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CPS Center for Postsecondary Success

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## Site Visit Report of the Fourth Year of Developmental Education Reform in the Florida College System

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# Executive Summary

We, the researchers at the Center for Postsecondary Success (CPS) at Florida State University, have been conducting a longitudinal study of how Florida College System (FCS) institutions have implemented developmental education reform (SB 1720) on their campuses. As a part of this research effort, we conducted site visits to nine FCS institutions from October 2017 to April 2018 to study how SB 1720 was implemented on the ground. Here we present findings from our analysis of focus group interviews conducted at these nine FCS institutions with administrators, faculty members, advisors, and students. In total, we conducted 34 semi-structured focus groups and 10 individual interviews lasting from 19 minutes to 75 minutes. Focus groups on average involved between 2 and 10 individuals. We spoke with 62 administrators, 48 faculty members, 50 academic advisors, and 59 students, resulting in data from 219 research participants.

Our student focus groups were diverse both in terms of age and racial and ethnic background. Of the 59 students who participated in our interviews and focus groups, 58% identified as female and 42% as male. Student participants' racial and ethnic background were as follows: 46% of students identified as Black or African American, 22% identified as White, non-Hispanic or Latina/o, and 14% identified as Hispanic or Latina/o. Of the participants, 19% spoke English as a second language. A total of 64% of the students were 21 years old or younger and 68% of students graduated high school after 2013, when developmental education (DE) was restructured by SB 1720. Of the students in our sample, 68% reported taking a college placement test and 47% were enrolled in DE courses, despite having the option to exempt the courses. When asked, 73% of students indicated plans to transfer to a 4-year college or university.

Our findings in this report identify six themes central to the ways that FCS institutions demonstrate commitment to meeting the needs of students: 1) meeting the needs of students through problem-solving and continuous improvement, 2) meeting the needs of students through advising, 3) meeting the needs of students through instruction, 4) meeting the needs of students through academic support, 5) meeting the needs of students by fostering individual student success strategies, and 6) meeting the needs of students through services for specific student populations.

1. FCS institutions demonstrate their commitment to meeting the needs of students while maintaining the open access mission of community colleges through efforts at continuous institutional improvement. This focus on continuous improvement in supporting students can be seen across units and divisions in advising practices, instruction, academic support services, the

emphasis on individual student success strategies, and accommodations targeted at specific student populations.

2. FCS advisors create the conditions necessary for students to thrive through building rapport, making connections, and developing trust between campus personnel and students. Advisors and other staff reported forming personal relationships with students grounded in frequent and informal communication. Sense of belonging at FCS institutions was facilitated by staff working intentionally to actively encourage students' active participation in their educational journeys.
3. FCS faculty design curriculum intended to meet student needs. Faculty reported that the poor academic preparation of some students oftentimes required teaching basic developmental skills in first-level credit-bearing classes. Faculty members cited writing, in particular, as a skill that is so essential to student success that it has been incorporated across the curriculum. Developing alternate math pathways for non-STEM majors was another way in which faculty created curriculum to support student learning and success.
4. Staff find students the help they need from a variety of campus sources. Across the FCS, these resources wed curriculum with academic support services to augment the overall support structure for students, particularly given widespread preparedness concerns.
5. FCS campus personnel assist students in developing strategies they can employ on their own to take greater ownership over their learning process. Students in our focus groups shared the ways they studied, which they argued, contributed to their overall learning. Students also highlighted the academic challenges they faced such as test anxiety and admitted they continued to work through these issues.
6. FCS campus personnel address the unique assets and learning challenges of students from specific populations.
   a. Campus personnel found that adult students sometimes suffered because of the length of time away from academic work and from a lack of familiarity with technology. Despite these challenges, adult students were widely viewed by campus personnel as more motivated than their traditional-aged peers.
   b. First-generation college students often pursued postsecondary education to make their families proud. Students in the focus groups felt that a college education alone could be their conduit to upward mobility. However, first-generation students' lack of familial capital about how to navigate a college setting disadvantaged some students.
   c. Throughout our data, campus personnel consistently identified the financial strain that economically disadvantaged students faced. Many staff mentioned how campus programs, like TRIO, helped their institutions accommodate economically disadvantaged students and give them a greater sense of belonging.
   d. Help-seeking among friends and peers was particularly useful for English language learners and immigrant students who were attempting to learn English while also completing academic coursework in a second language. Due to the language barriers, students and campus staff agreed that face-to-face classes were more beneficial than learning online.
   e. The support for active duty military and veteran students proved to be wide-ranging and impactful to students' connection to support staff and institutions. Many institutions hired staff who were themselves veterans to help students successfully navigate the challenges of campus life.

# Introduction

Researchers at the CPS (Center for Postsecondary Success) have been conducting a longitudinal study of how Florida College System (FCS) institutions have implemented developmental education reform (SB 1720) on their campuses. As a part of this research effort, CPS researchers conducted site visits to nine FCS institutions from October 2017 to April 2018. In this statewide report, we consider administrative, faculty, advisor, support staff, and student perspectives on meeting the needs of students throughout the FCS. We begin this report by describing the deep commitment we encountered across the state of Florida to the traditional open access mission of community colleges.

## COMMITTED TO THE OPEN ACCESS MISSION: "A BLANK SLATE TO CREATE THEIR OWN DESTINY"

The importance of meeting the needs of students for success in community colleges in a changing environment cannot be overstated. Campus personnel carry out this priority through a variety of mechanisms, including academic advising, instruction, and academic support. Through their work, community college staff seek to instill knowledge of success strategies that will make students more self-reliant learners while tailoring their practices to the needs of specific student populations.

Focus group participants at the institutions we visited were committed to the open access mission of the FCS. An administrator confirmed, "We're an open-door institution." Campus personnel and students alike regarded the FCS as a place where students could start anew despite their previous schooling experiences. An advisor at a different institution shared this philosophy:

> …for those students who were sort of subjected to stigma in high school this was an opportunity for them to let that stigma be behind them and start sort of with a blank slate and create their own destiny.

We uncovered a shared commitment among campus personnel at all levels to fostering academic success for all students. An administrator described this commitment by mentioning the ways personnel aimed to address individual student needs:

> …we will always set the student up for success, and each student is an individual, with individual needs, with individual experiences. We have students, as an open-access institution, joining us, returning to school, or coming from high schools all across Florida and around the country …, so our goal will always be, and will remain, to ensure that we open pathways for students to be successful…

The same administrator continued by linking the overarching individualized, student-centered approach and institutional practice with the open-access philosophy of the FCS:

> What is best for that individual student? An open access institution student needs a lot of assistance. Some don't, but some do…I work closely with the professors, and they say, 'This student is really struggling,' and we look at their record, and it's like, 'Yeah, all indices – You are right, professor.'…… We set the student up for success. .... I think we would all agree, because every one of us around the table and every one of our teams is all here to advocate for that student to be successful.

This shared commitment to the open access mission resulted in institutional practices nimble enough to respond to students' needs, while also responsive to the external pressures placed on personnel at the institutions.

# Research Design

Since 2014 researchers at the CPS have been conducting site visits to FCS institutions. In this section, we describe the data collection and analysis methods foregrounding our examination of the perspectives of the ways students' needs are met we provide in this report.

## DATA COLLECTION

Email invitations were sent to all FCS institutions requesting participation in the site visit component of the larger study on DE implementation and evaluation in FCS institutions. Nine institutions accepted our invitation. Four of the nine institutions were first time site visits, while we had previously visited five of the institutions. One-day site visits to the institutions were completed in fall 2017 and spring 2018. At least two CPS researchers visited each institution. Institutions assisted CPS researchers with setting up logistics of the visit, including soliciting potential focus group participants, as well as securing on-campus space for the focus group sessions. Data sources included field observations, institutional documents, and transcripts from focus groups with relevant stakeholders at each of the institutions.

### Field Observations

CPS researchers generated field notes for each site visit, identifying salient, interesting, or illuminating observations from each visit. Many of the field notes focused on observations of DE courses, gateway math and English courses, and advising sessions.

### Institutional Documents

In phase one of the project (2014-2015), CPS researchers collected and analyzed Implementation Plans from all 28 FCS institutions. The plans from the nine FCS institutions we visited were used to support the development of the focus group interview

protocols and the coding framework used for data analysis in the first and subsequent years. Starting in year two (2015-2016), researchers reviewed the Developmental Education Accountability Report compiled by the Division of Florida Colleges. Each FCS institution submitted an updated DE reform plan, along with other noteworthy actions taken related to DE. In the second and current phases (2016-2018) of the project, institutional documents such as course syllabi, advising flowcharts, DE brochures, and other student service resource material were used to provide background information for the focus group and field observation data.

**Focus Groups**

In the current phase of data collection, we conducted 34 semi-structured focus groups and 10 individual interviews lasting from 19 minutes to 75 minutes. Focus groups on average involved between 2 and 10 individuals. In total, we spoke with 62 administrators, 48 faculty members, 50 academic advisors, and 59 students, resulting in data from 219 research participants.

Our student focus groups were diverse both in terms of age and racial and ethnic background. Of the 59 students who participated in our interviews and focus groups, 58% identified as female and 42% as male. Student participants' racial and ethnic background were as follows: 46% of students identified as Black or African American, 22% identified as White, non-Hispanic or Latina/o, and 14% identified as Hispanic or Latina/o. Of the participants, 19% spoke English as a second language. A total of 64% of the students were 21 years old or younger, and 68% of students graduated high school after 2013, when developmental education (DE) was restructured by SB 1720. Of the students in our sample, 68% reported taking a college placement test and 47% were enrolled in DE courses, despite having the option to exempt the courses. When asked, 73% of students indicated plans to transfer to a 4-year college or university.

The interview protocols for each of the stakeholder groups were designed to identify the considerations underlying institutions' choices for the new placement, advising, and DE options. Each of the four interview protocols (i.e., administrator, faculty, advisor and support staff, and student) began with a "grand tour" question intended to identify broad changes in institutional practice after the passage of SB 1720. The administrative protocol, for instance, began with the following question, "Overall, how would you describe your college's approach to redesigning your developmental education program?" Likewise, the faculty and advisor/support staff protocols began with grand tour questions eliciting an overview of curricular changes, changes to the advising process, and changes to academic support functions. The student protocol focused broadly on students' educational experiences at their respective institutions as well as their perceptions of changes in several areas including curriculum, advising, and support services. From these opening questions, follow-up questions were then asked for participants to elaborate on their perspectives about implementation of the legislation. Each focus group concluded with the following question, "Is there anything we didn't ask about developmental education reform and your experience at this institution that would be important to know?"

## DATA ANALYSIS

A digital recording of each focus group was used to generate a verbatim transcript. Transcripts were then imported into qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10, for coding and analysis. To establish analyst triangulation (Patton, 2015), multiple analysts (four researchers) coded the data. The entire coding team met weekly to share findings and discuss issues arising from data analysis.

We used pattern coding of the focus group transcripts to identify central ideas and properties in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). We employed a four-phase approach to guide data coding and analysis. In the first phase, we read through the focus group transcripts to gain a better understanding of institutional processes and participant perspectives at each institution. Coding in phase two involved a subset of data files across participant types. During this process, the coding team of four researchers engaged in a reliability-building process. During the initial phase of open coding, we began with the coding framework from year three that included 237 codes. Each researcher coded four transcripts individually. We then ran the Cohen's Kappa coefficient function in NVivo 10 on the selected transcripts to determine the degree of similarity in coding styles between researchers. Our aggregate coefficient was 0.61, indicating satisfactory reliability according to the guidelines set by the software company that makes NVivo, QRS International. This process also allowed us to identify disputed codes so that we could redefine them and increase our reliability moving forward. In addition to establishing inter-coder reliability, we revised our year three coding framework by renaming and reorganizing codes for year four data.

After modifying the coding framework from year three and adding, merging, or deleting codes, we had a total of 238 codes for the current year of coding. After we achieved inter-coder reliability, members of the team used the revised framework to code the remaining files in phrase three, and to re-code and analyze the data coded during reliability-building.

Researchers also wrote analytic memos throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Written memos in this project were used to identify emergent themes in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These themes were used to create codes, including broad codes like *students* and more detailed codes like *student perceptions of faculty and staff*. In the fourth phase of data analysis, we synopsized the institutional processes, student experiences, and participant perspectives at each of the nine institutions.

Trustworthiness was established through peer debriefing with three researchers who acted as "devil's advocates" in questioning the group's interpretations (Patton, 2015). Member-checking of the institutional synopses is currently being conducted with administrators from each of the nine state colleges we visited.

# Meeting the Needs of Students

In this section of this report, we explore the commitment to meeting the needs of students in the FCS through a variety of lenses. We first broadly describe the "fix it" philosophy of continuous improvement in the FCS, then consider how student learning is supported through advising, instruction, academic support, individual student success strategies, and services for specific student populations.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS THROUGH PROBLEM-SOLVING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: "WHAT CAN WE DO TO FIX IT?"

Campus personnel who participated in our focus groups emphasized that an integral part of the culture of student learning in the FCS involves a "can do" and "fix it" attitude in supporting student success through institutional problem solving. A faculty member confirmed, "And we were trying to identify where the issues were – internal, external – what can we do to fix it." Similarly, an advisor at another institution remarked:

> And I do feel in some of these situations, it is how are we gonna fix this problem? How are we gonna solve what's going on? It has dramatically increased communication among our divisions, however, you know. I mean, we're talking to these people all the time. And we're talking to each other, and how are we going to fix this? So I mean, is it a great conversation starter, and it is something that is, in my opinion, going to take a lot of heads to put together in order to solve this problem. Because I do find it to be a bit of an issue. But I think that we're all working towards that goal. I think that's a very, very positive component of our campus. You know, just we love our students, and we want to see them succeed.

This "fix-it" approach was shared across state colleges, which helped prevent academic silos and allowed for collaborative problem-solving to occur. An administrator at another institution described how her colleagues' intentionality brought divisions together to solve organizational problems, "From the student affairs perspective . . . there was really a much more intentional alignment between academic affairs and student affairs and, you know, the coming together has been quite beneficial."

Despite the challenges that SB 1720 presented for institutions, staff across divisions strive to help students succeed and are committed to adapting practices to best serve students. One instructor explained the importance of navigating institutional challenges to foster positive outcomes for all students:

> And I feel as though many of the positive things that we are seeing coming from these changes have also stirred up some very interesting challenges that we have to try to navigate. And instead of really being able to process what we're trying to get these students to do, and come up with a really good, solid plan and manipulate it, I feel like we did see the writing on the wall. We made the best steps that we could, and I don't think we've done a poor job. But I think a lot more needs to be done. And that's one of the reasons I was so interested to come to these meetings.

> Because we cannot, in my opinion, let this bill go by and let it fall by the wayside. There are students who have been compromised by this. There are students who have been very successful because of this. But we cannot rest our laurels on only those students who have been successful. You know, our job is to help these students, and ensure their success, and our success as an institution.

With a positive attitude and the concerted effort to adapt to the FCS's diverse population of students and their needs, campus personnel at the institutions we visited proved committed to a cycle of continuous improvement to promote student growth and development. The proactive approach to both institutional problem-solving and student advising also required that staff work to connect students with the campus resources that could help them be successful.

The intentional approach to institutional problem-solving was manifested across all the FCS institutions we visited and across all academic divisions at state colleges from advising to instruction to academic support. In the next section, we begin by exploring how advisors support student learning though relationship-building, then consider student learning through instruction, and conclude by examining how campus personnel support student learning by linking students with academic support services.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS THROUGH ADVISING: "RELATIONSHIPS ARE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT"

Advisors are at the center of the open access mission. Advisors act by informing students of their course options as a first point of contact. They also encourage students to engage in appropriate educational activities in and outside of college (Kuh, 2008). While much variety exists in the types and ways advisors engage in their work, it is important that they understand the characteristics of the students they serve as well as the structures and programs of the college. Through such an understanding, they can gauge students' academic needs more appropriately and modify their practices to facilitate productive relationships with them.

A key role for advisors is to support the teaching and learning mission of the institution. In collaborative college environments, many campus personnel work with students over time; however, advisors are the center connecting students to campus programs and resources (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Advising models that are sensitive to student characteristics are essential. Developmental advising, a commonly adopted advising philosophy in community colleges, centers on empowering students to take ownership of their educational and life goals through a partnership between the student and college staff (Appleby, 2008; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Because community college students face a number of significant challenges, these individuals may require a more interactive and in-depth style of advising. Other students prefer prescriptive advising, however, which is essentially contractual in nature (Crookston, 1972). In these cases, students receive and use knowledge from advisors but engage in the advising relationship on an as-needed basis (Appleby, 2008).

In this section, we explore how advisors engage in relationship-building with students to enhance student learning and growth. A specific example of the commitment to meeting the needs of students and the problem-solving approach was demonstrated by the advising philosophy employed at one

institution. An advisor explained her institution's approach to advising students:

> . . . We have pretty much adopted intentional advising, being very specific on effectively reaching out to the student trying to avoid problems to being with. Reactive models don't work well so I'm a very proactive advisor and sometimes an intrusive advisor depending on the situation and the particular student. But I think given limitations on financial aid, given our current funding model at the state level we have to be proactive and try to steer them towards specific degree programs to specific occupations so frankly, we can graduate them, retain them, and have them be successful. So those are my three words, intrusive, proactive, and intentional.

In order to be intrusive, proactive, and intentional, FCS staff created the conditions necessary for students to thrive by building rapport, making connections, and developing trust with students. Advisors and other staff formed personal relationships with students grounded on frequent and informal communication. Sense of belonging at FCS institutions was encouraged by staff working to actively engage students to participate in their educational journeys. Specifically, relationship-building effectively increased student's engagement with their own learning processes. An administrator at one institution emphasized the importance of relationship-building:

> I think it's fair to say that [name of campus program] initially really caused us to look at our system and look at, you know, where we could improve the support necessary for students to be successful from the very beginning, attracting them in, to the very end. And as a result, the college I think came up with a new model, if you will, and the college invested in that model. And I would add to that that in addition to that, you know, relationships are critically important in the process.

Relationships were integral to the success of the student-centered model at one small, rural institution, particularly among advisors who served as the first points of contact for students. An advisor echoed this sentiment, when she described the importance of advisor-student interaction:

> One thing I always tell students, "At [name of institution] you can see pretty much any advisor that you want to see. If you go to one advisor, and you don't make that connection or you don't understand what they're telling you, not that this happens here, but if you don't trust what they're telling you, go hear it from a different voice. But the moment that you find that person that you trust, that you understand, that you can relate to, you need to stick with them throughout the entire process so that you can continue to build that connection.

At first contact, advisors aimed both to understand students' long term needs holistically and to gauge their immediate needs. To achieve these goals, advisors described the importance of basic communication skills, particularly listening, in their methods. One advisor remarked on his need to be flexible in advising conversations to "make them [students] feel comfortable . . . whatever their personality." Another advisor walked us through an intricate process he uses. He noted listening as crucial to the success of conversations with students and a first priority to determining student needs.

After which, he stated, "According to what they're looking for, then you can add to that [dialogue]. … you may ask some questions like, you know, 'So after this degree, what is it that you want to do?'" Another advisor also prioritized listening:

> I've learned to listen to what a student is saying to me that they're not saying. What are they asking me and based on what they're asking me I can tell or I can pull, be intrusive a little bit on what other things they need to know. …So it [advising is] based on the dialogue of the conversation. … I sit, I observe, I listen very well and then I build my conversation based on the conversation or the dialogue.

One advisor reiterated that amid changes at the institution, listening is an essential route to building relationships with students. He continued, "Listening, sometimes being intrusive, slowing the roll can be an effective way" to support students' decision-making and course-taking.

As a result of SB 1720, advisors used various measures to determine how students should enroll in their first college courses. Many advisors felt that SB1720 instigated more in-depth conversations with students about the "type of student[s] they were in high school." An advisor explained:

> I mean, we started looking at the high school transcript not just for you graduated [graduation date] but for what kind of classes did you [students] take, English and math, and what type of grades did you receive in those? And so I think that that…made the conversations more in-depth with students.

An advisor explained an example of a typical student conversation, "We have conversations about the type of student and courses they took when they were in high school to try to understand… [what their] options are in picking the right classes for them to start them off on that path correctly."

Advisors felt that by obtaining this information they could "look at the student as a whole." An advisor shared an in-depth line of inquiry she used to understand how to place students in courses:

> You've got to see are they ready? How many classes are they trying to take? What kind of classes did they take in high school? Do they have ACT and SAT scores? Are they working a full-time job? Do they have children? I think you need to look at all of that before you talk about classes.

Maintaining good relationships with students allowed advisors to feel more comfortable asking pointed questions regarding course selection and realistic course loads in college, such as, "How many courses do you think is a good load?" With this interpersonal comfort advisors could then challenge students to think critically about their goals, needs, and forecast potential roadblocks. One advisor informs students, "You need to think about how much time you have to devote to your studies" and encouraged them to use that information to determine an appropriate course load.

Advisors also sought to understand students' goals for the future. One advisor asked students, "What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? What institutions offer the degree that you're seeking?" Personal conversations were important in this process "to determine what it is that they [students] want

and what will fit in the lifestyle that they need." These conversations served as the foundation for guiding students appropriately.

In these discussions, advisors also provided encouragement to students in the face of difficulty or failure. One advisor explained how they often tell students, "Hey, you know, you can do this. Push yourself. Don't get into the comfort zone. Push yourself. Get out of that comfort zone." These interactions help students develop the confidence to "do the best they can." Another advisor expounded:

> Well, what I find is that I have people come to [me] and they say, 'I just can't do this.' And, I keep telling 'em, whenever they come in . . . 'You got this, you got this.' And, I've had a few of 'em come back and thank me . . . It just makes you feel good when they come back and tell you, 'You know, I don't think I could've done this without you pushing me.' And I think, 'I wasn't pushing you. I was just telling you, you can do this.' And then, after a while they start believing it.

Another advisor reiterated her commitment to student access and support by remarking:

> So what I tell them is, 'Let's give it a shot. If this is your dream, let's do everything we can to get you on this dream.' …And then if that student struggles, then let's have a conversation.

Advisors used their in-depth knowledge of individual students for understanding students' immediate and longer-term goals and helped students adjust their practices to overcome obstacles. They also worked closely with the students "to work backwards and talk about this is everything you're going to need to do." One advisor told students, "Do I think you could do it? Absolutely, but are you willing to put in the work to get there?" Another advisor explained:

> I just have to step away from the [institution's] funding model and look at the success of the student and encourage them to back off and sometimes say it sounds like you might have been overwhelmed 'cause a lot of them are afraid to admit [it].

**Student Success Courses and Coaching**

Advisors and faculty in student success courses and first-year experience courses intentionally apply in-depth listening. An advisor mentioned that the first-year seminar course "helped us [personnel] a lot as being one-on-one with the student [and] engaging with them" can encourage relationships. An administrator added:

> We've worked really hard to differentiate it from our college success class…It's really specific to [name of institution]. Even the textbook is something that we put together here. It's designed for students to make connections in the classroom so that they are getting to know their fellow students and they're getting to know their instructors as well, so we're building relationships with them on campus…we have to be able to get them [students] comfortable with things like going into a faculty office.

Students in this institution's first-year seminar course meet for hour-long weekly coaching sessions. A campus support staff explained how coaching is both preventative and responsive to students' needs. She shared that coaches ask questions of students to determine their support structures at home as well

as their out-of-school engagements. Coaches aim to build rapport so that students will return in "two weeks, two months, [or] two years" because they now "have at least one go-to person." She remarked:

> It's an opportunity for us to build rapport. It's our opportunity to expose students to the idea of social belonging. It's an opportunity to give them a safe space to ask questions, and it's also a safe place for us to ask questions… I can gauge them and they can tell me things that are outside of the realm of the classroom that seep into the academic arena that they're probably not aware of, but those things…can quite possibly cause them to not do well.

An advisor explained that some students "share very personal information" during coaching sessions, while others "stick directly to the content that's on that [coaching] sheet." Campus personnel believed this model worked well for both types of students. One advisor stated, "Several students…come in my office, and I do have that rapport with 'em and make 'em feel comfortable and they relax". Another advisor felt coaching was "a good place for students to make a connection with a very supportive instructor" to become "connected to the [academic] services." An advisor commented on her experience:

> In my role as the academic success coach this semester, when they're referred to me and I make that initial contact, initially they're not pleased. They're not, like, excited about the contact. They're not, like, oh my goodness, can't wait for that call. So it's really great when they come back four or five visits later and I'm, like, 'You're back in my office. Why do you keep coming?' And you know, it's like the idea that they really now have found that go-to person.

Staff felt that the support they offer students and their "responsibilities often go far beyond just the classroom and academic support." One advisor stated, "We're more than academic advisors."

Relationship-building, while central to advising, was no less important in the classroom. In addition to students taking an active role with advising, they were also very vocal about what characteristics they were looking for in professors and the struggles that they faced in college classes. Faculty acknowledged those struggles, as well as students' academic preparation, by responding with individualized approaches to student success, including diagnostic examinations, supplemental course material, and even personal stories of struggle.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS THROUGH INSTRUCTION: "FILLING IN THE GAPS"

Like academic advising, the dedicated work and personalized approach of faculty in providing instruction is key to the open access mission of community colleges. In this section, we explore the strategies that students used to select instructors, as well as the ways in which instructors gauged students' academic preparation. We learned that many faculty members adapted their courses to better support students, which included supplementing courses with campus resources and technology. Two important curricular trends in the FCS and nationwide are the shift towards designated math pathways and the writing across the curriculum initiative. Some institutions also implemented alternate math pathways for students when existing courses proved an ill-fit with students' future academic plans.

Writing proved to be a weak skill that instructors observed among students in various courses and across subject areas.

**Selecting Instructors: Desired Characteristics**

Instruction is at the heart of the commitment to the culture of learning and continuous improvement in the FCS. Students reported their desires to have professors who were both relatable and "straight up." For example, instructors who were direct in how they chose to correct students in their writing, math computation, and reading comprehension skills were preferred by students. A student discussed:

> I do like [name of professor] I think she's very straight up. Like, she'll tell you what is wrong, and I think that's very necessary. And people take it personally sometimes, but she just tells you this is what you need to fix, this, this and this. And she'll tell you straighten up. She won't beat around the bush. She just tells you how it is, and I like that 'cause I like to get right to it. I like to learn what I've been messing up on, and that's exactly what she does.

Another instructor exemplified a "straight up" approach when he shared a sentiment that he communicates to students regarding the importance of mastering material before moving to future coursework:

> Once I sign off on you, as far as your grade is concerned, that's saying that in your next class you should be able to write, technically. . . . They're going to expect that you already know how to do this because they know that you've already taken 1101.

Because the quality of instruction is central to the learning process, students seemed to be selective in how they chose their professors at the beginning of each semester. When asked how they chose their professors, a majority of students said the "the internet." When asked where they learned about which professors to choose one student shared:

> RateMyProfessor.com. That's where I went. They gave me a list of instructors, and I went on that website for each one, and whoever got the best reviews. And I look in the reviews, and if they say they work with you, and they don't get irritated or anything like that, I pick that teacher.

*RateMyProfessor.com*, was just one mechanism among many by which students evaluated the quality, personality, and relatability of their instructors who directly influenced their learning. Others relied on word of mouth, especially the opinions of trusted friends and even family members.

**Gauging Academic Preparation**

The poor academic preparation of some students oftentimes required faculty to teach material that should have been previously mastered. Students and instructors alike acknowledged academic preparation as a potential challenge and an important factor for students' success, as well as the overall success rate of first-level credit-bearing classes. One professor confirmed, "We're seeing a stark difference in the level of ability that are entering our classrooms." This broad range of skills has proven to be a challenge for many faculty members.

One instructor described having to teach "basic developmental skills and waste the time of the students who are academically prepared." Faculty also reported often "filling in the gaps" by using office hours to "remediate some of those deficiencies." An administrator acknowledged the extra work faculty members put forth, noting, "I think they've had to adjust. . . . They're teaching some of those skills or at least calling it 'reviewing' some of those skills up front."

A developmental education faculty member described the necessary changes she made to first-level credit-bearing courses as a result of underprepared students:

> I will say, just interacting with other instructors who [teach first-level credit-bearing courses] and seeing their syllabi change from prior – you know, pre-SB to post-SB, I think that they have had to accommodate a lot to kind of fill the gap and their information that they're sharing has changed, how much they have to place into that semester has changed. So I see them almost like filling the gaps, I think, because they know that that's the only way the students are going to be successful. It's not like you can just throw your hands up and go, 'Well, you're not prepared, oh well.' So I think I see instructors attempting to fill the gaps.

When discussing the passing rate of one institution's MAT 1033 course, a professor shared that the college "really knew that they had to do something." The college decided to organize a committee to "redesign MAT 1033 [to] find a way to remediate students while [teaching] the material that they needed to learn for the class." They decided to implement a diagnostic exam to be given on the first day of classes, which provided instructors and students understanding for the students' readiness. A faculty member described the diagnostic and a typical student follow-up conversation:

> So, that diagnostic was, more than anything, just to open the eyes of the students because we can't place them. Just open their eyes and tell them, 'You're expected to know this stuff.' So, you know, they take the diagnostic and they fail it. So now, we have to intervene. So, lots of intervention, either with advisors, with everybody, with the faculty. It's like, 'If you scored less than this, you need to consider what you're going to do.' And basically, like, in my classroom, I'll sit there and I'll tell them, 'Get into a Dev Math class.' Some of them, they realize, 'I don't know this stuff.' And they will listen to warning and go into a dev math class.

Faculty at one institution adjusted the timing of initial assignments to better gauge student preparation and to allow support staff more time to intervene before the drop deadline. Instructors emphasized their commitment to "spend(ing) more time over in the ACE lab working one-on-one with students." In addition, faculty prioritized supportive relationships with students in the math courses where they struggled. One instructor mentioned:

> I love [MAT 0057] because it gives me an opportunity to work with students on a one-on-one basis so they can work at their own pace. …so they open up to me, and sometimes they'll let me know what's going on at home. They're just frustrated and just wanna get it out. And so I just listen.

Another faculty member disclosed her own struggles with math when she was a college student, which included enrollment in DE, stating that she uses that story to relate to and encourage students:

> I took developmental courses when I went to college, math. And let me tell you, I thank goodness for that experience. I was never good at math. And those people helped me. And I try to use that story every time I possibly can to tell these students that remedial or developmental doesn't have to be a bad thing. It just means you've got strengths in one area, and you've got some weaknesses in another, and that's fine. But I do feel like the changes in developmental education, although some of them are exciting, you know, the self-paced, modularization, even the compression of some of these courses, I do think could be very positive.

**Writing Across the Curriculum**

Faculty members cited writing, in particular, as a skill that is required of students across the curriculum, and many institutions sought to foster writing in intentional ways. Because writing is an essential skill for the workforce, efforts to incorporate writing into the curriculum across disciplines was one way that institutions supported student learning.

The phrase "writing across the curriculum" became popular in the United States throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and is a movement that continues today (Hennessy & Evans, 2005). Shaw (1995) suggested that because of the mission of community colleges, incorporating such wide-ranging writing programs is important to the preparation of students, whether those students seek further education or transition directly to the workforce. In Florida, writing across the curriculum is popular partly because of the Gordon Rule, which requires students to complete two additional writing-intensive courses beyond the two introductory composition courses (Hennessy & Evans, 2005). Because of this requirement, Foote (1999) explained that community colleges incorporate writing across the curriculum and in all subjects, from social studies, to math, and even science. Foote also described the ways in which writing is beneficial, which include students' improved ability to understand content contextually, as well as their retention and overall writing skills.

An administrator commented on the importance of strong writing skills:

> Writing is everywhere, and so you hear it across the curriculum that faculty are noticing these writing things and faculty, humanities are spending more time either directly addressing writing things or asking English faculty for resources to help them in their course. So it's spilled out not just from those gateway courses but to other courses in the curriculum as well.

An instructor from history agreed, sharing the student learning struggles he witnessed and the impact of optional developmental education enrollment and subsequent poor writing skills on students in his courses:

> I do a lot of writing assignments. I give essay exams. No multiple guess exams. So I was gonna say, I have seen it. It's just like – and some of these people, I don't know how they got out of the sixth grade. And I know that writing labs are doing an excellent job of helping, and I'm trying to send them to there. But there's only so much

> they can do. And I know the English department is probably completely overwhelmed with all this, trying to deal with it. And we're, because you have to have some basic English comp skills for you to take a history class. And they still get through, and like, good gracious, it's just not even complete sentences. It's frightening.

A few students admitted that writing was one of their biggest struggles. However, instructors meeting students "where they are" proved beneficial to improving student writing and fostering student success. A student mentioned:

> Writing essays is like my biggest struggle. And in [instructor's name] class, like, she really, like, breaks it down, like. And, she really, like, helps us, like, understand. Like, this is what you should, like, write and this is what you shouldn't write. And like, now that I know, like, probably when I get into Comp I, like, I'll probably be way better than I was before. 'Cause, like, writing essays are kind of really kind of hard to do. But, like, with her, it's not that hard. Like, she really explains it, so, like, I'm happy I took her class.

The importance of strong writing skills also extended into math courses at one institution. An administrator explained the ways in which one math faculty member fostered students' critical thinking by requiring students to research and write a paper on a math-related topic:

> We do have one faculty member in math who's doing a faculty project where she is incorporating projects that require students to go to other resources. So she has them writing a paper on some math topic and they have to go to the learning center and meet with tutors and get some edits on their paper. And she has a project with – psychology I think is her other area, and she's gonna develop one with political science as they start looking at polling data and that kind of thing.

Encouraging students to take advantage of institutional resources, as well as integrating writing across the curriculum, is just one way that student success is promoted at FCS institutions. In addition to breaking down the steps in effective writing instruction, in some instances, instructors of first-level courses mentioned their need to adjust courses to meet the students' academic levels.

**Adjusting Academic Expectations**

English and math professors alike experienced the challenge of underprepared students in first-level credit-bearing courses. In some instances, instructors reported adding developmental topics and skills into their gateway courses, as one math faculty member explained:

> I will say this - in teaching both the developmental as well as the intermediate, that some of the stuff that I used to do in my developmental class, I am now having - not just choosing – I am now having to do in my [MAT] 1033 class. . . . We are having to bring up topics from Dev 1. . . . I know one of the other things that I brought up that I would always do in the developmental class is try to teach students how to study and prepare math-wise, which many students have no clue. That no longer happens in developmental, so that would get brought up in there [MAT 1033]. And I would say that what has happened is that there's some of the extra problems where maybe, used to I could work five or six or seven problems with them and I got to

> really pound it in. That's now cut down to three or four. And again, what does that do? Well, that may take some of the rigor because I don't grab some of the real theoretical or something like that, which I'm trying to get them used to.

An English professor also reported changes to his gateway course, which included more opportunities for students to earn satisfactory grades:

> We changed English 1 in preparation for the onslaught of students who didn't take a PERT. We used to require that you had to pass every core assignment. . . . Well, we softened that. We said that it was your overall average, and if you failed one thing, it wasn't a gatekeeper anymore. . . . We added in a – like for 10 percent of the grade, a required grammar lab, essentially, as a way because we'd have perhaps a wider range of suitability in the class.

In addition to adding content to courses, a math faculty member also reported how his institution supplemented math courses with formal supports, such as peer leaders, and connected students to support centers on campus:

> I would say that the biggest fear is we were putting students in a place that they would not be successful. So due to the fear, and we were forced to basically, I think we really heavy loaded those classes with support. So when they first come in, a diagnostic to see where they're at, and if you are lacking in skills, you need to get support now. A lot of visits, a lot of connection with the support centers. We tried learning leaders where there's basically a peer in the classroom that they've already taken the class, usually the semester prior, to be with the students and help. And we tried learning in community link courses. So all the strategies that we're kind of doing in different places, we focused on the entry level courses.

Similarly, one English professor shared that online labs were implemented to help underprepared students:

> Our English 1 has had to be revamped, and there are students coming in that don't have basic skills, and you – so we can either fail them, or we can try to do something that addresses that, so we have. We've added online labs.

Acknowledging students' struggles in first-level credit-bearing courses, administrators and faculty encouraged many institutions to re-evaluate their curricular options for students.

**Alternate Options for Math**

The central idea behind the math pathways movement in community colleges is that mathematics curriculum must be redesigned and modernized so that course sequences are closely-tailored to the skills students need for their chosen majors, courses meet the prerequisites for transfer to four-year institutions, and math offerings in high schools are well aligned with math sequences in community colleges (Charles A. Dana Center, 2018a). In support of this movement, the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin delineates the following principles:

1. Use multiple measures that promote accurate and aligned placement into mathematics pathways.
2. Implement accelerated pathways that allow students to effectively move to and through college–level math in their first year of study.

3. Improve student transfer between institutions by addressing issues related to articulation and applicability.
4. Continuously collect and analyze student–level data to determine if goals are being met and where improvements are needed.
5. Maintain focus on the needs of low-income students and students of color to ensure equal access and success in academic and career opportunities. (Charles A. Dana Center, 2018b)

Some of the specific proposals related to the math pathways movement in the FCS include the plan to enroll underprepared math students directly in college-level work with additional academic support rather than DE math courses, the initiative to offer co-requisite mathematics instruction to underprepared students, and the shift towards enrolling non-STEM majors in alternatives to Algebra such as statistics courses (Williams, Stewart, & Henderson, 2018).

The apparent struggles students faced in Intermediate Algebra created discussion for potential changes to the typical math pathway at one institution:

> And one of the things we are looking at doing right now, we're in discussion about, and I think a lot of the other colleges have already done this, if there are majors that do not require College Algebra that we are not going to require 1033. Because 1033 is a course to prepare them for College Algebra and they're not going to take College Algebra. Then we can bypass that and let them go into Liberal Arts Math 1 and 2. And that might be something that would keep them from kind of getting stuck and not being able to move forward.

This alternate math pathway had already been implemented in several institutions we visited. The alternate pathway was described as better suited to students pursuing non-STEM majors due to success rates in traditional first-level credit-bearing math courses. When discussing student success in this course, a professor explained the rationale for the new math pathway:

> So in math, we had so many people obviously now entering MAT1033, which is our Intermediate Algebra, which was traditionally our gateway course and not being successful. We made another pathway. So we basically created another course, so now we have Intermediate Algebra, which we direct people that are going to go into STEM, science, technology, engineering, math, fields, to take the Intermediate Algebra. And people that know that they are gonna do a liberal arts based-degree, we have them now going to like a liberal arts math equivalent of MAT1033, which is MAT1100. . . Knowing that we had this exempt population and knowing that they're not going to realign to developmental where they need to be, we sort of just created a new course where they fit and direct them that way.

An advisor communicated the excitement expressed by students referred to her to discuss the alternate math pathway, sharing that students said, "Now maybe I can do this!" after realizing that Algebra would no longer be a roadblock to success.

This institution also sought to educate students on their math options as early as Orientation, to provide students with tools to make their own decisions,

and support early success. One advisor detailed the options presented to students:

> At orientation we like to have a whiteboard where we can actually show students, 'These are your different scenarios and why there's pros and cons of picking these sessions.' So ideally we do tell students, 'The state says go straight into English 1101 or MAT 1033, but here's the reality. The probability of you passing MAT 1033 or ENC 1101 in your first shot is X, Y, and Z.' We give them the numbers.

A faculty member at another institution promoted educating students of their options to ensure that they are well informed and able to make appropriate decisions:

> And I think at this point, students need to be well-informed on their options and also need to have people that help them to be honest, that talk to them and let 'em know, hey, be honest with yourself. What are your needs? And those people need to be able to explain to them how to assess what their needs are with their education. Some students may not be well-informed on that, how to tell do I need this course. Do I need this math course?

We observed this personalized approach to student success at many institutions, and among all personnel, including advisors, administrators, and faculty members. The proactive approach to institutional problem-solving required that staff work to connect students with the campus resources that could help them be successful.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS THROUGH ACADEMIC SUPPORT: "ONE OF OUR STRENGTHS IS ACCESS"

Another key component of the open access mission at community colleges is learning supports, which are typically housed in learning or academic support centers. These learning support programs are student-centered, aligned with the mission, and appropriate and encouraging to diverse students to supplement their general and discipline-specific education (Singer, 2014). Some of the practices that foster academic integration for diverse student populations include new student orientation, learning communities, student success courses, mentoring programs, and student activities (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Cox et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Group and peer tutoring, e-tutoring, and literacy and math coaching are also effective in supporting classroom learning (Singer, 2014; Weiss, 2007).

A significant feature of the FCS meeting student needs is the staff commitment to finding students the help they need from a variety of campus sources. In this section, we share the perspectives of instructors, advisors, and other staff on the array of student supports offered in FCS institutions. These resources wed curriculum with academic support services to augment the overall support structure for students, particularly given preparedness concerns. In student success and first-year courses, or in tutoring environments in the learning centers, the college curricula aligned with student needs and learning objectives. Early alert systems often identified key moments when students required intervention. An administrator explained:

> [O]ur students are very successful based on the wonderful curriculum that we have developed to assist these students, in the academic success center and coaching and tutoring and mentoring and all of the ways we have surrounded our students with success strategies, they are successful because of that.

Supportive curricula were not bound to discipline-specific areas, but also included first-year seminar courses. This unique hybrid course, with Orientation topics and one-on-one instructor coaching, was intended to increase students' feelings of social belonging on campus. The course was described as "breaking down the barrier between the office walls or the office doors so that students are comfortable coming in [to speak with faculty]." Outside of curricular supports, there are myriad academic practices used by FCS personnel to increase student access to support structures, including early alert systems, tutoring from learning center staff, as well as comprehensive library services.

**Early Alert Systems**

State colleges used early alert systems to identify students who were at risk for course failures. The unique benefit of this technology was that it created a space for advisors and faculty to reach out to students directly, to better gauge the ways they could help students succeed. An advisor shared her perceptions of the benefits of her institution's early alert system. She detailed the students' encouraging responses to this type of connection by stating:

> I [send a] message, 'Hey, is everything going okay with your classes? Feel free to stop by anytime, we'll discuss it.' You'd be surprised at how many responses I get back, 'Oh, they're going pretty good, thank you for asking.'

The same advisor also hinted at the ways early alert promotes closeness between students and support staff and boosts students' feeling of belonging in college. She continued:

> …maybe it's because they [students] know someone's taking an interest now, you see their [early alert] score drop back down out of the red and it may have went right on up higher in red if we hadn't of done that…Some of 'em just wanna know that someone's, not so much watching but, cares.

**Learning Labs and Centers**

The early alert system complimented other campus services expanding student access to support, including learning labs. A big change at one institution was the decentralization of tutoring, which consequently moved the locations of learning labs closer to the respective academic departments. Specifically, "the math lab [was moved] in the math building" and the "writing and reading lab [moved] closer to language and literature." Advisors at this college felt that the change was positive, as they could now "grab those students as they came out of their classes." In making services more accessible, staff at the college noticed "an immediate uptick in the number of students who were using those sorts of [academic support] services." An advisor remarked on this trend:

> So the writing and reading lab did the same thing. We started with those developmental populations. But we realized very quickly that students who were in the gateway [first-level credit-bearing] courses also needed help. So [we] quickly absorbed students who were talking 1101 in order to ensure that they, too, were successful because our goal is to serve every student, not just the developmental student[s].

There were also instances of customized workshops for students created by library services staff. Students were encouraged to share workshop topics of interest with personnel, which staff in turn developed into offerings to fulfill student requests. An advisor explained that these supports were possible through expanded library hours and open access:

> But we have good evening support. We even have weekend support. . . . So I think what we provide, our strength right now . . . is some good one-on-one support. And we have a professional librarian available for just about all of those hours that the library's open, which isn't that common anymore, to be honest, across the trends in librarianship for professional librarians.

They also introduced a coordinated chat portal for students to reach librarians without having to "walk in physically and talk to somebody at a desk." An administrator elaborated on the service:

> So we have a brand new chat service, we have a brand new texting service . . . and e-mail, of course . . . all of that is all coordinated now into one centralized thing [so] that different librarians across the different campuses can claim these tickets . . . and respond to them so that students get immediate, prompt, and detailed assistance.

These examples highlight the power of both faculty-student interaction and peer interaction to support the student learning mission of FCS institutions. Focus group participants emphasized, however, that only making resources available to students was inadequate. A crucial element was taking steps to ensure access. An academic support center administrator exemplified such efforts in his statements regarding academic support services at the learning centers:

> *Administrator:* As far as the learning centers are concerned, I think our strength – one of our strengths is our availability of access for students, and we've done a decent job in expanding that to the online domain. We're present on four campuses, and each campus offers well over 50 hours a week of available services. We're open all seven days of the week somewhere. So each campus has some weekend offering, whether it be a Friday or Saturday or Sunday. I mean, the bulk of our academics week is Monday through Thursday. We don't have a Monday-Wednesday-Friday course structure here.
>
> *Advisor:* And you guys have a couple of days where you're open late too, right?
>
> *Administrator:* Yeah, so I mean, depending on the campus and the day, we do campus-based management in our centers, so those supervisors get into the course schedules and enrollments and talk with the deans and the faculty, and they try to develop their schedules for each discipline around when classes dismiss and when classes are held, so trying to make sure we're available when the students need us [is important]. For finals week, we extend our hours, and so does the library, so we've all added hours for the last two weeks of the term. Same thing when we came around the hurricane. The hurricane shut everybody down for a week, but a lot of the due dates remained, so I can't even remember. We were all so exhausted we couldn't even see straight. We had so many days and hours trying to help students. So that's a great strength of ours.

Institutional support for student learning at FCS was not only confined to staff helping students succeed in state colleges. Staff also helped students develop strategies they could employ to take greater ownership over their learning process.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS THROUGH INDIVIDUAL STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGIES: "I CAN FIX IT"

Educational researchers have posited that learning through advisement, instruction, and academic support are not the only sources of learning for students in community college contexts (Attinasi, 1989; Karp, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). To truly achieve the open access mission of community colleges, however, students must also take responsibility for their own learning processes. An important tool for community college students to improve learning is to access essential metacognitive skills which can increase their personal awareness, regulation of knowledge, and overall learning in college (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

Metacognition is defined as students constantly "thinking about how they think", given academic challenges (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994, p.10). Metacognitive skills can be taught by advisors, faculty, support staff, and peers. Within community colleges, students must employ metacognitive strategies such as navigating bureaucratic environments, adopting time management strategies, developing study habits, and learning to communicate socially (Attinasi 1989; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Dickie & Farrell, 1991; Shields, 2002). Metacognitive knowledge also involves community college students being goal-oriented as they pursue their degrees (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005).

**Metacognitive Skills Development: Students Thinking about Their Learning**

These metacognitive skills are essential to community college student success as it allows them to maneuver and overcome learning challenges learning (Shields, 2002). In doing so, students may change the way they study, who they study with, or even come up with up ways to remember and apply course material (Dickie & Farrell, 1991; Shields, 2002). Students who have not developed these metacognitive strategies tend to be less successful in college (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

Students in our focus groups shared how the ways they studied contributed to their overall learning. In this section, we explore students' perspectives on how they learned best, the importance of their relationships with faculty, and challenges to their learning. Even more, these students shared details about their learning and motivational strategies, and techniques they employed to help them grow as students. Students also highlighted the academic challenges they faced such as anxiety, and admitted they continued to work through these issues. The learning mechanisms that students used were relevant information for campus personnel to aid them in recognizing students' cognitive preferences for developing and acquiring new information.

For institutional stakeholders to help students "create their own destiny," students had to first understand the learning styles that "worked" for them. Throughout our focus group data, students were cognizant of the ways they learned in the classroom and how to structure their learning outside of class. For example, many students remarked on their need for "one-on-one" instruction to better absorb course content. A student shared, "Yeah. I mean, you can tie your mind up into knots trying to figure some of

these things out. So, more contact with others on that would be good. But just discussing the material person-to-person, that is the best."

Students felt that having quality instructors helped them to progress academically from their high school levels. Furthermore, several students shared that their professors taught them new learning strategies and skills they could continue to utilize as students. One student explained:

> Yes, I do think that the teacher was actually like very helpful with it and she taught us new strategies that I've never learned in high school. And I thought it was helpful, and I flew by this. All four years [of high school], I did struggle with reading, but this year I'm doing really good with it. Like, she taught me new things to do. So far, I'm just flying through it. It's all good.

In our focus groups, students repeatedly mentioned that faculty who tailored their teaching to student needs helped them become more invested in course material. Students appreciated this adaptable style of teaching especially in "harder" classes. Another student shared:

> I really suck at biology. But the teacher is really good at explaining things in different ways and applying it to real life. And he was always open on his off hours, like out of class, so you could go and see him, and he'd help you out.

Students reported that personalized instruction was especially useful for them. They remarked that the close-up teaching style "guided" them in grasping course material more concretely, and in achieving a better academic fit at their institutions. Furthermore, our focus groups participants demonstrated that when students knew who they were as learners, and used appropriate techniques to strengthen themselves, they were successful. A student mentioned:

> Well, actually, for me, I'm a more hands-on individual. I need you to guide me in the direction because I can go too fast, and I'll get every problem wrong. But then if you sit there and you say what did you do wrong there? And I'll be like, oh my god. I know all of those. Now, I can fix it. I feel as if you – I'm a slower learner. So, with me being a slow learner, I don't go as quickly as [another student] here. I don't go as quickly as other individuals.

Students were frequently aware of the ways they studied best, which in turn strengthened their learning. For example, students shared that studying alone was useful for them in avoiding distractions. One student shared:

> I like being alone. I don't like studying in groups. I get distracted. I don't like to even study at home 'cause I got a new puppy. I like playing with him. I get distracted so easily. Like, I just like at night, mostly if I'll get home from work or anything, take a shower and cool down in my room, I'll do it. Or in the morning.... I wanna get everything done.

Regarding the technique of studying alone, another student remarked, "I mean I actually enjoy the peace of being left alone. I mean, I prefer just to be, okay, here's the direction that you need to go. Leave me alone. Let me figure it out."

Conversely, some students were still perfecting their understanding of how exactly "they learned best." One reason some students remained unclear

were motivational challenges. In reference to their motivation to learn, one student said:

> Yeah, it did help to break out like the more passionate and motivated side of me to like push through the hard times and try to like make myself okay, I need to sit here and I need to study.

Students also shared how their struggles required them to acquire new strategies that would help them to become more "efficient" as students. The same student continued:

> I need to learn how to study because I know that maybe most of us, we've never studied even in high school or anything. So, we just like maybe look over the paper and just glancing, and like just was able to take the test. So, like now with these classes, I'm learning how to study. I'm learning how to be more efficient with my time management.

In addition to some students' lack of awareness about how they best learned, test anxiety proved to be an additional challenge, which threatened students' execution of academic tasks. Students frequently shared that "being timed" on tests hindered their learning. One student expressed:

> I took the FCAT, I took the SAT, the ACT and then I took the PERT. The SAT and ACT, I didn't do as well as I wanted because I get anxiety. With test anxiety, I get more worried about how much time I have to, you know, to actually finish. So, that's why I did take the PERT here, and I love how it's, you know, you're not being timed. So, you can take your time, you can read the article. And I thought it was accurate based upon my scores, and I was able to go into College Algebra like right from the start. And I actually did very well.

Despite suffering from test anxiety, one student shared that enrolling in DE courses helped her to cope more effectively in testing situations:

> Well, for me, I'm a learner who just needs to refresh my memory for a quick second. And I'm terrible at taking tests. I get nervous. So, I knew a lot of things, but it was like I got nervous, I guess. And I didn't score as high as I could. So, whenever I did start, I knew everything. But then when I came back, I didn't know anything because I had forgot. So, the developmental classes that I'm in now, it refreshed my memory, and I'm like, oh my gosh, this is amazing. I'm so happy I did this.

Several students also expressed nervousness outside of testing situations, such as becoming shy in front of people in classes, in presentations and in group work. However, one student felt that being forced to overcome these challenges enhanced his overall development:

> I think that class [developmental class] is very helpful. I think people who have problems with organizing…that class should be specifically aimed towards them. I try to think [of people] who have fears and who gets nervous and anxiety while talking in front of people. I think that's a good class because we do presentations and everything. So, I think it's helpful. I do think it's a very helpful class. I'm happy I took it.

While some students felt that DE courses helped them to overcome obstacles, others regretted not enrolling directly in college-level coursework given

their willingness to take on the challenge of first-level courses. A student explained:

> In a way, I do wish I would have thought of it, and actually went straight to Algebra instead of [DE] because I could have went either way. And I decided to take the developmental, which in a way, I'm glad I did, and in a way, I wish I would have fought it because that's kind of a semester gone that I probably could have refreshed during Algebra because I was a little bit too nervous about it going in because it had been so many years. And it had been, okay, I know I don't remember this, but it's come back so quick that I wish I would have just went straight to Algebra.

Other students, however, were well aware that taking DE courses was a contributing factor in them learning later course material. Taking developmental courses, they felt, fully prepared them to move forward in their college education. One student posited:

> I think it's helping me a lot, because for English, well, developmental, the one I'm going into, there's so many people that are saying that it's hard, so I'm glad that I made the choice to do it. I probably could have skipped, because I, it was like I could have, but then everyone was coming to me and saying Composition was hard, so I wanted to go ahead and take that course so that I have the knowledge so when I go forward.

Students in our focus groups valued learning in their own unique ways and effective instruction. Students also identified academic barriers which challenged their learning (e.g., test anxiety). While students in our focus groups shared their overall learning strategies, students and campus personnel alike explained that specific FCS student populations had particular obstacles to learning as well as accommodations tailored to their needs.

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATIONS: "DO WHATEVER POSSIBLE"

Nothing is more important to the open access mission of community colleges than ensuring equity and inclusion for all student populations. As the community college system of one of the most diverse states in the nation, the FCS is committed to educating students representative of the overall population of Florida. Institutional knowledge of the diversity of students present on campus helps campus leaders and staff tailor educational methods and tools to the students who need them most (Guthrie, Bertrand Jones, Osteen, & Hu, 2015).

In support of the open access mission of community colleges, one facet of the FCS commitment to the culture of student learning extends to how campus personnel address the unique assets and learning challenges of students from specific populations. In this section, we consider those assets and the obstacles faced by adult students, first-generation students, economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and veterans and active duty military as well as the services tailored to address their needs.

**Adult Students**

In this report, we use the term *adult students* to describe those 25 and older and either working at least 25 hours per week, or with one or more dependents. Adult students in the FCS comprise 36% of the student population (Scheuch, K., 2017a). As a group, adult students in community colleges share a number of characteristics. They are more likely than traditional age students to be female, first-generation, ethnically and racially diverse, and financially independent; more likely to have children for whom they are financially responsible; and study part-time while working (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2003).

FCS institutions are attractive to older adults because they can attend part-time while continuing to work and because these colleges frequently offer programs tailored to employees who wish to upgrade their career prospects. Reasons adult students return to community college include life transitions, career concerns, family needs, and self-improvement (Bauman, Wang, DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez & Lindsey, 2004; Chao & Good, 2004; Kasworm, 2003). These life transitions may occur after negative or positive events including losing a job, divorce, promotion at work, or reevaluating life goals (Chao & Good, 2004; Hardin, 2008). As a result, community colleges have increasingly begun to offer services catering to adults such as childcare, job placement offices, academic advising geared to adults, financial aid advising, and support groups and personal counseling (Bauman et al., 2004; Chao & Good, 2004; Giancola et al., 2009; Tull, Kuk, & Dalpes, 2014).

With respect to adult students, an FCS administrator explained that "Our student population is a little older anyway, and I see that a lot." Our focus group data revealed that adult students bring with them both tremendous assets that enriched their experience in community college, as well as significant challenges that sometimes threatened their chances for success.

Adults students, because they were more likely to be non-exempt, tended to comprise a large portion of the DE population. An administrator remarked on this trend, "Our age range, though, I mean, our average age in the developmental was like 27, 28, where overall, in the other courses, like 22." Campus personnel found that these students sometimes suffered because of the length of time they had been away from academic work and from a lack of familiarity with technology. An administrator at another institution commented that, "if they haven't engaged with college level work or used academic math, writing, or reading skills for ten years, they're not going to be in a position to be successful."

Regarding adult students' technology challenges, a faculty member described her difficulty in presenting material with online content to adult students, "I've had the session where it's like you and your USB drive, and I've had non-traditional students holding up their USB drive like, 'What do I do?'" To address this deficit, many instructors in our focus groups reported teaching basic technology skills in their classes, regardless of the content area. For instance, an instructor explained:

> I find that a lot of the adult students who are developmental are also technologically challenged…I support my class completely…I essentially teach technology all semester long, basic processing skills, word processing skills, how to upload, how to download, how to even open an e-mail.

Another way that institutions addressed this deficit was by offering enough face-to-face classes so that adult students could find a course that met their learning needs.

Despite these challenges, adult students were widely viewed by campus personnel as more motivated than their traditional-aged peers. Our focus group participants suggested that the increased levels of motivation among these students came from two sources: the motivation adult students derived from the encouragement they received from staff members, and a deep internal self-motivation to learn. A 50-year-old mother who returned to state college after a long hiatus from school, explained how she viewed her age as an asset in establishing rapport with instructors:

> I worked in IT for many years and became a stay-at-home mom when my youngest was born because he was a special needs child, so I've been out of the business for a long time…And I wanted to go back into it, even though that it's really changed, but nobody's going to hire a 50-year-old who's been out of the business for a while… I think I'm kind of in a unique position because I'm older than some of my professors. [Laughter]. Seriously. You know, and most of my classmates are far younger than I am. My oldest children are probably older than most of you. [Laughter]… It's been positive for the most part because I think it gives me a little better rapport with the professors, even if they're not great professors. You know, it gives me kind of an edge. And the knowledge and experience that I have for all the length of time and the things that I've been through has helped me as a student.

The personal approach from instructors proved to be important, as adult students in our focus groups tended to select professors based on how much they could "relate" to them. In feeling a connection to these professors, students felt inspired to be outstanding students and defy odds themselves. Like this student, another adult female, described how inspired she was to succeed by her instructor's life story:

> My teacher, I could relate to him. He stated that it took him years to become who he is. He's an older teacher – well, not older…But he's married, been divorced, all of that. But he said it took him a while in order to get to where he is to become a teacher. He wasn't a good student in school. He wasn't any of that. It just took some time out of that course. And then he told us that he had a learning disability, all of that. He conquered all of that, and now look at him now. He's an instructor. He's been in New York. He's been everywhere, and look at him. He's an editor of all papers. He takes his time. He actually puts his all into it. So that was great on my behalf because I'm like, wait, I'm 27. I'm back in school. I'm the oldest one in my class. Whatever. I don't care. I'm gonna do it.

In addition to being inspired by their instructors, adult students in our focus groups, as well as the staff members who encountered them, described a deep internal motivation to learn. An adult male student summed up his attitude towards schoolwork this way:

> I think I look at college a lot differently than a lot of the people who are younger than me …I think a lot of the younger generation sees it as a hurdle, something they have to do before they can start

their career, and to me, this is something I'm doing just as a personal thing just because I want to. So, like I don't like missing any part of any class because I figure I look at it as information that I didn't get. So, some people complain – I hear a lot of other students complaining about class, or having to go to this, having to go to that, and I'm just the opposite. I want to learn as much as I can while I'm here.

Like this adult male student, two faculty members described an adult female student who persisted in her nursing studies to become an LPN despite the death of her child:

> *Faculty member 1:* She is your CNA working on her – wanting to get her LPN. She works crazy hours. The week before Thanksgiving, on her birthday, she gets a phone call that her son who lives in Texas with her father who is a week before his 18th birthday has been shot and she has to fly to Texas to take him off life support. She comes back and she's trying to get things finished, and I'm saying, 'Look, we have things in place. We can – we have time.' And her mentality is, 'No, if I don't finish this, I can't do next semester. If I can't do next semester, I can't work to get my LPN. I have to do this.'…To a point where sitting in my office in a conference, I'm saying you have time to do this paper. Focus on yourself right this minute because I can see you're falling apart.
>
> *Faculty member 2:* You have basic needs.
>
> *Faculty member 1:* You know, you need to take care of you….And so, I mean, we see those kinds of students all the time. I mean, they're not – it's not always the case where they've lost a child but, you know, we have students who are these non-traditional students.

Adult students in our focus groups brought with them both a wealth of life experience and significant obstacles when it came to pursuing higher education. Another student population in our focus groups with unique challenges were first-generation students.

**First-Generation Students**

First-generation college students are students for whom neither parent has completed a college degree by the time the student enters college. Research suggests that first-generation college students are less likely to persist, have lower grades, accumulate fewer credits, and are less likely to attain higher education degrees than students with one or more parent who is a college graduate (Bowen et al., 2005; Housel & Harvey, 2009; Sirin, 2005). These differences may exist, in part, because first-generation college students can lack the cultural capital needed to be successful in college, including prior family knowledge of the college student role and how to interact effectively in college settings (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Indeed, some scholars have hypothesized that there is a cultural mismatch between the families of first-generation college students and higher education institutions, proposing that "first-generation students underperform because interdependent norms from their mostly working-class backgrounds constitute a mismatch with middle-class independent norms prevalent in universities" (Stevens et al., 2012, p. 1178). Despite this deficit, in many cases first-generation students, particularly first-generation students of color, bring with them various other forms of capital used to support their learning and college completion. Yosso (2005) identified six forms of capital including: aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial, and resistance capital not traditionally used

to describe first-generation or students of color assets brought to campus.

It was evident in our data that a significant number of students in our focus groups were the first in their families to attend college. In an effort to make their families proud, they pursued postsecondary education. One student stated:

> Well, I'm the first one out of my family to go to college, and I have a huge family. I have three brothers and four sisters. My mom and dad dropped out of high school, and had to go back. And they said that was the hardest thing of their life. So, like, I've just always decided to go to college.

Being the first in the family to attend college came with a motivational "push" that promulgated students to academic success. However, several students disclosed that there was pressure that comes along with being "the example" in their family. Another first-generation student mentioned:

> My mom and dad are very excited [about her going to college], so they try to push me to stay on top of things. But I'm trying to set a good example for my younger siblings because, right now, they're all like kind of don't want to finish high school. And I'm like, 'You know, you need to.' So, it's tough being the only one.

Even though students who were first-generation stated it was "tough", they shared that they wanted to create a better life for themselves, and their families. Another student mentioned:

> I'm a first-generation college student, so I'm the first person going to college in my family, so seeing what it looks like to not go to college and what it is to go to college, it's like, oh, I need a good college education to pave a better pathway and lead an example for those around me.

Given first-generation students' unique identities, they were very clear about why they wanted to learn. More specifically, students knew the power of having a college education. With the future in mind, the students we interviewed felt they could "get somewhere" after earning a postsecondary degree, particularly in terms of their financial futures. When asked why they decided to attend college, one student explained:

> Kids are expensive, especially girls. I was working a full-time job, but it just you know, I don't have a degree, so I was at the bottom of the totem pole. And it's hard to get anywhere without a college education. I mean, and if you do, you're lucky you know. So, I had to do something different. So financial reasons, definitely.

Students in the focus groups felt that a college education alone would be their conduit to upward mobility. Therefore, the motivational tactics they used, including contemplating future aspirations were essential to help them "keep going." One student explained:

> I always think about what I want and I see all the houses I'm driving by, like, that's what I want. And the only way to do that is going to college and get education and keep going and keep going and keep going. I'm keep motivating myself 'til I get there. I don't care how long. I'll tell myself every day. I'll go to college eight years. I don't care 'cause I'll be at the end of it [college], I'll be good. I don't have to worry about money or anything. I think college is just really necessary.

Another tactic students used to "push" themselves in college was to utilize their family members as sources of persistence. To this point, students shared how family members knew of their "abilities," which helped push along, even in the case of more difficult learning endeavors when they felt they could not achieve their goals. One student shared the importance of her relationship with her mother:

> My mom, she's most important, but my whole family, they strive for me to keep going in college. Like I really want to quit, but I stay in it. My mama, she knows like my one ability in class, like I don't like writing work stuff. But if it's like hands-on, I can get it correct. I can get stuff fast.

Like first-generation students, another large percentage of FCS students were economically disadvantaged.

**Economically Disadvantaged Students**

College students from disadvantaged socioeconomic statuses tend to face unique challenges (Cox, 2016; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). For example, economically disadvantaged students whose parents did not attend college tend to have higher dropout rates than those from middle- and high-income households (Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). Economically disadvantaged students usually have less cultural and economic capital than those in other socioeconomic statuses, decreasing the resources they have at their discretion to succeed academically (Cox, 2016; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Due to these cultural differences, economically disadvantaged students have experienced discrimination, alienation, and difficulty with adjusting to their respective campus cultures (Cox, 2016; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Furthermore, these students have struggled with balancing academic and family responsibilities, and with managing their finances while in college (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Studies have also shown that economically disadvantaged students identify strategies which help them learn including finding spaces on campus where they can study, developing essential relationships with college staff (e.g., faculty, advisors, administrators), and exploring leadership roles on campus (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Of Florida high school graduates who entered college and were identified as being economically disadvantaged (i.e., qualified for Free or Reduced Lunch), 74.0% percent enrolled in the FCS (Scheuch, 2017b). Campus personnel in our focus groups were typically quite knowledgeable about the demographics of their students, especially those who were economically disadvantaged. With this knowledge, campus administrators, faculty, and advisors generally recognized the significant needs of this student population. One administrator shared:

> So, what do our students look like... in terms of low income, those students who fall below poverty level, we have the second-highest proportion. This gives you more information about who our students are, and I will tell you... we have the second-highest proportion of students who are caring for dependents. So that gives you a sense of the students we serve in this area.

With campus personnel understanding who their students were, they were also well informed about what resources they needed. For example, many administrators mentioned how campus programs, like TRIO, helped them accommodate economically

disadvantaged students in making their state college feel like "home." Furthermore, campus personnel mentioned how TRIO helped students gain a sense of "support" and guidance to persist as students. Another administrator mentioned:

> ...so we have a TRIO grant, and I think you all know what TRIO is about. And because most of our students [are low-income] …, we consider this a surrogate parenthood. We are the second parents to some of these students, and these are the things that are done – advising. They really don't do much in terms of the teaching, but the support of the students in their social and other aspects to keep going. So that's an important part of the piece.

Throughout our data, campus personnel specifically mentioned the financial strain that their economically disadvantaged students faced. A faculty member stated, "A lot of students come to me, they cannot afford a book." Even though some campus personnel genuinely enjoyed being a "second parent" to their students, some felt as if it was tough to play this role so frequently. It was especially difficult to play the parental role when campus personnel had to help their students out financially because they could not assist all of their students in this way. The faculty member continued, "So it's $100.00 for the book and the online homework thing and I guess they just don't have the $100.00. I mean it's significant to me to help them pay for it, but can you help 20 people?" Similarly, an administrator spoke of some of the services that had been considered to address the financial challenges faced by economically disadvantaged students:

> And so we [campus personnel] have a lot more conversations about out-of-class issues like students needing food pantries, and other needs that they have, such as transportation. We're re-engaging with [a Florida transit system] to see what we can do on transportation...And so we hope if we can address [these] barriers, all students will begin to achieve at a higher level.

Campus personnel were also concerned with economically disadvantaged students making decisions that were not always in their best interest academically. When asked about how they viewed Senate Bill 1720 (SB 1720), one administrator stated:

> I was quite concerned about what would happen to our students as they tried to go into comp [English Composition 1] without that background knowledge. I was particularly concerned with students who are often marginalized because of socioeconomic factors. I was very concerned with that population and worried that they would make decisions that were not in their best interests, that their decisions might be based on economics and time versus on the quality of the education that they were going to receive.

Campus personnel were especially concerned with how these "bad" decisions would affect students' financial aid. Another administrator explained:

> ...if [economically disadvantaged students] they don't take the course [DE], if they try to go into college courses before they're ready and they fail, they also are going to lose their financial aid. So, they lose their opportunity in the college environment much quicker, and I just think that that was an unintended result [of the legislation].

Aside from these concerns with students opting out of DE who may need it, campus personnel in our focus groups echoed that all they want is for their economically disadvantaged students to be "successful." In doing so, many faculty, advisors, and administrators expressed a familial connection to their students and wanted them to be as "informed" as possible in making course decisions to achieve success, choices which could affect their experience and academic outcomes in college. Another administrator shared:

> I think a lot of what we see is students who say, 'Well, I feel I can do it.' You know, and that's valid and meaningful and we respect that, but we just want them to have I think about all the data and evidence available to them as they make a decision so that it's as informed as possible. I worry that it [not making the right course decisions] disproportionately impacts lower socioeconomic status students because they don't have a mom, dad, family member, or loved one at home to say, you know, 'Honey, if this is where you're at with your skills, I'm not sure jumping to intermediate Algebra or comp is a good idea.'

Like economically disadvantaged students, English language learners in FCS institutions experienced obstacles that other students did not necessarily have to endure.

**English Language Learners (ELL)**

Community college students who are also in the process of acquiring English language skills are referred to as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learning (ELL) students. A large challenge for such students is utilizing coursework, academic supports, and campus resources that are primarily in English. Their previous academic literacy (Curry, 2004) also determines their experiences and likelihood of persisting in college. These students may have difficulty applying to college or understanding the requirements for doing so. They must also simultaneously learn to speak the language while completing course requirements, which can be challenging. Feeling misunderstood, figuratively and literally, is a common issue for English language learners along with social, cultural, and emotional adjustments factors (Estrada, Dupoux, & Wolman, 2005).

These issues make ESL and ELL students more vulnerable to dropping out of college. ELL are frequently first-generation college students as well, which adds accompanying stressors from family and home life (Cate, 2015). Native English speakers at the college, both staff and peers, can share with these students in productive ways that help them overcome barriers to communication. These experienced individuals must also check their biases and misattributed ideas concerning ELL students' intelligence, to more effectively provide campus resources and information to meet these students' needs.

Of Florida high school graduates who entered college and were English Language Learners, 85.8% enrolled in the FCS, and 77.5% of those identified as migrant students (children of migrant agricultural workers who move frequently to follow work) enrolled in the FCS (Scheuch, K., 2017b). We highlight the learning needs of ELL students and efforts by state colleges to serve them. While academic preparedness is an ongoing issue with students at many state colleges, learners who cannot adequately communicate their learning needs and personal preferences face additional challenges.

Nonetheless, college personnel find ways to best support ELL students, particularly in the absence of targeted structures on some campuses. A professor at one FCS institution shared this fact, "…we don't have any ESL support at all. There's nothing like that here. We're so small." She remarked, however, that English learning students use each other as social supports in the absence of college programs targeted to them. She continued, "Unless you have someone around who happens to speak the language…sometimes you can get 'em to help, but the kids are essentially helping themselves and helping each other. An instructor confirmed:

> *Faculty 1:* But I have one [international student] who…never had math in high school at all… the last thing he remembers doing is multiplying numbers. No Algebra whatsoever. But just like you said, the teammates, I mean…
>
> *Faculty 2:* They help him.
>
> *Faculty 1:* …if he wants to sit with his teammates [in class], that's okay with me 'cause they're helping each other for sure. And the [learning lab] is wonderful, too.

Help seeking among friends and peers is particularly useful for students attempting to learn English, and simultaneously completing coursework in this second language. These students often find success with access to their ELL peers, however. One faculty person shared a related story:

> I just saw one of our Brazilian softball players yesterday. I walked in the cafeteria and I could hear her speaking English across the room and I went up to her and I said – and I complimented her and said, 'You – I can tell you've really grown. How did – is it just talking to your teammates?' And she said, 'Yes, that's it.' …They really do struggle here, but…I guess they see that they need English, and so they get help from their teammates, you know, others.

English language learners, often international students, frequently place into DE courses. However, when these students land in first-level credit-bearing courses, mastering English is increasingly important to their success. Faculty argued that for ELL students in college-level courses, the incorporation of "placement tests would really help them [ELL students] figure out where they're supposed to be." This is a particular need in regions of Florida where the percentage of students who are not native speakers is rapidly increasing.

College faculty provide direct support as well as access to campus programs, where available, for ELL students. They state that ELL students often use personal translators as immediate supports in reading and writing courses. At one FCS institution, however, there is also a World Connect Center, with tutors specializing in English as a Second Language to accommodate numbers of international and ELL students in DE courses. This specialized tutoring is free to the students, and faculty remark that it "seems to be helping."

Students and campus staff also shared the view that ELL students learn best in face-to-face classes as opposed to online settings. An instructor stated that her entire class benefits when ELL students enroll because the second language students often "take these courses so seriously… [and] put forth so much effort, and ask amazing question[s]." Administrators at the same institution mentioned an influx of ELL students in face-to-face classes after the

administration changed course schedules to increase student access. An instructor continued regarding the contributions of face-to-face instruction:

> I know we have much more students that are [now] able to attend these classes when we moved them in-seat…but it's that classroom discussion, where you get those students, you know, speaking in different accents, and asking different questions, and coming from these different amazing places.

An English instructor also capitalized on these students' cultural wealth by incorporating a collaborative learning activity more accessible to her ELL students. Instead of using the textbook, she modified the course by incorporating a popular novel as learning material. She remarked on the success of this innovation:

> …since the bill a lot of my students are now English as a second language...and I had a group that I was supposed to use a certain textbook with, it was English 17, the lowest level. And when I saw the group and their vocabulary was so limited, I threw the textbook out and we read a novel instead, and it was – the class was totally organic. When we read the vocabulary list, they made the vocabulary list with each chapter. The questions, the discussions, everything was based on that novel. And they became such a learning community, they would make flash cards, they would have lunch together after the class. And at the end, I was doing the grades and I started bawling because everybody in the class but one student, you know, either had an A, B or C, and again, they weren't – this was their second language.

Students whose first language is not English can succeed in state colleges given faculty support and campus resources, where they are available. One student confirmed this notion:

> …so like…my first language is not English, so like, they told me just practice it. Or [instructor], she told me, 'Oh, like, I don't judge you for what you're… writing. I see your grammar and everything, but like, you just express yourself how you can. And I understand." And that motivates me because they…don't ask me for… something I can't [do]. Like, I'm learning and they're just teaching me…They're really good professors…

We conclude this section on diverse student populations by considering the needs of veterans and active duty military students.

**Veterans and Active Duty Military**

Students who previously served in the military, as well as students who are currently on active duty, face unique challenges in higher education (Kirchner, 2015). In addition to the bureaucracy of higher education itself, many veterans and active duty military students must navigate the bureaucracy of the Veterans Administration if they are using educational benefits (Akerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009). This population of students often also battles stereotypes and faces difficulties transitioning to the role of college student (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). In an environment where it is easy to be misunderstood, some students also feel isolated from their peers and unsupported by their institution (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Rumann et al., 2011). However, since the early 2000s, institutions have begun offering various supports, such as tailored orientations, resource centers, and student

organizations, for this population to aid in their success as college students (Kirchner, 2015).

Thousands of student veterans and active duty military personnel are enrolled in FCS institutions across the state. To support these students, each college in the FCS has one or more staff members who work to assist veterans (The Florida College System, 2018). Staff at many of the institutions we visited mentioned the ways that they support their active duty military and veteran student population. From words of encouragement to tailored advising, this population of students comes with unique needs that require individualized approaches.

An advisor at one institution, who was himself a veteran, explained that his regimented nature helped serve the active duty military and veteran population that he advises, saying, "I have a set number of things I cover and try to answer all their questions before they ask any questions." Having gone through experiences similar to his students, this advisor understood their needs, predicted the questions they might have, and prepared answers beforehand to help with their transitions. This advisor also described how he uses the institution's student information system to evaluate students' military transcripts and advise them on next steps:

> The military [students], I just look at the military transcripts, look at what they've had and normally none of that will work in for [general education requirements]. It just doesn't happen, so normally it's for electives. If they have any kind of electives in there in the new program that's where we'll put the military transcripts. . . . So, a lot of them just use 9, 10, 12 credits at the most, that's all they need.

By reviewing their transcripts, the advisor helped students fulfill some of the requirements necessary for graduation. An administrator at another institution mentioned the ways in which advisors use a student information system to alert them of a students' active duty or veteran status:

> We moved to Banner about five years ago, and this was how . . . we incorporate the ability of a student to – if they are a flexible placement student who just recently graduated from high school or military – then [we know] they are eligible for those gateway courses.

The veteran advisor also mentioned serving as a support system for students who may lack the academic confidence needed to persist. He described some of the words of encouragement he shares with students and the appreciation he receives in return:

> Well, what I find is that I have people come to me and they say, 'I just can't do this.' And, I keep telling them, whenever they come in . . ., 'You got this! You got this!' And I've had a few of them come back and thank me for helping them get through nursing school, even though they go to [other advisors] down there when they get into the program they still come by and see me. Especially since I gotta do the certification for the GI Bill and I go to all the pinnings for the nursing [students] that I have veterans in there. And I think here lately I've had some in the last two, three years, I've had veterans graduating. It just makes you feel good when they come back and tell you, 'You know, I don't think I could've done this without you pushing me.' And I think, 'I wasn't pushing you, I was just telling you, you can do this.' And then, after a while they start believing it.

The support for this population of students was also evident at another institution where a faculty member shared the transformation she saw in one student:

> I have an ex-military student who is taking the [DE] course simply because the student felt that he didn't have the writing skills. He self-selected this course. And about three weeks ago, a light bulb went off in his head and he said, 'I think I understand this!' And he sat down with his paper, completely rearranged it, handed it back to me and said, 'Does it work like that?' I'm, like, 'Yes!'

The support for active duty military and veteran students proved to be wide-ranging and impactful to students' connection to support staff and institutions. By personalizing approaches and conversations, advisors and faculty alike made differences in the lives of this and other deserving student populations across the FCS.

# Opportunities for Continuous Institutional Improvement across the FCS

Based on our focus group data, we highlight the following opportunities for continuous institutional improvement across the FCS:

1. Some institutions in our sample used multiple advising philosophies, while others incorporated none. We encourage institutions that have not already done so, to adopt a consistent advising philosophy or model (e.g., appreciative, developmental, intrusive advising) to guide practice. We also recommend that institutions train academic advisors in how to concretely apply their chosen philosophy in advising sessions to better support student learning.
2. Because effective writing is an essential workplace skill, FCS institutions may want to consider incorporating more writing practice not only in English courses, but across the curriculum. Furthermore, a promising practice at a few institutions involved English faculty collaborating with other disciplines to incorporate authentic writing exercises into the English curriculum. Frequent feedback from instructors on student writing is also important, as many students reported a lack of confidence in their writing.
3. Clearly defined math pathways offer an opportunity for institutions to improve educational outcomes and help students avoid hitting roadblocks at challenging courses such as MAT 1033. Advisor and faculty training on co-requisite instruction and alternate math options to non-STEM students could help student decision-making on most appropriate coursework. Close collaboration among high schools, state colleges, and transfer institutions on math course sequences would help to simplify

math pathways so that students enroll only in the math courses that best fit their educational goals and chosen meta-major.

4. Many institutions incorporated academic skills assessments in advising sessions, new student Orientation, and on the first day of class. We suggest that identifying students' academic deficits early, allows staff to direct campus resources to struggling students before it is too late (i.e., before students fail a class or decide not to return the subsequent semester).
5. Students who adopted effective metacognitive strategies reported better learning outcomes than students who were less reflective about their learning processes. Professional development to assist staff in fostering metacognitive awareness among students would be welcome. Metacognitive learning strategies can also be incorporated into the curriculum across content areas.
6. Some populations of students in our focus groups such as adults, economically disadvantaged students, and English language learners had less access to technology or less familiarity with technology. To facilitate success for these students, sufficient face-to-face sections of courses should be offered for classes with high enrollments.
7. Adults, economically disadvantaged students, and first-generation college students sometimes struggled to balance home life with academic expectations. Family-friendly policies could help to bridge the gap between home and school for many of these students. Expanded access to childcare at FCS institutions would benefit many adult students across the state. In addition, family-friendly campus events could help increase participation in extracurricular activities for parents as well as assist in acclimating first-generation students' extended family members to the college environment.
8. Enhanced career counseling and placement services would benefit all FCS students, but especially adult students who are changing careers in midlife and younger students who may be less informed about possible career paths.
9. Students in our focus groups responded well to staff who shared a common identity with them. Students perceived these staff members as better able to understand their life circumstances and direct them to appropriate services. Therefore, hiring staff who share a common identity with students such as English language learners, first-generation college students, and veterans may help to increase students' engagement and sense of belonging on campus.
10. Our focus groups reinforced the reality that English language learners are a growing percentage of the FCS student population. In institutions where there is limited access to ESL, bilingual students could be hired as tutors and peer mentors to facilitate learning and the acquisition of English skills for those with language barriers.

# Conclusion

FCS institutions demonstrate their commitment to the open access mission of community colleges by fostering a culture that supports student learning through efforts at continuous institutional improvement. This focus on continuous improvement in support of student success can be seen across units and divisions of FCS institutions in advising practices, instruction, academic support services, the emphasis on individual student success strategies, and services targeted at specific student populations.

The findings in this statewide report were based on focus groups with administrators, faculty members, advisors, support staff, and students during our visits to nine FCS institutions. In addition, the CPS team will continue to analyze student data to examine student outcomes over time, document the changes in institutional programs and practices, and study the interrelations among state policy change, the culture of learning in the FCS, and student success in postsecondary education.

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