This lack of enthusiasm can be infectious and lead to student disengagement from the class as well. As one student noted:

*Well, I only had one bad experience with a teacher because it seemed like he didn't even care about the students. He would just pretty much give us the lecture and then [have us] read the same lecture from our books, which wasn't really interesting, we didn't learn anything. And I remember I failed that test just because of the lack of interest from the professor and myself.*

Further, while student participants expressed understanding the “tough love” concept that some faculty may use, students noted the difference between *supportive* and *unsupportive* tough love. In the words of one student:

*My mom, that's how she raised us... tough love. She supports us. It's not just like good luck... tough love. No, she's tough on us, but when she sees [that] we're trying, but we're still not [succeeding] she gives us that push that we need. That's tough love, being there and supporting [students] as long as they're trying.*

## Lack of Trust in Professors' Knowledge

Along with not trusting instructors to want their students to be successful, focus group participants described instances where they felt that their instructor did not have a thorough grasp of the material he/she was teaching in class. This lack of trust in the faculty's skill set and knowledge base leads to frustration and disengagement in class. As one student discussed:

*[My] math teacher would explain [a problem] and write on the board and... reach a point where she doesn't know how to finish that problem and she would ask us... she like stares at the board and she's like, “Is this correct?” And most of us, we know this is not correct and then another woman stands up and she goes up to her and she corrects her. So the students correct the professor and I don't think that's supposed to happen, you know?... She would stare at the board for 10 minutes and she opens the book and tries her best and couldn't find the answer, you know? It's like if my professor doesn't know how to explain this material, how am I supposed to understand it, you know?*

## Two Types of Faculty

Across all student focus groups, participants drew a dichotomy between extremely positive experiences with their engaged and understanding instructors and negative experiences with other instructors who were unengaged and not understanding of some of the challenges students face. Two participants described interactions with instructors who were engaged in the classroom:

*[A] lot of the teachers that I had like for sociology, for psychology, even for like math, they would always like tell you about what was going on, like events that were happening.*

*[I had a] teacher this semester, [who] noticed I missed one class, and he asked me, "Oh, what's wrong? Is there anything wrong with you? Do you need help with anything?"*

However, the above experiences noted by students were offset by experiences students described with instructors who were very disengaged from Cuyamaca and its students. In the words of two students:

*Most of the teachers that you get are just [here] for the paycheck.*

*He'll literally give us an assignment and sit there and just stare and not say a word....and then when we actually have class discussions, he doesn't really teach either because he's in the back grading our speeches...I didn't really learn much from him, ...He didn't really get interactive with us.*

Student focus group participants also described their instructors as either being understanding and accommodating, or not understanding and out of touch with the challenges community college students face. Students who described their instructors as understanding were involved in programs at Cuyamaca that encouraged students to talk to their instructors. Therefore, as students provided examples of their interactions with instructors who demonstrated empathy, it is important to note that these instructors had an opportunity to accommodate their students because these students were able to approach their instructors and express their challenges. Three participants provided:

*[My] professor was really clear, like no one can leave early, but I left early three times because I talked to her ahead of time and I actually said, "Sometimes I have to go pick up my brothers or my nephews" ...I talked to her and she was like, "It's fine because I mean I know you're a good student and everything." She let me go. I just feel like a lot of students are afraid of talking to a teacher because some teachers are just so strict.*

*I had a lot of positive [experiences with] teachers. My first teacher, I was really familiar with, she was my math teacher. She was super nice...I feel like once you have things that are going on with your life and everything, [the teachers at Cuyamaca are] a lot more communicative if you just let them know. Or if you just talk to them, then they're a lot more willing [and] understanding. Obviously if you don't say anything at all, then how are they going to know.*

*A lot of my professors are the same as I am. A lot of them started their education in the [same] community, society, so it's really easy to relate to them even though they're [from a] different race, different cultures. It's just so easy to relate to them because they understand our struggles and what we're going through every day.*

However, students also described experiences with their instructors not understanding and/or not being accommodating of the challenges community college students face. Aside from the aforementioned textbook costs, two participants noted:

*[T]he teachers should know students might come a little bit late, like three to four minutes because I had one teacher, if you come late to class by one minute or 30 seconds, she takes off points on your grade or she passes by your name and you come sit and she's still calling the names and you go up to her and tell her, I'm here and she's like, oh no, you lost like two to three points and things like that... We're not kids, we're not in high school. [An] adult might have [an] emergency, they might have like issues at home, they might have a job or something,... you can't treat students like they're in high school.*

*So I was sick a lot and then I got a note from the doctor, I [was] not able to work and go to school, and over that time we had a quiz about the novel that we are reading and I went back to school and [my teacher] told me "I'm not gonna do the quiz for you" and I told him, "But I have a paper for you from the doctor"... and that dropped my grade like 10%... So I don't know what to do and I talked to him like two times and he just argued with me and he doesn't want to help me.*

## The Need for Better Training and Professional Development

Given the numerous negative experiences students commented on in their interactions with faculty, by far, the number one suggestion these focus group participants gave the college was to provide better training—or training at all—for Cuyamaca faculty. Noting especially to provide teachers with training on how to teach community college students, but also, to specifically increase their awareness of the challenges specific student populations face in the hopes of increasing empathy and cultural sensitivity. Faculty focus group participants also chimed in to this discussion, and highlighted the need to devote resources to expanding professional development for faculty and to make cultural diversity training mandatory for Cuyamaca personnel given its highly diverse student population.

Lastly, through focus group discussions, it became clear that many students attributed their success to interactions with that one Cuyamaca faculty/staff member that made the difference in their academic lives. Students pointing to these individual faculty/staff members only strengthens the argument for training and professional development to equip faculty/staff with the skills necessary to support students' success, because one person can make a difference in the likelihood of a student succeeding.

## New Teacher Orientation and Training

Student focus group participants strongly urged the college to provide training on “how to teach community college students” for the Cuyamaca faculty. Faculty participants also acknowledged

the need for better training and orienting new faculty members to teaching at Cuyamaca college. As three participants noted:

*Isn't it funny that there's certain...requirements [that] the teachers make [students meet], but there's no requirements for what they should be doing right. Like we have to follow all these rules, but there's a lot of rules that aren't even made for them...I'm not saying all teachers because we have some great teachers, but some teachers just think that they can never get fired or anything like that. That they can do whatever they want. (student)*

*[M]ore training with teachers on how to not overlook students and everything in that regard. Not just overlook, more like if they notice something, just any little thing and maybe that's the problem, maybe they don't notice something and stuff like that, maybe there could be training for them to pick up on [when a student is in trouble] and whether they want to take that chance or not, it's up to them. But at least they have that training so they can recognize that. (student)*

*I think we can do a much better job of onboarding new faculty. Training new faculty, and providing them an ongoing academy of some sort. At least throughout their first year or throughout their tenure process. (faculty/staff)*

## Better-Informed Teacher Evaluations

Student focus group participants described having teachers who showed up at their class unprepared to teach or were completely disengaged from the material and their students. However, when instructors are informed of their upcoming in-class teaching evaluations, suddenly teachers were prepared and energized during class. Moreover, students reported that the evaluator would often check-in for just a few minutes before leaving. Students noted how unfair this system is, and suggested Cuyamaca reform the manner in which it evaluates its teachers to ensure that students are being taught effectively. Two students described:

*I've been in this college for three semesters and of the three, I've never seen someone come in and check [on the class]...only once and it was this semester, two classes ago and the [evaluator] didn't even hold out to the end of the class. He stayed in for 10, 15 minutes and walked away.*

*[My teacher] knew and she had time to prepare. And you could tell... she knew what she was doing in that class...[E]veryone noticed [the difference].*

## Professional Development on Equity Awareness and Cultural Sensitivity

Student focus group participants also highlighted the need to train instructors (perhaps through professional development) not just on “how to teach,” but also to enhance instructors’ understanding of who their students are—from their backgrounds to their challenges—in the hopes of creating more empathy, awareness, and sensitivity. It is also important to recognize that cultural sensitivity includes challenges students face based on their racial/ethnic backgrounds, disability, or status as veterans. Student participants also specifically suggested a program where

students can share with teachers how to approach students from particular backgrounds and with unique needs. In the words of two participants:

*[At another college,] the students are training the teachers, where...different minority groups will train the teachers how they should deal with situations...because only they themselves know how it feels and only they themselves know how they want to be treated....[G]iving that teacher that broad spectrum of how...you can't treat all your students the same because they come from different backgrounds, I think would be really nice for this college. You know, it's very diverse, but it'd be more open, more understanding, if the students could have a voice in how the teachers treat them basically and be more empathetic too.*

*I've had a good experience with instructors. They are so helpful. But there's no harm to have a meeting with them and tell them about disability, you know, because I came across some instructors who [do not] know [about disabilities] and how disabled people should be dealt with...[T]here's no harm to have a meeting, you know, to kind of gather them in the DSPS maybe and tell them that, "These are disabled people and these are their problems and challenges."*

The lack of professional development is clearly aligned with the fact that Cuyamaca does not have a stable, institutionalized staff member dedicated to the development of Cuyamaca faculty. Dedicating more resources and institutionalizing a steady position would allow the opportunity to establish a stable professional development program for faculty and staff. Creating this position would also demonstrate to the faculty and staff that the college intends to nurture and develop them so they can be successful in their profession. In the words of one faculty participant:

*We need to address that rotating the [Professional Development] Coordinator every two years is a bad idea. We need a professional who that is their thing. Training and getting professional development onto this campus.*

However, given the divide existing between engaged and unengaged Cuyamaca faculty and staff, it is also important to recognize that people who choose to attend trainings and meetings are more likely to be engaged. Therefore, several faculty/staff focus group participants commented that if Cuyamaca intends to increase equity awareness and cultural sensitivity, the college needs to consider making these trainings mandatory and engaging. As two participants noted:

*Staff development, we should make it mandatory for everybody to attend at least one counseling diversity training.*

*I started attending some of these trainings of increasing cultural awareness, and [it] seems like there's a lack of understanding among faculty members about what these terms mean...Particularly in the sciences, where you have faculty members just walking into a training to declare that they can't do that and they shouldn't be asked to do that. And then they're going to leave. Or they're going to sit there and, [hear]...these strategies [that] particularly work for some students of color and it's best teaching practice for every student. And there are faculty members who just go to be able to explain why they can't do that.*

## The One Person Who Made a Difference

Student focus group participants often called out one individual who motivated and directed them toward a specific academic pursuit. Two students described:

*I took his intro class and that changed the way I saw life. He brought psychology to life in the way that I hadn't seen it before. That's when I decided not to pursue mathematics anymore and become a psychology major. I looked into specific areas I could major in within psychology. And that's when I felt I was once again motivated to do bigger and better things. For me, that professor has not only helped me, but I've seen in the class the way he motivates the students. Sometimes all it takes is one professor in a certain department. I feel I got lucky to have him, that changed my life.*

*[M]y counselor said, "Well, what do you like?" She was helpful in that sense; asked me what things I like to do or like where I see myself. I want to do social work helping families. [The counselor suggested I] try taking a child development class. After I took my first child development class, I completely fell in love with the class and [I] talked to the teacher, "Is there actually a major for this [where] I could work with families and kids?" ... She said, "Go back to your counselor and tell her that you want an ed plan." [The counselor and the teacher] talked me through it and that's how I started to slowly learn, how everything worked.*

## Section 5: Findings by Individual Student Focus Group

The overarching themes above were heard across various focus groups. However, unique challenges also emerged within each group.<sup>5</sup> Key findings emerging within groups are summarized below.

### African-American Students

African-American students expressed feeling very welcomed on the Cuyamaca campus overall. However, participants specifically described instances where they felt discriminated against in class and noted that their instructors clearly did not understand the challenges faced by African-American students.

This group of students expressed that overall the campus culture feels welcoming and that they appreciate the diversity on campus. In the words of one student:

*I don't feel isolated at all; even with a small minority of African American students on campus.*

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<sup>5</sup> The non-first generation student focus group findings are not summarized in their own individual section because the non-first generation students did not share a unique identity, and subsequently, no themes emerged that were uniquely associated with participants being part of their target group. Rather, the topics discussed in the non-first generation focus group mirrored emerging themes that cut across multiple focus groups.

However, despite feeling positive about Cuyamaca as a whole, these students described a different experience taking certain courses. One student described her experience in a history class taught by a non-African American faculty:

*My teacher wanted to talk about Black Lives Matter. I am sitting at the back of the class and I am [thinking] “Just don’t say anything. Just sit back. I don’t want anyone to look at me.” This White kid raises his hand... “I work for the police department. I would’ve shot that kid, [that] 12 year old kid, looked like he had a gun.” [Again, I said to myself,] “Wow! We’re off to a rough start. Just keep it to yourself, nothing you say is going to change peoples' minds. They’re adults and if they think this way, then you making a comment isn’t going to change it. It’s just going to start a fight.” The other black student [in the class], couldn’t hold it anymore. He raised his hand and he goes, “That kid was about 5’2”,” he points to me and says, “He’s about her height. She’s not threatening, is she?” And then [the conversation] just spiraled out of control. The Black student tried raising his hand again, but the [teacher], she just was like, “Wait a second” and just kept letting the White students talk.*

Whether the faculty was conscious of it or not, this student describes a feeling of being silenced by the teacher in order to avoid controversy. As the conversation continued, it got to a point that the student could no longer be silent. She continued:

*I just sat there and I couldn’t [let the conversation keep going] I raised my hand [and said,] “I’m sorry, let’s just make this clear. [The police] have taken school shooters, people [who] have taken people hostage, [people involved in] robberies, and people who straight up murdered their wives. They’ve taken them in with no problem at all; just tased them a little, put them in handcuffs, and brought them in. But a 12 year old kid with a BB gun who’s scared, you couldn’t? Why are our [African-American] boys seen as like threats, but your grown men are seen as kids?” And then [the teacher] said to me, “Let’s not make it an us versus them kind of thing.”*

Finally, the student shared that she did not really believe the teacher was racist, but perhaps ignorant and uniformed. The student shared:

*[The teacher is] one of those that [believes that if you] have a Black friend, you totally get what [African Americans] mean. The only reason that I realized that she just genuinely didn’t understand and wasn’t being racist [is that she said], “I do realize that Black people...if I were to get into a huge car accident and then get pulled over, because of the way I look, I probably wouldn’t face the same things as someone who is Black or a darker skin tone.” I was like, “All right she kind of gets a little, but she’s really far out [of touch].”*

## Chaldean Students

Compared to the other student focus groups, Chaldean participants were more focused on earning their credential and getting a job rather than transferring. Chaldean students expressed feeling very comfortable and welcomed at Cuyamaca. However, though Chaldean students described an overall positive experience and noted not feeling any sort of hostility from the Cuyamaca faculty, staff, and students, several participants collectively called out one particular instructor they had all taken who demonstrated a pattern of discrimination toward his Chaldean students. In the words of one of these students:

*[This one] professor...me and a couple of my friends were in his class and once he realized where we're from, like we're Middle Eastern, I realized [that]...every time you start to ask him questions, he wouldn't like answer them fully. He would like just give us ... a short cut of the answer and he would like just go away and I would like stand by other people and then I hear them like asking him questions and like he answers them. He gives them like a good explanation... There was some racism in there and me and my friends, we dropped that class actually because like my friend, she actually cried because of him and she left the class and she dropped him...*

This participant noted that the pattern of discrimination with this professor continued with a friend who took a different class with this same instructor:

*And like I have another friend that's taking the same professor right now and she's dealing with the same exact thing. She's like... the moment he realized where I'm from,... he snaps and he acts differently with you.*

The participant went on to provide context that aside from this professor, he has had positive interactions with faculty. However, when this student attempted to report this persistent issue, the complaint was never addressed and the problem has continued. He describes:

*Any other experience I've had with professors, they're all like great, except this professor. Even it reached the point where... if we ask him a question, he would say, "If you guys would have stopped talking, I would have answered you." ...[M]e and my friends, we tried to talk to the head department chair and she said, "Yeah, this guy is known for that and stuff like that." But eventually we never reached a result that I'm satisfied with. We just like dropped the class and I got a W...I think the chair of the department, she's like almost as mean as him, so that's when I realized, yeah, this is not gonna work.*

## Latino Students

The Latino students in the focus group were very proud of their heritage. While they had much in common with other student groups attending community colleges—such as financial challenges, mixed relationships with counselors and faculty to name a few—several students in this group were undocumented<sup>6</sup> and described their unique educational experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> Students self-disclosed this information throughout their participation in the focus groups.

## Undocumented Immigrant Student Experience

Undocumented immigrant students in higher education are one of the most vulnerable student populations within the larger college population. This group faces many of the same challenges as many other student groups, however, the hurdles immigrant students experience are even more disconcerting; their statuses as a resident and student are constantly in flux causing their lives to be very unstable, this instability is further compounded by the current anti-immigrant climate in the United States. Furthermore, this group of students also has less access to campus resources, limited or no access to private scholarships, and are far less likely to know the requirements necessary or the process of applying to college.

The experience of undocumented students are even more distressing because they experience even more unstable lives and a fear and anxiety of either they themselves or their family members being deported due to their immigration status. Three students shared their experiences and struggles:

*I'm an immigrant student, it was hard for me at first to even imagine going to school. Even though I was always good in school, it was hard for me to imagine getting to a four-year [university]. I didn't know there [were] resources that could help me. And I found them. I did everything I could. I had to research my Dream Act, my financial aid and everything. That was a challenge for me. The [resources] are there, but they're not [going to] come and get you. You have to go to them.*

*As an immigrant student, you're not seen as the same, you don't have the same opportunities. I've seen that many times people look down on immigrants just because of where you come from. Another challenge I had was because of my immigrant status, my financial aid wasn't as impactful as I had wanted it to be. I had two jobs my first semester in college. Having to work two jobs and go full-time to school and put time aside for your family and time aside for your studying is very hard. You don't get the same [financial] opportunities as other people. If [other students] get [financial aid], they get a lot more, but with the Dream Act, you just get the Cal Grant B or Cal Grant A and/or a scholarship from the school or a grant.*

*Being an undocumented student felt like I couldn't do anything; I couldn't get a license, I couldn't get a job. I felt very restricted and unmotivated to do anything. Whatever major I'm going to get, it's not like I can get a job. I felt that way, it was just so frustrating for a long time. And then I transitioned to being able to get temporary residence status and it was like you're about to start a race, "You're going to have this. Now, go do the most you can with like this opportunity." So from there, it's just been non-stop.*

For one of these students, her experience has led her to want to help others like her:

*I developed this passion to help out my community and especially the undocumented population. I can see that there are a lot of students that are still scared to go out and ask for help. I've also had the opportunity to work for EOPS. I feel so privileged to be able to work. [In EOPS], I met even more students that are like me and also foster students and single parents. I just felt more eager each day to be able to help. I just developed so much*

*care and love for students out there that are trying to make it too. That [is] what's keeping me going to finish up school. I can't wait until I tell students, "Hey, you know what? I know it seems frustrating right now, but you're going to get through it."*

Another related issue is related to how much others understand and/or care about the realities undocumented students face. On the negative side, one student described others' biases and lack of awareness:

*[More privileged students] are stuck in their own reality. And they don't see [that] people don't have the same like opportunities as them, they don't have the same [access] as them. What enrages me is that like a lot of people that have these opportunities, they don't take advantage of them. Like us that are Dreamers or undocumented, we've struggled so much and people don't realize that they just have a negative connotation about us and it's just very frustrating. They're labeling you with negative things, but you've done so much, like you've gone through so much to be where you're at, but people still don't really care.*

However, on the positive side, another student expressed gratitude and appreciation for the college's efforts to educate and inform the campus community:

*There was an immigrant forum here at Cuyamaca College that the Student Affairs put together [because] a lot of faculty, staff, and students [wanted] to have more information about what [it's like] to be a DACA student, to gain more knowledge [of] the things that we go through. That touched my heart because I [felt] like a lot of people really care. When I heard teachers say, "We would like to know more. [Immigrant students] need more events or more workshops where we can inform ourselves." I thought that was really cool because then that means that the community does want to learn a little bit more, but I do still see that it's [just] some people.*

## Native American, Pacific Islander, and/or Filipino Students

The focus group designated for Native American, Pacific Islander, and/or Filipino students was mostly—if not all—comprised of students who identified themselves as belonging to the latter two groups. Among this group of students, then, participants stated that a unique challenge faced by Pacific Islanders and Filipinos is an ethnic identity crisis where they are unsure whether they are considered a Pacific Islander, Filipino, or if they are being lumped into the Asian group. Students further noted that it can be difficult sharing their culture with others at Cuyamaca because they represent a relatively small number of students. As two participants commented:

*[T]o be honest, I just had a conversation about that over lunch and my friend was saying, "Oh, no we're not Asians, we're Pacific Islanders." And I think it's like maybe that lack of knowledge and understanding and everything, where people just assume what it is and they go based on that assumption and I feel like maybe that's the reason why we do these events on campus and do focus groups like this is because we want others to have a better understanding of what's going on around them and who they are and everything.*

*[One] challenge is embracing and teaching other people [about] our culture. There's not a lot of us, and it's just really hard to [teach] them [about] our culture... There's not a lot of news about Filipinos in the U.S.*

## Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities participating in the focus group expressed having very accommodating instructors. However, one suggestion these students made to the college was to hire more individuals with disabilities. Participants expressed that having professionals with disabilities at Cuyamaca would help disabled students develop an increased awareness of disabled persons' presence at Cuyamaca, as well as provide someone who will both be able to empathize with and be a role model for students with disabilities. In the words of one participant:

*I know that there are [disabled] people who are teaching, who are working, and they have the ability to [work]. So some of them should be hired in the DSPS [at Cuyamaca]...because they understand our problems and we can talk to them....[Also,] if you are hiring a disabled person, it means for a student like me, you are [showing] me that I can be a professional in the future...[If] I see somebody [like me] working in the DSPS, [I know] I can be a very good worker in future,... [so] you're giving me a message that I can perform better.*

Similar to the overall theme regarding Cuyamaca personnel needing more training on cultural sensitivity, student participants highlighted some of the struggles students with disabilities encounter trying to advocate for themselves or being discouraged when trying to seek out help. As one participant described:

*It takes a lot of very good communication skills to convince people what you want in the DSPS... [When] you have [a] disability, there's a lot of irritation, complications, a lot of stuff going on in your head. You are sometimes upset, sometimes not happy, sometimes people are not treating you well. You have a lot of things going on in your life. And [not] every disabled person [has] this ability to convince and [receive help]...to get their work done. I want to say that there should be some people who should be understanding of the disabled person's problem... There are some people who don't know. It's hard for some... because sometimes a lot of people have mental challenges too, mental disabilities. But if they cannot convince a person to make their work done for them. And then they will be treated like a child [and not be helped]. So it's not a good thing... because this kind of discourages people to go to the DSPS.*

## Former Foster Youth and First-Generation Students

Former foster youth and first-generation student participants spent a good deal of time during the focus group describing their gratitude of the available resources at Cuyamaca, especially the FYE program. Former foster youth and first-generation students share a commonality in that they may lack guidance from their parents or guardians on how to succeed in college including where to start, to whom to talk, and which resources to access. Therefore, programs like the FYE are particularly beneficial to these student populations. Participants from these groups attributed

their success in navigating college to their involvement with this program. Two participants described:

*I think [the FYE program] really helped me get to know what college is and how to cope with the problems and the stress that college brings. We read a really good book that taught a lot too,... and it also helped bring peers together because it's also easier in college if you have group of friends that you can study with. (former foster youth student)*

*FYE made me feel more comfortable,...they told you how you could [be involved]... they have all these things out here in the campus that you could use and how to go for it...[H]onestly, I didn't really like talking to counselors at first, but then I met that [the FYE] counselor ... He made it seem like it was just a normal conversation, like an old friend almost. The way he would set up appointments, let you feel like, "Okay, I could do that eventually by myself if I need to talk to a counselor." And they were just very helpful telling you where you need to go if you need help. If you've got problems with math, STEM Center is right there ... If you're having problems in English, go to the Writing Center, ARC is open all the time and I feel like that's the reason why I'm having a good time here because I know the school by heart basically so I know where everything is now. (first-generation student)*

*To be 100% honest on my part, I was that student in high school who would have never imagined myself in college... I didn't know how to start. FYE came to my high school and with them it was just like do this, do this, sign here, do this, get these...I did everything I could. Got every award they've ever offered and I still have them in my storage...then [they] offered [me] a job after... [W]henver I do presentations, [I say] they gave me the wings to fly. (first-generation student)*

## Veterans

The veterans in the focus group were very proud of their service to the country and the skills they gained in the military. Three key themes emerged in the veteran focus group that centered on veterans feeling that the campus lacks understanding of the veteran population and their unique challenges. These key themes were: only the veterans program office understands veteran needs, the difficult transition to civilian life, and feeling set apart from the campus community.

### Only Veterans Program Office Understands Veterans Needs

As discussed earlier in this report, there is a significant contrast between the dedicated counseling students who are in special programs receive as compared to general counseling. Several veteran students mentioned having been to general counseling prior to being a part of the veterans program. These students cited that general counselors lack the knowledge about how education plans are connected to veterans receiving their financial benefits. Three veteran students described:

*The [general] counselors don't understand that there are certain regulations that we [as veterans] have to abide by to receive our benefits. You have to be a full-time student. You can only take classes that the VA (Veterans Affairs) will pay for, which are classes*

*specific to your major. [The veterans' counselor] understands [the regulations], he goes to seminars to be able to guide veterans the way they need to be guided.*

*I think [the veterans program] is absolutely wonderful. They understand what we need to get our benefits. The [veteran's resource center staff] are there to make sure we achieve our goal [at Cuyamaca]. Outside of that little corner [of the veteran's program office], there's kind of an issue. I feel ... the Admissions Office and Financial Aid Office have no understanding [of] veteran needs. I'm not saying that we're needier or we need special attention, but [there are] certain rules and regulations that we have to abide by from the VA, it's not our choice how things have to be done. A lot of of issues come from the Admissions Building, clearing residency and getting the runaround for certain things. Another area is Financial Aid, that's a whole other beast [with] their own rules and regulations.*

*It's good for the college, for faculty and counselors to know, that our time is money, literally. If you don't feel comfortable answering a question because you don't know the VA process or the process that veterans have to do, please say so. [Veterans] who are coming in, they think that you know your job. They think you know everything about everything, especially if you're acting like it. If you don't feel comfortable answering a question or setting up a pathway for somebody because you don't know the process, don't tell somebody that that's the process. Say, "I'd like to check on that for you" or just say, "This is probably a question you need to ask your veteran counselor" Before I knew the [veteran's counselor,] I knew a lot of counselors telling me a lot of different things and wasting my time.*

## **Transition to Civilian Life**

Another topic that emerged among veteran students was having to readjust to civilian life and the culture of a collegiate environment, which for many veteran students has not been an easy process. In the words of one veteran:

*The big challenge is that culture shift from the military, especially for a lot of the retired guys, for the guys that got out of high school and went through the military and then are now going to college and it's that changing culture is probably the biggest challenge along with basically just sticking to school, going from one institution to another.*

Further, Cuyamaca has a high percentage of Chaldean students (a Christian minority in Iraq, many refugees from religious prosecution). For veterans who were deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, being in the same classroom with Chaldean students has compounded their readjustment process because many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from their experiences fighting in the Middle East. One student described:

*You come to this college [after] the war in Iraq. Now we go back to diversity and culture. You have these [veteran] men and women that come to this school, they have their biases, and they have PTSD and disabilities. This is real stuff, we hear this every day. You come to the [Admissions and Records] counter you have vets with PTSD and stressors and you*

*put them alongside with a group of people that they fought against, whatever [is] going through their mind that's a stressor for them.*

Additionally, veterans cited not being understood by faculty and other students and in certain cases demeaned because of their service in the military. In the words of one veteran:

*In my major, when you start addressing things like the military industrial complex and different ideologies of society, there is a bit of backlash on veterans, especially when you start looking at the cultural end of it. If you look at the military culture [and] the anti-establishment culture it creates a clash. We believe we've been doing meritorious service this entire time and then you have people that not only completely disagree with that, but for incomprehensible reasons argue that not only was it not meritorious service, but that it was a disservice to humanity.*

Moreover, veterans are also feeling stereotyped in the current political climate. Three students described:

*Not every veteran voted for Trump. [Faculty, staff and students] see a veteran and say, "You're a veteran, you're a Trump supporter, so you're a misogynist, homophobic." There's the label. You're a vet, you're a Trump supporter. All of this because you're a veteran. You don't know how I voted.*

*These past few months [I've heard,]... "You're a vet. Oh, you're a Trump supporter. I can't talk to you. You're narrow minded." Really?*

*[Veterans don't come to the VRC] only because they hear the horror stories of school. "I don't want to put it out there that I'm a veteran".*

Another topic that emerged in this focus group was the fact that while many veteran students are part of the veterans program there is a significant number of veterans who are not. Participants cited the efforts of the Veterans Resource Center to engage the disengaged veteran population only to find little support from the college. One student described:

*The problem is the only people we get to see are veterans who are using their benefits. There's a ton of veterans out there who aren't even using benefits. You come across some of those guys, they don't even know that there is a VRC. We're (veteran students who work in VRC) trying to contact incoming veterans and we have to fight with Admissions to even tell us who the incoming veterans are. [The] person who does most of the admin for the VRC is constantly talking about the battles that she has to go through just to get the names and emails of these people, so we can tell them; "Hey, there's a VRC for you."*

## **Not Part of the Cuyamaca Community**

Among the things veteran students shared was feeling physically isolated on campus. They mentioned that the VRC is inconveniently located on the campus and far-removed from where veterans support service staff and the veterans counselor are situated. Moreover, participants described the VRC as being hard to find and lacking adequate signage. Two students shared:

*The VRC [is] completely on the other side of the campus from where people have to actually go through. We're just a word of mouth center over there. We're just lucky you know that we exist.*

*I learned about this place through some loud Army guy. He's like, "Follow me, free printing." I was like "Yes." I found the VRC that way.*

Moreover, participants expressed feeling "invisible" because they did not see themselves represented in the college catalogue. One student described this sense of not being seen:

*I would start with the catalogue, I've seen the catalogue for better colleges, again, hundreds and thousands of military people here. In the [Cuyamaca college] catalogue we have one column with [information for veterans, just the little one column. I've seen Mesa College's [catalogue], they have veteran pictures all over the place. You see Grossmont's catalog, they have a section for veterans. You see South Western College, a section for veterans. [At] Cuyamaca, we get this little box.*

The student shared the message that the limited information for veterans in the Cuyamaca catalogue sent to him and the veteran community:

*We get a box. For them [the college] we fit in this box. "Don't get out of the box, just stay right there." It feels that way, "Just stay in the box. Stay in counseling, [the] VRC and don't circulate."*

Students also pointed out that the college's messaging shows a lack of recognition for the dependents of veterans who are attending the college. These dependents are not aware of whether the VRC is for them or is they have to have served. In the words of two students:

*[In] the catalogue, we're saying veteran, veteran, veteran, but there's also the dependents. The survivors of a veteran who may have died. Where does that mom take that kid where the dad left those benefits to that kid? There's that spouse, that survivor, or that widow who's using her husband's benefits or a CalVet kid, that's just not the vet.*

*The few [dependents] that come into the VRC, they're even a little scared when they come in. They explain that they're a dependent and they go, "Am I allowed to be here?" There's no information that says, "Hey, this [VRC] is for dependents as well." If there was more information about us, on the outside, then they would feel comfortable coming in.*

## **Section 6: Findings by Individual Faculty/Staff Focus Group**

Focus groups comprised of classified staff, adjunct faculty, and full-time faculty participants described a positive experience for students at Cuyamaca College especially given its numerous cultural events that embrace the college's diversity as well as the many resources Cuyamaca provides its students. One point that emerged across focus groups with Cuyamaca personnel was

a discussion of students' challenges related to being in basic skills education and how the college has addressed this issue. This common theme is described below followed by a summary of the unique challenges Cuyamaca classified staff, adjunct faculty, and full-time faculty face.

## Addressing Students' Basic Skills Needs

One challenge students face that all three focus groups with Cuyamaca personnel identified was getting stuck in basic skills courses. To address this challenge, focus group participants noted Cuyamaca's efforts in providing an accelerated curriculum to its basic skills students; though, adjunct faculty focus group participants commented that they feel some of their students are getting rushed through and are unprepared for the transfer-level curriculum, even with the additional support. Three participants noted:

*Cuyamaca has done a fabulous job with accelerating basic skills. So in English, in ESL even, and in math, math just jumped over the ledge and they were like no more basic skills ever. (full-time faculty)*

*To speak to the [Cuyamaca] success part, we're one of the leaders I think in the nation probably, almost, but for sure the state in acceleration, so we're trying to get students through these pipelines a lot quicker. (staff)*

*This semester, I got a whole cohort of students who were reading like eighth and ninth grade level. They're very frustrated, they're unhappy. They knew they were going to fail ... It's been really ugly and unpleasant. I don't think again that's necessarily a shift in the population. I think that's a result of our focus in English acceleration and compression. Because we're trying to basically take the five, six or seven semesters of ESL and get them through in two or three. The statistics show us that this is an effective thing to do and we're actually successful and through faster, but what it means is they're working even harder and they're already working pretty hard. And they're under even more pressure. And I don't think we did our best job as an institution this semester in supporting them. (adjunct faculty)*

## Classified Staff

Classified staff members participating in the focus group reported working directly with students in support services departments. While participants described a positive and nurturing environment for Cuyamaca students, they expressed a different culture existing for classified staff that inevitably affects their ability to support student success.

## Crisis Mode

According to focus group participants, the culture for classified staff at Cuyamaca is in "crisis mode." The crisis mode identified by participants was created by years of Cuyamaca being understaffed. In the words of one participant:

*We've had such issues with understaffing... and budget issues that the classified staff are so dedicated to making the college actually function that we've become hyper vigilant*

*and overly responsible... [T]he majority of the time we've been in crisis mode and... it's hard to let go of that even when more staff have developed or been hired....[I]t's hard to let go of that feeling, even though we feel like we have the right. We're supposed to take our lunch, we should be able to leave, but that is part of our culture not to. Survival.*

Aside from adapting to being understaffed, the crisis mode culture has been caused by and sustained through high turnover among administrators. Two participants described:

*[I]t's a testament to the people ... that do their jobs and have that hyper vigilance that the ship will continue to sail regardless of whether we have leadership or not. And that speaks to the people, the dedicated people ... But it does create a sense of chaos for us and then as you have new people coming in that have no attachment to the department, you constantly are having to train someone who's supposed to be in charge of you and then they come and they go and that's kind of been our cycle.*

*Yeah, it's the burnout and... the constant shift of [managers and administrators] that we have had where it's like people come in and they're all excited about it and you get excited because they are and then they leave. And it's like, "Oh, okay. So then I'll just go back to my thing" and then someone else comes and they have a different idea or perception of it and then you kind of look side glances at them like... "What do you know?"... [Classified staff are] not receptive to it.*

## **Equity: Feeling Unequal**

When asked about how equity looks like at Cuyamaca, the discussion revolved around the inequities they feel as classified staff. The constant state of "crisis," makes classified staff feel overworked and undervalued, and eventually leads to burn out. this type of survival mentality has led classified staff to feel they do not have the time, energy, or resources to be involved in the campus or its student equity efforts. Further, classified staff can feel taken advantage of and thus do not want to make the extra effort to help the institution. Three participants noted:

*You have all these initiatives and big buzz words coming down and people, the classified staff, I think don't feel cared about... [E]ven though these initiatives are coming from the state and we have a responsibility and should be investing in students because that's why we're supposed to be here, I think a lot of people...end up saying, "Well, what about me? No one cares about me so why am I supposed to make the extra effort to help the institution, to help these students. I'm going to do my bare minimum."*

*I would say the institution has done a really good job of being very inclusive with our students...I feel like students have a different experience than even our own faculty and staff do in that we're very mindful of equity and diversity, but we're not making sure that students feel validated and engaged. But what I always come back to with validating and engaging students is that you also have to validate and engage your staff.*

## Adjunct Faculty

Only two participants took part in the adjunct faculty focus group, which spoke to the lack of engagement and connection this group may have to the Cuyamaca community. Similar to the focus group with classified staff, the adjunct faculty focus group participants described feeling undervalued at Cuyamaca. Further, participants noted that adjunct faculty represent approximately 80 percent of the instructors at the college and thus interact with a vast majority of Cuyamaca students. Adjunct faculty, therefore, play an integral role in student success and should feel valued by the college.

### Feeling Undervalued

Cuyamaca adjunct faculty participants expressed feeling undervalued at the college, which aligned with adjunct faculty being uninformed at Cuyamaca. In fact, participants expressed disappointment with only having two adjunct faculty members participate in the focus group though at the same time they noted that the lack of participation is a result of the college not trying to engage their adjunct faculty. Both focus group participants commented:

*I think it's important that we're here. And I commend us all for being here. And I wish there was more turnout [at the focus group]. And I think that one thing the administration can do is promote [adjunct faculty involvement and engagement] more.*

*78% of us [are adjuncts and] don't really belong here. We're just here for a paycheck, we're not, we don't feel involved. We don't feel like we're part of the family... And so again [the]... problem is that you know we are not treated as well as we should be because we're not involved. And we're not involved because we don't feel like we're involved.*

### Equity: Disconnected Messages

Again, just as the conversation around equity turned to a discussion of classified staff feeling undervalued, when adjunct faculty were asked about Cuyamaca's equity efforts, focus group participants noted a disconnect between what the college is messaging to the students compared to the messages received by its adjunct faculty. The two focus group participants described:

*I think the message to the students [that being successful in school then leads to more success] is right, but when 80% of your faculty are not demonstrating the thing you want to demonstrate, that seems like a huge problem to me. [If the college thinks that this is the message you should get, then the college should be sending that message. And they should be sending that message by allowing us to be successful.*

*I wish we would have had more of a turnout but this is a good reason. This is a perfect example of the disconnect we have here. And if you don't get people involved and you don't really allocate some time and maybe some funding to really bring in 78% of the teachers that you have here, teaching 78% of the classes here, involved on that level you know, everything trickles down from there... You're not going to have students that could have a better education.*

## Full-Time Faculty

Across student focus groups, one consistent theme students described was the dichotomy between two types of faculty. Within the full-time faculty focus group, participants shed light on one potential cause and related solution to this challenge. Full-time faculty participants described an insufficient professional development program and the absence of an adequate onboarding process for new faculty. Without programs that support faculty success, instructors are on their own in navigating Cuyamaca's policies and how to effectively reach their students. For more consistency in teaching practices and to productively work toward student success, faculty focus group participants encouraged the college to invest more in professional development.

## Professional Development

As noted above, across all student focus groups, participants described both highly positive and extremely negative experiences with their teachers. Drawing from those experiences, student participants advised the college to better train their teachers. The consensus from students that teachers need more training was echoed by the full-time faculty focus group participants who urged Cuyamaca to institutionalize programs to ensure new faculty are oriented and onboarded appropriately, and to provide faculty with a robust professional development program. As two participants stated:

*I'll just simply say that the college needs to look at hiring a permanent professional development coordinator whether they be faculty or a director or whatever classification.*

*[New faculty] are not being set up for success. And feel like they have nobody to talk to. And it's really a mess. [A] full-time faculty member is a huge investment and you need to make that work and I was shocked to realize that it was just luck of the draw [if you have a good department chair], there's no kind of campus-wide methodology for onboarding faculty. That's a big problem.*

*I think that we can do a much better job of onboarding new faculty. Training new faculty, and providing them an ongoing academy of some sort. At least throughout their first year or throughout their tenure process.*

On the one hand, faculty focus group participants cited a lack of a permanent position to coordinate professional development for Cuyamaca personnel. Further, this lack of resources directed to lead college committees extended beyond professional development as evidenced by the small portion of reassigned time the college dedicates to—as examples from focus group—the Tenure Review Coordinator and Student Learning Outcomes Coordinator positions. On the other hand, faculty focus group participants expressed their frustration that the District has recently hired three full-time professional development specialists which participants have not felt has been beneficial to Cuyamaca faculty. In the words of one participant:

*Our district has three full-time professional development specialists... [and they're] putting out all of these activities that are for everyone [at the colleges] but... I don't think it's necessarily aimed at faculty... There's nothing wrong with that, but there's no coordination with the colleges or very little coordination. Other than occasionally they'll*

*come attend [professional development committee] meetings...So that's a little frustrating.*

## Equity: Efforts at Cuyamaca

After some negative experiences with Cuyamaca's past administration, faculty focus group participants expressed their excitement about the new administration. One participant specifically highlighted seeing promise in the new administration's ability to make meaningful strides in Cuyamaca's equity efforts:

*We're in a moment now where I think the administration is able to really make some headway with creating structural and institutional change to serve students. And it's just really exciting...I hope to integrate equity data into our practices as instructors more...To be able to look [at our equity data] and kind of get some training about where our misses are. What our highlights are...and to be able to kind of use that data to have research informed practices.*

Another faculty focus group participant provided concrete examples of what may currently be hindering equitable student access and success and suggestions on addressing those barriers:

*[W]ith regard to issues of equity and access to students, I think it's important to look at the staffing, we lost two counselors and they have [not yet been] replaced. And that's taking away time from everybody, increases the stress [and decreases] student access. Second one is promoting equity with translating documents to fit the needs of our students, because [some of the Chaldean students] come to me and say, "Financial aid sent me. Help me out." And I'm not supposed to translate or do the first phase for them. That's not my job.*

## Section 7: Recommendations

In providing recommendations, this section aligns the challenges and suggestions offered by focus group participants with the six success factors from the RP Group's Student Support (Re)defined project: *Directed, Focused, Engaged, Connected, Nurtured, and Valued*. While Student Support (Re)defined was a student-focused investigation, in work subsequent to this study, it was found that these success factors are not limited to reaching students, but can apply to faculty and staff as well. The six success factors, as demonstrated below, are often intertwined, therefore, addressing a challenge through the lens of one factor can result in helping students succeed through a different factor. There are other times, too, where a success factor can stand alone based on the needs of students, faculty, and staff.

### Directed and Focused

To be *directed* is defined by students having a goal and knowing how to achieve it, which directly relates to being *focused*, which means students stay on track and keep their eyes on the prize. Across focus groups, participants described campus resources that kept them on track. It is important to mention, though, that a significant proportion of student participants were recruited

through their participation in the FYE program, were involved in EOPS, active in student government, and/or worked on campus. This group of students, therefore, were well-resourced through these programs and activities, and specifically cited their counselors as helping direct them and stay focused on their educational goal. However, student participants contrasted their appreciation of their program-specific counselors who helped them maneuver through their educational plans with negative experiences with general counselors where they felt misdirected and misguided.

It is recommended, therefore, that the college **scale-up and institutionalize what works within these programs to ensure that all Cuyamaca students are properly directed and focused.** Student participants cited the main difficulty with general counseling is that they have to meet with a different counselor each time and are offered different information; thus, each time they leave the Counseling Center, students feel confused and misinformed. Through the FYE, EOPS, DSPS, and other programs, students are assigned counselors enabling students to establish trusting and caring relationships with their counselor. **To help combat the issue of students being provided with inconsistent information across counselors, Cuyamaca should explore assigning counselors for every student based on specific academic programs.** Assigning counselors to students ensures that the counselor is comprehensively informed about the academic program the student is pursuing and has the opportunity to develop relationships with students.

## Engaged and Connected

To feel *connected* means to feel a part of the college community, which often leads to students being more *engaged* through active participation on the campus. Again, the student participants in the focus group overly represented students who were particularly active and resourced through programs like the FYE. The only focus group participants who were recruited, more or less, at random represented the non-first generation student population. The non-first generation student participants expressed not having enough opportunities to engage on campus, and not wanting to be involved in the student clubs available at Cuyamaca due to lack of interest in what was available. The difference between this group of disengaged and disconnected students and the other students who participated in the focus group was stark and clearly was affecting their experience at the college given how negative these students were in contrast. Seeing how programs like FYE can heavily influence students' connection to and engagement with the college, efforts must be made to **determine how to help a larger number of students, particularly those who do not find their way to a program, experience a greater sense of involvement and belonging.**

Further, student focus group participants described that the college needs to advertise and communicate the available resources at Cuyamaca. Many student participants involved in the various campus resources described getting connected and involved with specific programs by chance through either being directed personally by their counselor or, more often, being directed by their peers. It is important for the college **to clearly and broadly communicate the available resources at Cuyamaca to ensure all students know where to go for support and are connected to available programs and services.**

## Nurtured

To feel *nurtured* means that students feel somebody cares about their success and helps them succeed. One of the main challenges students consistently described facing was the financial burden of their course textbooks, which was compounded by students expressing that their instructors do not use the textbooks to teach their courses. Further, focus group participants noted that the high cost of textbooks create a barrier to their success. They described frustration with certain institutional practices; for instance, when students do not receive their financial aid in time to purchase their required books. These practices are received as signals to students that the faculty and the college do not want to help them succeed. To address this concern the college needs to **inform faculty about the impact of their textbook decisions, and encourage them to investigate how these decisions affect students.** Relatedly, **Cuyamaca needs to find additional ways to help students afford their books,** and investigate current policies—like financial aid, book vouchers, available textbooks in the library—that intend to address this challenge and examine whether they are in fact effective.

## Valued

To be *valued* means that the individuals' skills, talents, abilities, and experiences are recognized; and individuals feel their contributions are appreciated. In regards to the student focus groups, participants described negative interactions with faculty/staff who lack cultural sensitivity and seem uncomfortable supporting students from underrepresented racial minority backgrounds, have disabilities, and are veterans. These negative experiences make students from these underserved backgrounds feel misunderstood and undervalued. Cuyamaca would benefit from providing **opportunities for faculty/staff to engage in cultural sensitivity training designed to increase empathy and understanding of how to support these students.** Further, students with disabilities specifically expressed that hiring individuals with disabilities would help increase empathy for and awareness of the disabled student population among Cuyamaca personnel, as well as provide insights into some of the unique and evolving challenges these students face.

Lastly, participants across focus groups articulated an appreciation for being provided with the opportunity to speak. Participants were encouraged that Cuyamaca was putting together these focus groups and taking time to learn about the challenges students, faculty, and staff face, and expressed hope that action is taken from focus group findings. These focus groups have provided a step for the college in showing its students, faculty, and staff that they are valued at Cuyamaca and that the college wants to make sure it is addressing their challenges and providing them with the opportunity to be successful. It is therefore important that Cuyamaca continue to **conduct focus groups regularly to gather student, faculty, and staff voices.**

## The Critical Role of Faculty and Staff in Supporting Student Success

One stressor underlying the themes highlighted in this report is that **while Cuyamaca personnel expressed that the college provides its students with an engaging and nurturing and environment, this environment does not necessarily exist for Cuyamaca faculty/staff.**

Throughout each focus group with Cuyamaca personnel, participants described challenges that allude to not feeling nurtured by the college, which lead faculty/staff to not feel connected or want to be engaged at the college. Faculty participants discussed the need for a more permanent and robust professional development program, adjunct faculty expressed feeling taken advantage of, and staff described a “crisis mode” culture.

One of the most significant institutional challenges student focus group participants described was the negative experiences they had with some of their faculty, noting especially that their instructors lacked proper training and should be more aware of how to support community college students with diverse backgrounds. Student participants, therefore, overwhelmingly suggested professional development with special attention to train faculty on more effective teaching strategies. Cuyamaca faculty and staff are on the “front lines” and interact with students daily. These interactions are what stand out for students when describing their college experience. Cuyamaca, therefore, needs to **recognize the instrumental role faculty and staff play in supporting equitable student success and provide their personnel with the resources to feel valued, nurtured, engaged, and connected** at Cuyamaca.

Cuyamaca College is not only an organizational entity; it is also a network of complex human interactions. **For students to feel supported both academically and socially, the college must promote a culture in which all faculty, staff, and administrators feel a shared responsibility for student success.** Instructors and counselors may see their roles at the college as already inherently about support because their positions require them to work directly with students. However, based on the findings from Student Support (Re)defined, faculty and counselors play a pivotal role in how students’ experience college that goes far beyond the classroom and/or the counseling center. For instance, faculty can help students develop a connection to and actively engage with their peers, stay focused, and feel that they and the college care about their academic and personal success. In addition to guiding and supporting students to attain their educational goals, counselors can help students learn about engagement opportunities including extracurricular activities and clubs and connect as many students as possible to special programs like EOPS and FYE that help them identify a direction early on and receive ongoing guidance for reaching their goals. In contrast, others may not see how what they do directly supports students, such as individuals working behind the scenes in payroll, maintenance, or administrative offices. However, everyone who works at the college can potentially play a valuable role promoting student achievement.

**For each and every person working at Cuyamaca to be empowered to provide that student support, more is required than simply telling personnel to be more supportive of students and leaving them on their own to figure out how to implement that directive.** Rather, personnel across the college must have the opportunity to discover exactly how, both in their official positions and as members of the college community, they can directly contribute to student success. As such, the college needs to **provide professional development and assistance that enables personnel at all levels and in all roles to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support students**, as well as to continually practice these new skills.

By considering a few recommendations offered here, Cuyamaca can begin cultivating a more nurturing and engaging culture for Cuyamaca faculty and staff, and a sense that the college values its personnel and understands their role in supporting student success. To that end, we recommend that Cuyamaca provide a **robust new year-long faculty orientation that includes a**

**teaching academy as well as professional development that is specifically designed to help enhance equity awareness and cultural sensitivity for Cuyamaca’s disproportionately-impacted groups.** Naturally, staff and faculty who choose to attend such trainings are oftentimes more aware and culturally sensitive than personnel choosing to not attend these types of workshops and programs. For an institutional cultural shift, then, it is important to make these trainings mandatory and provided in a way that truly engages its participants and promotes thoughtful dialogue. Cuyamaca would be additionally aided by **creating a team-oriented culture among its staff and faculty.** As a first step, the college needs to shift the crisis mode culture to one that promotes staff engagement by encouraging staff to be involved in campus events and providing them the time to serve on collegewide committees. Cuyamaca also needs to ensure adjunct faculty feel valued at the college through benefits such as mentors and/or space to offer office hours.

In order for this all-inclusive approach to student support to be both meaningful and sustainable, Cuyamaca must work to create an institution-wide culture in which the promotion of student success is a built-in component of every position at the college, with the expectations of these responsibilities robustly communicated throughout the institution and fully supported from an operational and logistical standpoint by administrative policies and practices.

## Section 8: Conclusion

This report summarizes key findings from 12 focus groups comprised of an extremely diverse group of Cuyamaca students, faculty, and staff. A variety of themes emerged describing the Cuyamaca culture, challenges that are shared across student populations, as well as challenges noted by faculty and staff participants. While participants described challenges they face that are unique to their identified group, a number of themes emerged that cut across focus groups and aligned with multiple success factors. By sharing their challenges and recommendations, focus group participants have provided Cuyamaca with tremendous insight into what must be done to create a culture that aligns with emphasizing the six success factors defined through the Student Support (Re)defined project, and that promotes equitable student success.

As a first step to addressing challenges reported by student, faculty, and staff participants, Cuyamaca should consider a robust professional development program for its faculty/staff to assist in onboarding new faculty, informing them of best teaching practices, and enhancing awareness and understanding of the challenges of Cuyamaca’s diverse student population. This type of professional development program signals to the faculty/staff that Cuyamaca wants to foster their growth, and will undoubtedly result in better experiences for students in the classroom and with support services thus increasing students’ likelihood of success.

These focus groups marked an important beginning for making student, faculty, and staff perspectives more visible at Cuyamaca College. Looking at the college through the lens of experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—could dramatically help to evolve the campus community’s (faculty, staff, administrators) understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. The college has an opportunity to build upon this initial step of eliciting student views, by developing a systematic process to regularly engage student, faculty, and staff voices in the planning, design,

assessment and refinement of college practices, particularly those central to the Student Equity Plan.

## Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

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

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# Appendix

## Project Notification to the Campus



### Conversations about the Cuyamaca College Experience: Focus Group Project – Spring 2017

#### Overview

The College is seeking feedback about the Cuyamaca College experience! The Student Success and Equity Committee has supported this effort by coordinating with the RP Group to conduct a series of focus groups with Cuyamaca students, faculty, and staff regarding their perceptions of the campus, particularly as it relates to creating an inclusive environment.

#### Goal

The goal of the project is to gather information to guide the College's efforts to improve student success and foster an inclusive experience for all of those in the campus community.

#### How will participants be recruited?

The tri-chairs and other representatives from the Student Success and Equity Committee will be working with other members of the campus community and college governance groups to recruit students, faculty, and staff to participate in focus groups that will be held the week of May 15<sup>th</sup> on the Cuyamaca College campus.

Your collaboration in reaching out to and encouraging students from the College's historically underrepresented student groups, as well as part-time faculty, full-time faculty, and classified staff, to participate in these focus groups would be greatly appreciated.

If you would like to find out more about the focus group project, please contact the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Success and Equity at 619-660-4046.

#### How will research results be communicated and utilized?

The results of the focus group study will be communicated back to the campus in the fall 2017 semester and will be used by the Student Success and Equity Committee and other campus governance groups to inform plans, practices, and approaches to foster equitable student outcomes in the 2017/18 academic year.