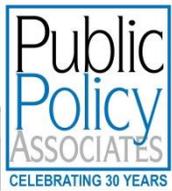


MI-BEST STUDENT FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Cross-Cutting Findings

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Public Policy Associates, Incorporated is a public policy research, development, and evaluation firm headquartered in Lansing, Michigan. We serve clients in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors at the national, state, and local levels by conducting research, analysis, and evaluation that supports informed strategic decision-making.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE AND PROCESS

Public Policy Associates (PPA) facilitated focus groups to understand students' needs while attending college and what non-academic supports eliminate the barriers to successful completion. Two focus groups were held virtually for each college in February and March 2021 with students from four Michigan community colleges: Bay College, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Lake Michigan College, and Oakland Community College. In total, PPA spoke with 44 students.

The topics of the focus groups included students' college goals, financial concerns, awareness of supports on and off campus, overall satisfaction with non-academic supports available, and suggestions for improving communication and services.

KEY FINDINGS

- Students piece together funding sources to cover the cost of school and living expenses. Many students are working as well as attending college.
- The top financial worries (beyond tuition) for students are paying for housing and utilities. Just under a third of the focus group participants had food insecurities.
- A majority of students were not able to name non-academic supports provided by their colleges.
- Students are unclear about whom to ask for help on campus when they have issues, academic or otherwise.
- Some students are highly self-sufficient and able to navigate financial and academic challenges independently, whereas others require direct support to locate and access resources to address their challenges.
- Students are interested in receiving information from the colleges about supports through websites, online platforms, social media, emails, text messages, and/or print notices, as well as through staff and faculty.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a list of community resources with direct links for easy access to details, and make the list accessible on the college webpage or other online platforms students use in connection with the college. Test website changes with students.
- Increase communication about student supports through a variety of approaches and during different times each semester.
- Ensure that there are mental health services available and known to students.
- Consider small supports that could ease student budgets, such as arranging discounts at local establishments, and judge carefully whether a textbook should be a required purchase.

- Make sure all faculty and advisors know how to refer students to supports.
- Include in student supports information about the process to address issues with instructors, technology support services, and study tips. Younger and older students often have different needs and life experiences that require a different menu of supports.

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INTRODUCTION

PROJECT CONTEXT

Historically, colleges have not been thought of by students or others as a resource for non-academic supports because these types of services were not generally offered to students in the past. While academic tutoring, test preparation, and learning accommodations have been recognized as important to students' academic progress, wraparound services of a non-academic nature have only more recently been recognized at colleges as critically important to helping students persist and complete their programs of study. Particularly as our society at large has sought to increase educational credentials and overall college enrollment has grown, institutions of higher education have been seen as needing to offer new kinds of guidance and resources to students.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges had to quickly pivot instructional, advising, and other interactions with students to a remote environment. College staff and faculty are working with students in a different way. For students, too, the pandemic created challenges and changes. For some, loss of employment, online learning, and the loss of connections to peers introduced financial and social-emotional difficulties.

In the midst of this, the MI-BEST project launched. The project, funded by the ECMC Foundation and led by the Michigan Center for Student Success, aids Michigan community colleges in building their capacity to understand students' wraparound support needs and develop strategies to better serve students. To capture student voices as part of the project, Public Policy Associates (PPA) conducted focus groups with students of four of the community colleges participating in MI-BEST. Four community colleges were selected to participate by the PPA team with the input of MCSS staff, with consideration for geography, size of college, current student-support activities, and willingness to host and learn from the focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP APPROACH

Topics

PPA worked closely with college teams to understand their perception of student needs in the context of the college and their current student support offerings. PPA staff and consultant Chris Baldwin, Ph.D., then worked with the colleges to craft questions for the focus groups about students' college goals, financial concerns, awareness of and satisfaction with college and community resources, the colleges' communication about student support resources, and recommendations for improvements. For these groups, student supports were defined as “non-

academic” to help students distinguish the services being discussed from other kinds of supports tied to coursework, such as tutoring and academic advising.

The focus group questions were developed with reference from the Trellis’ Student Financial Wellness Survey, the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement’s Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment, and the Center for Community College Student Engagement Focus Group Guide. After the instrument was used for the first focus group, questions were refined to improve the flow of responses.

Student Recruitment Process

To recruit students, PPA provided a set of criteria to target the focus groups to students who were most likely to have financial challenges and to be reflective of the colleges’ core population. These criteria were:

- Students who were full time or part time students (at least 18-20 credits over multiple semesters) seeking an associate’s degree or transfer to four-year program
- Students who have qualified for need-based financial aid (beyond student loans)
- Students representing the student population mix at the college, including by age groups, racial/ethnic background, gender, and campus
- Students who have accessed non-academic student support services (e.g., emergency funds, food pantry, transportation services, child care) previously
- Students flagged in the college’s early alert system
- Students who are not under the age of 18 or who are dual enrolled

The colleges used these criteria to generate a list of students from their administrative records and reach out to students with a focus group invitation. Not all the colleges track student services in the same way or have an early-alert system, so the application of the criteria looked slightly different at each institution. PPA asked that a minimum of 150 students be included in the invitation list, but the four colleges exceeded that outreach target.

Recruiting began three weeks prior to the focus group dates selected by PPA. When a group of students were identified, college teams were asked to send communication promoting the focus groups using an email invitation with an attached poster that was created by PPA. Text messaging language was also created for colleges that had texting capabilities. Students interested in participating registered online, completing a set of demographic questions. The profile data included questions about a student’s demographics, enrollment hours, employment status, financial resources for college, financial responsibilities and stability, food security, access to transportation, and their most current challenges.

The goal was to recruit 14 students per focus group at each college, anticipating some attrition. PPA monitored and reported to colleges the total number of students registered each week. A second invitation was sent out to students if the registration capacity was at or less than 50% of the number of participants needed.

Participation

With guidance from college teams, PPA planned focus group dates in February and March 2021. Each college was provided two dates with an afternoon (3 p.m. – 5 p.m.) and evening (6 p.m. – 8 p.m.) session to offer students. PPA held one additional focus group for two colleges that had low participation in the first two sessions. While a good number of students signed up for the focus groups (153 students across all colleges), the no-show rate for these groups was unusually high, despite confirmations and reminder notices by email and/or telephone. The no-show rate ranged from 62% of registrants to 89% of registrants per college. See Table 1 below for the dates of the groups and the total participation for each college.

Table 1. Focus Group Dates and Total Student Participation by College

College and Session Dates	Number of Students
Bay College	13
February 17	
February 18	
March 25	
Kalamazoo Valley Community College	11
February 23	
February 24	
Oakland Community College	15
March 9	
March 10	
Lake Michigan Community College	5
March 2	
March 3	
March 23	
Total	44

All sessions were conducted virtually using Zoom, with a PPA moderator and note-taker.

Participant Characteristics

Across the colleges, 68% of participants in the focus groups were White, 11% were Black, 7% were Asian, and others were from other racial/ethnic groups, of multiple races, or did not give their race/ethnicity. The majority of the participants were female (61%) and attending college full time (66%). Student ages ranged from 20 to 55. Sixty-seven percent of the students reported that they had financial responsibility for another person (e.g., spouse, child, other family member). Other financial information was shared by students when they completed the participant profile at registration.



Figure 1. Percentage of Students Selecting Statements That Were True in the Past 12 Months, Across All Colleges

Community colleges serve a wide range of students, and the MI-BEST focus groups were no different. In the focus groups existed a mix of students who were first-time students, returning students, and students seeking a new career pathway. There were also a variety of goals for students with academic plans that included transferring to a university and obtaining an associate's degree for the first time or an additional degree as part of a career change. The majors of the students ranged widely.

Analysis

The profile data for students who participated in the focus groups were exported from SurveyMonkey into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. PPA analyzed the focus group notes from each session using a qualitative software program (NVivo) and coded by question. Emergent themes from the discussion were also coded and reviewed for interpretation. PPA then summarized the topics from the focus group instrument for each college separately and overall, looking at overarching themes across colleges.

CROSS-CUTTING RESULTS

The MI-BEST student focus groups generated insights across the colleges, as well as for individual colleges. The colleges received their individual reports separately. What follows is the summary of results across colleges.

STUDENT FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Focus group participants most often did not mention their financial concerns within the groups right away. When asked how they felt about their financial situation almost all indicated that they were getting by. From the student registration profile, most ranked food, housing, and mental health as their top challenges across all colleges. This, of course, looks slightly different for each college depending on the differences among the students and the college location. Challenges with legal issues and child care were not selected by most students as concerns, with many marking these items as not applicable. (Only 4 out of 44 students indicated that they pay for child care on the student registration profile.) In focus groups discussions, however, of the students who had young children, child care was an issue they mentioned.

Students discussed a variety of expenses. Most often these included rent or a mortgage, utility bills, and books and materials. The top responses from the student registration questionnaire reflect these concerns. Most students indicated that in the past 12 months they had difficulty paying utility bills or paying for housing (see Figure 1). None of the students indicated that they had experienced homelessness in the past 12 months.

“You pay, you go, you learn, you turn in assignments, and get a degree. You don’t think about the extra stuff at all [beforehand]. I don’t think a lot of people think about that [non-academic supports] . . . and [that] would definitely be a huge issue to address.”

- Student focus group participant

Students were paying for college through a variety of means, which included student loans, Pell Grant, other grants, scholarships, employment, savings, and credit cards. The top funding sources that were listed in the student registration profile indicate students use Pell grants, scholarships, and independent student loans. None of the students reported having parents take out loans to help pay for their schooling or receiving veterans benefits.

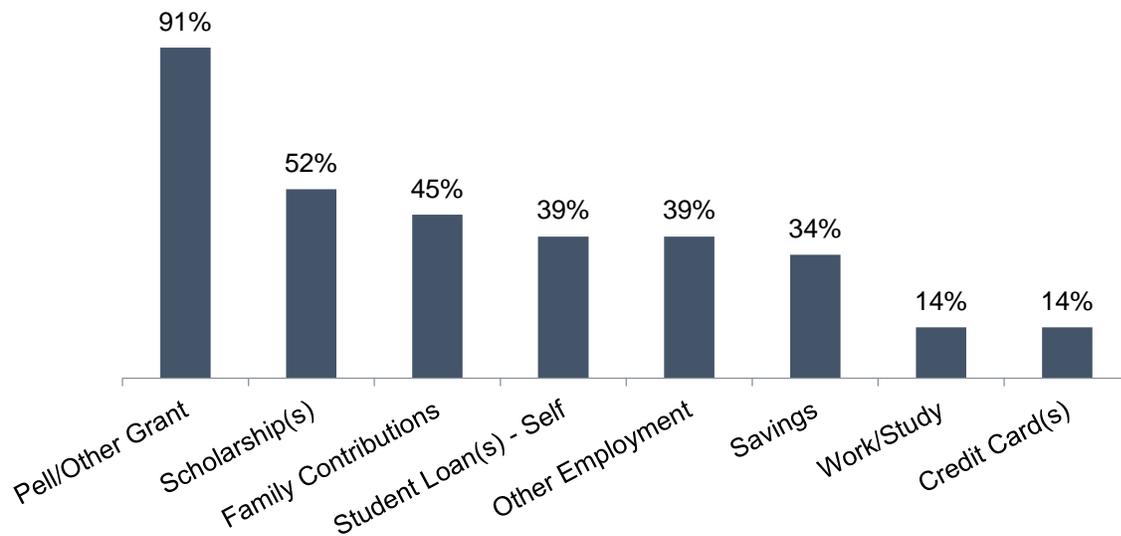


Figure 2. Funding Sources Used by Students to Pay for College, Across All Colleges

AWARENESS OF NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

Overall students expressed a lack of familiarity for non-academic supports being offered by their colleges. Most often students mentioned academic supports such as tutoring, scholarship funding, or grant funding for books and materials. Of the students who were aware of non-academic supports, most referred to food assistance programs.

In general, students could not say what supports were available on campus or speak to differences in offerings on different campuses. Many students were in their first year and had only experienced online classes due to the pandemic. Most that needed non-academic supports were unsure of whom to consult or where they would go on campus to seek information. Some mentioned a Student Services department on campus, but they were not certain of what the department offered.

All students, however, could speak to the best ways to communicate with students about supports and resources. Most said they prefer learning about resources by email and text messaging. Some students had a strong preference for one or the other, so it would be important to communicate in multiple modes. Students thought it would be best to send information out at the beginning of the

“There is minimal information [on the website]. Need more emphasis on what is available and direct links to the services. They list services, but it’s mostly academic. More emphasis on mental health support would definitely help.”

- Student focus group participant

semester and then again in the middle of the semester as a reminder. Some also suggested it would be good to get a reminder for supports such as counseling and study groups just before finals.

STUDENT SUPPORTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Overall, the focus group participants were not referred to services in the community through their colleges. Most were also not aware of the kinds of non-academic supports available in the communities of the college campuses. This could be because of a lack of need for these particular students or because some of the students had a long commute from home to college (e.g., 45 minutes) and were not familiar with the community where the campuses exist.

Some of the students mentioned the stresses of college and the pandemic, stating that access to mental health services or any health provider such as dental, vision, or general family practitioners would be valuable.

OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

Similar to community support awareness, a majority of the students were not aware of the non-academic supports offered by their colleges. Most often students referenced federal aid, such as the CARES grant or the Michigan's Futures for Frontliners scholarship, as supports they appreciated. Only a few were aware of resources such as a food pantry or a clothing closet.

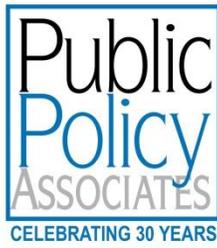
Of the students who had experience with the non-academic supports, the general impressions were that the resources helped meet their needs, and they were grateful for the support from the staff involved (e.g., counselors) and the college as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While college-specific recommendations are provided in the following sections, below are some suggestions for practices that all of the colleges could institute to help students. These recommendations originated through the focus groups from students directly or indirectly.

- Create a list of community resources (e.g., shelters, food pantries, community groups, health professionals, etc.) with direct links for easy access to contact details, and make the list accessible on the college webpage and other online platforms in use at the college, like classroom forums and assignment boards. Improvements to the college website should be reviewed by students to test for potential navigation barriers and other usability factors. Asking students periodically to provide feedback on the college's website can help gauge how students interact with it and help guide future platform designs for easier information access by students.

- Increase communication about student supports through a variety of approaches (e.g., text, email, and classroom visits) and during different times each semester, such as at the beginning of the semester and again during finals week. When classes resume in-person, posting flyers in general areas or classrooms and displaying resources on video monitors in common locations could also help increase the awareness of resources.
- Make sure all faculty and advisors know how to refer students to supports and share a list of resources at the college and in the community with faculty and staff at multiple times during the year.
- Ensure that there are mental health services available and known to students (either offered by the college or within the community by partners of the college).
- Consider small supports that could ease student budgets, such as arranging discounts at local establishments (e.g., cafes and technology stores), and ask faculty to judge carefully whether a textbook should be a required purchase or if they could otherwise reduce textbook costs in order to avoid unnecessary expenses for students. Encourage the availability of textbooks in different formats to best meet student learning needs (e.g., online application and audio).
- Include in student supports information about the process to address issues with instructors, technology support services, and study tips. Younger and older students often have different needs and life experiences that require a different menu of supports.



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