FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE:
A FACULTY INITIATIVE TO INCREASE SUPPORT

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate
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struggles. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and the administration at my institution for their support during this journey. Sending me to conferences awakened my curiosity and increased my awareness about what was happening across the country at community colleges.

I dedicate this disquisition to my family. To my husband, John Baylor, who supported me on this journey and encourages me to see things from different perspectives. To my daughters, Isabella and Frances, who were understanding when I had to work and who I hope will grow up to be strong female leaders who look out for everyone. We have tried to model the hard work and dedication that you need to accomplish anything you want.

Maureen Lambert: Several times throughout this disquisition process, I have been reminded of the African proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." In this spirit, I have been honored to join in this endeavor with my partner, Laura Baylor. I thank her for constantly keeping me on track, always having a plan, and helping me to expand my knowledge. The ability to partner with Laura allowed me a larger view and increased depth of this work.

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ABSTRACT

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College retention is a primary focus within many institutions of higher education; however, retention efforts have largely been unsuccessful in impacting first-year completion rates and eventual degree attainment. Drawing on research that demonstrates the value of a strong faculty-student relationship and an engaging classroom environment, this initiative investigates the potential impact faculty have on first-year student success at two local institutions: a community college and a four-year proprietary institution. Utilizing a scholar-practitioner lens and improvement science methodology to complete a Plan, Do, Study Act (PDSA) cycle, we evaluated the efficacy of an initiative that included professional development for faculty, individual Get to Know You (GTKY) meetings between faculty and students, and strategies for class engagement. The work was carried out during the fall of 2020 as instructors and students dealt with the challenges of COVID-19. The professional development, covering equity, sense of belonging, and the importance of student and faculty relationships, was well received. Overall, faculty and students found value in the GTKY meetings, and there was a weak but positive correlation between GTKY meetings and engagement. These strategies are promising and demonstrate value in a second PDSA cycle with more participants.

Recommendations for a second cycle include implementing a shorter study timeline, adding specific engagement activities, and including focus groups. Partnering between different institutions of higher education, utilizing the scholar-practitioner model, and conducting the initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique perspective on the improvement science process.

FOREWORD

Many students are not prepared for college-level work when they begin their first year of college, particularly if they have not had strong, supportive prior educational opportunities. Post-traditional students (formerly referred to as "non-traditional students"), who often enter college from a disadvantaged background, may feel vulnerable as students and lack confidence in the classroom (Iloh, 2018). This often results in students not reaching their goals of obtaining a degree or transferring to a four-year institution. Recognizing the negative consequences for both the student and the institution that result from student attrition, we sought to address this problem in our disquisition from a scholar-practitioner perspective.

A scholar-practitioner is both a leader and a participant in an improvement initiative (Drake & Health, 2011). This dual role provides a unique perspective on the improvement process for the professional doctoral student, who aims to negotiate the scholarly research within local educational institutions. As such, we approached this work by combining our roles as scholars and as practitioners seeking to institute change through on-the-job leadership.

A disquisition is a dissertation in practice that develops the scholar-practitioner role, prepares professional practitioners, and develops their skills for change leadership (Perry et al., 2020). The disquisition is the culminating experience of the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at Western Carolina University (Lomotey, 2018).

This disquisition draws on improvement science as the guiding methodology and focuses on an improvement initiative designed to emphasize the role of faculty in building relationships with students to support their first-year transition to college. The goal of this work is to increase connection between faculty and students with the outcome of improving students' sense of belonging. This initiative was carried out in two contexts of practice in a southeastern state.

FOSTERING A SENESE OF BELONING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACULTY IN FIRST-YEAR SUPPORT

The transition into college is undoubtedly a time of uncertainty for many students. As they embark on their journey toward a college degree, students are often challenged with academic, social, and economic changes that they have not previously experienced. While many students enter college with the hope of improving their lives, retaining students through to graduation is unfortunately not the reality for many colleges. Data from fall 2017 through fall 2018 show that, of all first-time students who entered all institutions of higher education, only 61.7% were retained after their first year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSC], 2019). In the four-year for-profit sector, just 41.9% of entering fall 2017 students were retained after that first year (NSC, 2019). Statistics specific to the community college are bleak, showing an overall retention rate of 48.9% for the same time period (NSC, 2019). However, to clarify, some community college students do not enroll with the intent of earning a degree. For example, they enroll to complete a prerequisite to return to school or for short-term job training.

College students have many demands on their attention, often making the transition into college complex and difficult. This is particularly true for students who commute to college and do not attend public four-year universities. Identified as post-traditional students, many of these students are working a full or part-time job, are not financially secure, are caring for children, represent the first generation in their family to attend college, or are returning to school after a break from formal education (Iloh, 2018 p. 26). These conditions often do not correlate with academic success, the lack of support and finances compound an already stressful time of change (Burns, 2010; Grace-Odeleye, 2019).

Still, achieving a college education is an important personal and societal goal, and ample literature demonstrates both the necessity and value of a college degree. To live an economically self-sufficient life, it is estimated that a post-secondary education is necessary for as many as four-fifths of high school graduates (Grace-Odeleye, 2019; Kuh et al., 2006). In fact, the financial impact between those who complete a college degree and those who start a degree, but do not finish, is a lifetime earnings gap of more than $750,000 (Tinto, 2021a). That number grows to more than $1 million for those who never start college (Pennington, 2004). Obtaining an associate degree not only carries with it an increase in earning potential, but also correlates with lower numbers of adults who are institutionalized in the criminal justice and mental health systems (Rath et al., 2013). Positive personal outcomes such as increased confidence, sense of purpose, self-awareness, and social competence also correlate with degree completion (Grace-Odeleye, 2019). In essence, college completion brings with it economic, individual, and societal benefits. Higher education has long promoted this mission of providing a means to greater economic and social mobility. Marketing literature often emphasizes a diverse group of students achieving their goals in supportive environments; however, the reality often does not mirror this ideal. Instead, higher education's failure to solve the retention problem is rooted in issues of social justice that limit opportunities for student growth and advancement.

Beyond the impact on the student, completion rates are also vital to a college's image, accountability, financial stability, and its ability to increase program offerings (Fike & Fike, 2008). Retention, therefore, is an integral component of the institutional landscape. However, college development theorist Vincent Tinto (1999, 2012b) argues that retention efforts on college campuses do not do enough to keep students, particularly in their first year of college. Tinto (1999, 2012b) further claims that most colleges take ineffective approaches to retention by

adding on classes or initiatives aimed at fixing a target problem instead of focusing on changing the larger college culture and the deeper roots of the problem (e.g., freshman seminars and/or academic success courses). Therefore, the call has been, and continues to be, for colleges to develop meaningful retention efforts that not only help students as they transition to college, but also support them as they persevere to degree or transfer completion. This requires a recognition on the part of university agents that attrition is not simply the fault of the student, but is a result of "the very character of the settings…in which they ask students to learn" (Tinto, 1999, p. 5). Since students often take prerequisite and general education courses in their first year of college, those required courses are important places to focus retention efforts. Low completion rates in first-year classes lead to low retention and student frustration, impacting students' success toward completion.

Retention and the First Year

As a focal point of study for more than 50 years, retention efforts are not new in higher education literature and initiatives (Tinto, 2006). While research efforts initially took a student-blaming approach, depicting students as lazy, unmotivated, and under-prepared, this deficit mindset shifted in the 1970s when researchers began instead to examine the environment of the institution and the impact it has on retention. As research shifted to analyze the institution, theorists called for increased student services and add-on activities and classes, such as orientations and first-year experience programs (Tinto, 2006). Approaching student success in college from an organizational learning perspective, Bensimon (2005) emphasizes that the structures and culture of an organization can either promote or inhibit learning. When it comes to supporting underrepresented students with institutional retention efforts, these initiatives can only be successful if inequities and cultural obstacles are understood and acknowledged by those working in the institution (Bensimon, 2005). Bensimon (2005) explains, "Contrary to the dominant belief that the solution to unequal educational outcomes lies in a new program or technique...I believe that institutional actors, as a consequence of their beliefs, expectations, values, and practices, create or perpetuate unequal outcomes" (p. 101). As the research continues to progress, the complexities of what makes retention efforts successful and meaningful continue to be uncovered. Theory now points to the complex ways retention varies among institutions and different groups of students with organizational culture playing a role in shaping success. With these various institutional and personal factors colliding, it is evident that a clear, easy solution to college retention is a complex undertaking, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Complexity of Factors Impacting Retention

Issues students bring with them to college
- Children/dependents
- Work
- Financial hardships
- Stress
- Prior negative experiences with education
- Low confidence
- Poor study skills
- Lack of knowledge of the system
- Lack of personal support structures

Issues facing students when they enter college
- Deficit mindsets of institutional faculty and staff
- Lack of meaningful support resources
- Unwritten rules and unfamiliar processes
- Institutional culture that prioritizes normative behavior and values

Outcomes
- Frustration
- Isolation
- Inability to connect
- Class withdrawal, drop, or failure
- Exit from the institution
- Financial aid burden
- Lower employment opportunities
- Lower economic capital
- Lower social capital

The first year of college must be understood as a key time for students' social and academic development. During this time, students are developing the skills and forming the relationships to successfully persist to graduation or transfer. For underprepared and underrepresented students who do not successfully transition into the first year of college (more specifically, the first semester), their likelihood of continuing into the second year of college greatly declines (Stewart et al., 2015). Tinto (2006, 2012a, 2012b) also identifies engagement during the first year as an important factor in student persistence. Further, he challenges institutions to take action to close academic gaps, particularly for low-income students who tend to be academically underprepared.

Karp and Bork (2014) highlight this lack of preparedness, specifically among community college students, who often do not understand faculty expectations and struggle to know the "unwritten rules of the community college" (p. 3). As compared to high school, the less structured environment of community college, which allows for more flexible scheduling and requires students to function with more independence, makes it more difficult for students to manage their time and prepare for classes (Karp & Bork, 2014). Students need to develop positive academic habits and college attitudes, self-awareness, and strategies for seeking help, particularly because the expectations held by instructors are "rarely articulated to aspiring and new community college students" (Karp & Bork, 2014, p. 31). While faculty and other institutional actors may be aware of inequities in educational outcomes, acknowledging their own role in contributing to the problem is often ignored (Bensimon, 2005). However, these institutional actors must analyze the problems within their own local context if real support and change is to occur (Bensimon, 2005). To meet retention goals, Tinto (1999) maintains that this foundational first year "should be able to stand as a distinct institutional response to the question, 'How should the first year of college be structured to best promote student learning in that year and beyond?'" (p. 9).

Analyzing two local institutions, Connected Community College (CCC) and Applewood College (AC), we have found that the complex factors that are apparent in the national literature on retention are also apparent on our campuses. Students at both institutions rely heavily on financial aid to pay for school and are balancing college, work, and family responsibilities. Since both institutions are commuter colleges, many students lack a strong connection to their school and struggle to adjust to the demands of college in their first year. Additionally, we believe that faculty, who normally spend the most direct time with students, are best positioned to serve as a

support structure, particularly in the first year. The purpose of this disquisition is to analyze the

dynamic ways that faculty can serve as influential support systems in first-year classes. If

faculty take more of an active role to increase personal connections and build relationships with

their students, we hypothesize that students will feel an increased sense of belonging in the

classroom, which will ultimately improve their chances of course completion and retention.

Key Terms and Definitions

It is necessary to define key terms that will be used throughout this disquisition. Our

overall aim is an increase in *student retention,* which analyzes if a student progresses through

college at the same institution (Tinto, 2012a). Retention is different from *persistence,* as

persistence is measured by student continuation in college at any institution (Tinto, 2012a).

Retention is measured nationally by counting students enrolled in college for the first time in the

fall semester who are still enrolled at that same institution the following fall semester (NSC,

2019).

Because the focus only on first-time students limits our scope of understanding success of

all students, it is important for us to analyze completion in first-year classes to broaden our scope

of student progress. *Course completion*, therefore, is measured by counting students who

successfully complete a course with a grade of A, B, or C; this also defines the course *pass rate*.

Students who are in danger of not completing the course with a C or better are identified

as *at-risk students* as they are "at risk" of not completing the course. Faculty should identify and

begin outreach to at-risk students as soon as they show signs of falling behind (such as noting

excessive class absences, missing assignments, or receiving low grades on tests). Grades may

indicate a student as at-risk; however, other characteristics, such as demonstration of outside

stressors that impact a student's ability to succeed can identify them as at-risk (e.g., child care

needs, work conflicts, psychological concerns). We ground this term in the work of Gordon and Yowell (1999), who emphasize that at-risk status is not simply dependent upon an individual's characteristics, but on how the institutional environment supports the student. The inability of the educational environment to support minoritized and underprepared students is a barrier that hinders student success (Gordon & Yowell, 1999).

Throughout this disquisition, we use the term *post-traditional student* rather than non-traditional student. This term is chosen to distinguish both a growing, but often neglected, adult student population; however, it also includes students under 25 who maintain adult responsibilities, such as working while in school, having non-spousal dependents, and having a nontraditional educational path (Iloh, 2018). In short, these students are often juggling multiple roles that present challenges to study time and campus participation (Iloh, 2018). As shifting demographics in higher education now demonstrate, students who have typically been referred to as "non-traditional" have now become the norm in postsecondary education (Gulley, 2016). Referring to students as "non-traditional" might impact students' confidence and acceptance at the university (Gulley, 2016). As Gulley (2016) explains, "the continued and frequent labeling of the majority of our college students as nontraditional is a form of othering that adversely impacts these students' ability to successfully persist in many of our educational settings" (para. 4).

We focus our work on *first-year courses*, which often include required General Education courses, such as English or math. Additionally, for students enrolling in a program, it could include an introductory course (e.g., Introduction to Criminal Justice or Introduction to Business).

We refer to *sense of belonging* as a student's ability to feel connected to a group or environment that makes them feel comfortable and valued.

Demographic Comparison of Two Local Colleges

This investigation occurred at two sites in the Southeast: Connected Community College (CCC) and Applewood College (AC). CCC is a public two-year community college that offers transfer and applied science degrees, in addition to job training, certificates, and diplomas. In Spring 2019, CCC had 1,994 students on average with 33% of them being full-time; the average student age was 23, and 76% of the population was White, 12.6% Latinx, and 3.9% African American. AC is a small, private, proprietary (for-profit) institution that offers both associate's and bachelor's degrees. In Spring 2019, AC had 307 students, 82% of whom were full time. The average age was 30, and 73.9% of the population was White, 6.84 Latinx, and 11.4% African American. Table 1 provides a comparison of retention figures between the two institutions, and a comparison of institutional characteristics is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 1

Retention Comparison of Connected Community College and Applewood College

Connected Community College	Applewood College
2016 Fall to 2017 Fall Retention: Full-time students: 58% Part-time students: 43%	**2016 Summer 2017 to Fall Retention**: 72%
2017 Fall to 2018 Fall Retention: Full-time students: 64% Part-time students: 58%	**2017 Summer to 2018 Spring Retention:** 74%

Table 2

Comparison of Institutional Characteristics

Institutional Characteristics	Connected Community College	Applewood College
Schedule	16-week semester	10-week quarter
Housing	Students commute	Students commute
Enrollment	1,994 students	307 students
Student demographics:		
Average age	23	30
Male	43.2%	17.6%
Female	56.7%	82.4%
White	76%	73.9%
Latinx	12.6%	6.84%
African American	3.9%	11.4%
Other	5.8%	7.8%
Full-time	33%	82%
Part-time	67%	18%
Financial aid:		
Students receiving any financial aid	75%	98%
Students receiving Pell Grants	49%	57%

Demographics of Connected Community College

Connected Community College is located in a southeastern state. The mission of CCC is to create strong educational and training programs that help students reach their educational goals and satisfy the workforce demands of their service area. This aligns with the mission (1A SBCCC 200.1) for community colleges given in the State Board of Community Colleges Code (2018, p.1). Connected Community College is an open-door institution, meaning there is not a competitive admissions process. There is no on-campus housing. One pathway at CCC is to complete the first two years of college and then transfer to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree. Similar to other community colleges nation-wide, CCC offers certificates, diplomas, and associate in applied science degrees that lead to employment (Brooks et al., 1997).

These options provide ways for students to reach higher educational goals and meet employment needs in the local area. A focus of the community college is to bridge the "gap between people and jobs" (Brooks et. al, 1997, p. 395)

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, CCC's retention rates for full-time students from fall to fall in 2016-2017 was 58%; it was 43% for part-time students. The overall graduation rate for students who began in 2014 was 32%. Fall to fall retention in 2017-2018 was 64% for full time students and 58% for part time students. The overall graduation rate for students who began in 2015 within 150% of "normal time" of the program was 11% and the transfer out rate is 13%. The graduation rate is much lower than the fall-to-fall retention, demonstrating that somewhere along the way students are leaving the institution.

The Southeastern State Community College System (2019) office also distributes statewide student success data. According to the curriculum completion measure in 2012, 35.4% of students at CCC graduated, transferred, or are enrolled during the fourth academic year with 42 hours of non-developmental credit successfully completed. The Southeastern State Community College System regards baseline as 34.1% and excellence as 52.7%. The rate in the 2013 cohort was 39.2%. The 2014 cohort saw an increase to 47.2%. The first-year progression measure (percentage of first-time fall credential-seeking students who graduate prior to or enroll in postsecondary education during the subsequent fall term) for CCC was 57.2% in 2015, 58.9% in 2016, and 61.6% in 2017. The system office states that the average among colleges is 68.2% and excellence is 71.9%, so there is room for improvement to reach the excellence level. Community college enrollment determines funding from the state, so losing students impacts the budget negatively.

In February 2019, focus groups of two groups of stakeholders – two faculty members and four department chairs – were held. All participants agreed that improving retention would benefit CCC (Faculty 1, Faculty 2, Faculty 3, Faculty 4, Faculty 5, Faculty 6, personal communication, February 2019). This feedback and the retention data support the need to examine how to create an environment that supports students and assists them in reaching their academic goals.

I, Laura Baylor, have been a community college faculty member for 15 years. I did not attend community college, so, as a young faculty member, I did not fully understand the challenges many community college students face, such as working while in school and balancing family and school responsibilities. In addition to understanding their challenges, it took me even longer to understand the importance of the community college faculty and the classroom environment to many community college students. As a college student, I did not want anything to do with faculty members outside of class and did not talk with my professors or visit during their office hours. Both of my parents were community college instructors so I had a lot of support at home and resources to find answers I needed without engaging with professors outside of class. When I began teaching at a community college, I wrongly assumed that community college students were not interested in getting to know their instructors. A few students would reach out, but, if students did not make the effort, I assumed that they did not want to get to know me. However, as I continued to work at the community college, talked with students, read student surveys, and became exposed to research on the community college experience, I learned that many community college students need and want interactions with their instructors, but they may not know how to go about building a support network. They have very busy schedules with work and family responsibilities, which often makes connection

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challenging. I also reflected on my experience as a college senior, during which time I got to know my senior thesis advisor very well. He helped me grow as a student and a person. Developing that relationship was a key in building the confidence to go on to get my master's degree.

These experiences came together when I attended a conference where I heard about a project at a community college where retention improved by building relationships in the classroom through individual meetings. I immediately felt excited and thought we could do this at our college. I think community college instructors are dedicated and caring, but sometimes their busy schedules makes it easy just to talk only to the students who approach them. Having a strategy to make sure every student has an opportunity to talk with the instructor gives students the chance to build the relationship if they would like. It is my hope that, through this work, I can help instructors (1) develop an understanding about the importance of connecting with students, (2) develop a strategy to build relationships, and (3) expand their capacity to serve our students. Like myself, many community college instructors have not attended community college themselves, so they do not have first-hand experience of the struggles many community college students face. This lack of understanding may lead to the deficit perception that students are lazy or not interested in school. In my observations, it can take instructors up to five years to fully understand the student experience, and it is my goal to help instructors understand community college students sooner in their career. When instructors fully understand the challenges community college students face, their perception shifts, and they learn ways to support and help students reach their goals.

Demographics of Applewood College

Applewood College is a small, private, proprietary college located in the Southeast in the same region as CCC. It has multiple campus sites in the region with a growing online presence. The campus used as the site of this initiative is located in an urban area. Although student enrollment represents several states, primary campus enrollment is from in-state students. All students commute to campus as there is no student housing. Total student enrollment as of spring 2019 was 307 students majoring in a variety of baccalaureate, associate, and certificate programs. Most students enroll in health care-related programs, such as nursing, radiological science, and physical therapy assistant, although additional programs outside of healthcare, such as legal studies, are available. Class sizes are quite small at AC, averaging just over five students per class during the 2018 calendar year. Classes run on a ten-week quarter system. Applewood College reports retention rates from Summer 2017 to Spring 2018 of 74%.

As an English faculty member to first-year students, I, Maureen Lambert, have continuously noticed different levels of preparation and confidence among my student population and have witnessed the impact it has on course completion and overall retention. Most students at AC are post-traditional and enter class under prepared, nervous, or with multiple outside stressors. Our small class sizes give me the opportunity to work individually with students on their writing. I have sat with some students who hold back tears as we work line by line on their papers and they claim they just "cannot write." Others have entered my classroom with different types of fear and trepidation, explaining that they have been out of school for too long and that navigating the system is daunting. Still others sit in the back corner of the classroom and bury their heads in what appears to be a fear of participating and speaking

in front of others. They quietly attend each class, but never fully engage, and their grades

flounder as their questions remain unanswered, yet their confusion remains constant.

As a formerly shy student, I understand the intimidation that speaking in front of others

and that the faculty-student power dynamic bring; however, I went through all of my educational

experiences as a traditional student with few outside stressors, immense support, and many years

of strong academic preparation. Compound those feelings even I had through my normative lens

with the multiple stressors many of my students bring, and it is evident to me that faculty can

serve students well by being in a position of reaching out with warmth and support, particularly

to first-year students. I also have experience teaching fully online courses and have consistently

offered students a welcome phone call to start the class as a way to personalize the virtual course.

While most students do not take me up on the offer, those who do often use the opportunity to

share their struggles, outside stressors, and anxiety about the class or being in school. These

phone calls allow us to connect more personally and have helped a relationship grow over the

course of the term. If these individual meetings were not optional, but were expected, and if they

were face-to-face rather than on the phone, I speculate that they would be even more powerful

and impactful.

The many different student scenarios that play out in the classroom consistently lead me

to believe that students would profoundly benefit from a stronger support system. Those who

seem to have enough confidence to ask questions and seek assistance tend to complete the class

successfully. When they do reach out, it is only then that they share how overwhelmed and

behind they feel. Unfortunately, however, this opportunity never comes for some students. By

weaving in an opportunity for faculty and students to make an individualized connection early in

the term, I hope that every student will experience support in a manner that is meaningful enough

for them to succeed in the class. Particularly because AC is a commuter campus, the classroom is a powerful place for retention efforts as students often do not connect to the institution or other students outside of the classroom.

As I have taught first-year English composition classes at various institutions for the last 15 years, I believe the composition classroom is particularly well suited for a faculty-support initiative. It is through this lens as an English teacher that I ground my motivations for this initiative. English composition, along with other general education requirements, are typically classes students take in their very first term of college, meaning they serve as an introduction to college. If students form strong relationships with their instructor and other students at this point of entry, it has the potential to positively impact their overall perception of college. Likewise, if students feel engaged, supported, and motivated to participate, they may carry this confidence into other classes, anchoring them with expectations of what college should be. While my inspiration for leading this type of initiative is strongly impacted by my experiences as a first-year composition instructor, it is also motivated by an administrative perspective that understands the challenges of improving college retention, a battle that often seems to carry with it more struggles than successes. Therefore, the scholar-practitioner roles allows me to connect to this work intimately from an instructor's perspective that sees the student struggle first-hand and from an administrative position that realizes the impact attrition has on the College.

Applewood College is also challenged with a serious obligation to create a culture of support to students as it seeks to demonstrate its difference from other proprietary institutions, which often draw disproportionately from a population of students that are minoritized, working-class, first-generation, adult, and returning. AC must separate itself from those proprietary schools that "sometimes serve to reproduce social inequities, not equalize them" (Salem, 2014, p.

22). As one of only 12 for-profit institutions accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC] and ranked among the fastest growing for-profits from 2006-2016 by the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* AC is currently tasked with aligning growth with quality support ("Fastest-Growing Colleges," 2018).

Since they are located in the same geographic region and serve similar student populations, implementing the same intervention at CCC and AC was beneficial to both institutions. Many of the faculty and students at both institutions face some of the same challenges; widening the scope of the initiative to two contexts allowed us to make comparisons and share outcomes. Combining our research efforts allowed for a larger sample size and for more faculty and student voices to be heard.

Current Retention and Initiatives

Connected Community College

Both institutions have engaged in several initiatives to promote student completion and retention. Connected Community College joined the Achieving the Dream (ATD) network in 2015 (CCC, 2015). Achieving the Dream is a national network of community colleges working to improve student success through data analysis, coaching, and resources (ATD, n.d.) During year one, CCC collected data. During year two, a core team was formed, and then, during year three, the smaller teams focused on connection, class offerings, advising, and communication. The primary outcome of ATD was the creation of new positions: academic success class coordinator, advising coordinator, and chair positions in each division to increase oversight and administrative help for the deans. These new positions have been positive additions for the College. Connected Community College completed the intense three-year ATD cycle and remains a member of the network. Overall, however, the ATD process was not as impactful as we would have hoped at improving student success and retention.

There are multiple current initiatives of focus at CCC. The first is the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which prioritizes creating engaging online classes. This initiative centers its efforts on training instructors to write engaging content and incorporate technology into their online classes. To assess online preparation, students are completing an online orientation and performing a self-evaluation about online readiness (CCC, n.d.c). We had planned to focus on seated classes so that the QEP and our project could be assessed independently. However, the quick shift to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the inclusion of online classes.

A second initiative being undertaken to increase completion is to improve the advising process. Connected Community College is moving from a faculty advising model to having first semester advising done by a counselor/coordinator in student services. After the first semester, the student will move to their faculty advisor. In addition, an advising coordinator was hired in 2018-2019 who is offering increased training and accountability for advising. The goal of this advising initiative is to increase access to advisors and to make the initial advising session more helpful in determining what program the student pursues.

A third initiative occurring is assessment. Connected Community College is updating the assessment process used to assess student learning. This effort is guided by the assessment committee. It involves updating the institutional learning outcomes, program learning outcomes, and course learning outcomes. Once these are complete, programs are mapping where in the curriculum these outcomes are introduced, reinforced, and mastered. Instructors are collecting classroom data to demonstrate that course learning outcomes are met. Connected Community College has designated assessment days to allow for training and the discussion of the data collected among faculty members. Programs such as business and automotive also meet with local advisory boards to gather stakeholder information about community needs. Programs are placed into three cohorts and will go through the program review cycle every three years to report on the data they have collected and to see if they are meeting their course, program, and institutional learning outcomes.

Finally, the state is redesigning developmental math and English into a co-requisite model. Students enter into one of three pathways based on their high school grade point average (GPA). If their GPA is below 2.2, they enter into a transitions class that utilizes online modules to prepare for the next level. If their GPA is 2.2-2.8, students may take a college-level math and

English class with a corequisite class. If a student's GPA is above a 2.8, they are presumed to be college-ready and may enroll directly into the college-level math or English. The goal is to get students college-ready faster and to build students' confidence, saving the student and the institution time and money (Barbitta, 2019). This was implemented in Fall 2020.

Several policies at CCC aim to support retention and completion. For example, CCC has an attendance policy to encourage classroom attendance. According to the CCC (n.d.b) Policies and Procedures Manual 4.12.1, students can be withdrawn from a seated class if they have a combination of excused and unexcused absences exceeding 10% of the scheduled class time. To promote student involvement on campus, CCC employs a student life activities coordinator. Recent activities include a welcome back breakfast, holiday events, and a spring picnic. The CCC (n.d.b) Policies and Procedures Manual 4.20.1 outlines how events should be handled, expectations for student clubs, and funding for clubs. According to the CCC website, there are 18 student clubs on campus; however, based on personal experience, student participation in clubs at CCC can be difficult due to the many demands on students' time.

The Student Success Center (SSC) provides student support for curriculum and developmental classes, offering instructor tutoring, peer tutoring, workshops, and computers (CCC, n.d.b, 6.11.2). Faculty can refer any student to the SSC for assistance. Math and English faculty volunteer one to two hours a week to tutor students. In addition, there are several tutors who assist with chemistry, engineering, and math. Smarthinking, an online tutoring resource, is provided for students who cannot come to campus when the SSC is open. Finally, the SSC has created student success video modules for information on time management, planners, to-do lists, and math anxiety.

When a student is struggling in a class at CCC, the instructor completes an early alert form where they provide information about the student and briefly identify the academic issue. The form then goes to the Director of Enrollment Management in student services. The Director, whom the student may or may not know, reaches out to the student via phone or email to discuss what is happening in the course. This system was piloted with a small group in spring 2018-2019 and used campus wide for the 2018-2019 academic year. Drop data indicate an improvement. In fall 2018 at the 50% point in the semester, 8.9% of the courses had been dropped (619 out of 6938) and, in fall 2019, 8.4% of courses had been dropped (592 out of 7103) (Staff 1, personal communication, December 13, 2019). However, there is still room for further improvement.

It was discovered at CCC during the Achieving the Dream process that students desire more interactions with instructors. During fall 2015 and spring 2016, CCC held student focus groups and a theme emerged that students desire more connections with instructors (Staff 1, personal communication, August 11, 2016). The discovery that students desire more interactions with faculty shaped my (Laura's) work at CCC and influenced me in the selection of this topic for an improvement science project.

Applewood College

Under the guidance of a College Retention Committee, AC last published a Retention Plan for the 2016-2017 academic year (AC, n.d.). The intention of the plan was to offer support to a diverse student population in order to eliminate barriers and achieve a higher retention rate. The retention plan calls on all faculty, staff, and members of administration to collaborate in this support system with focus in three areas: the academic environment, the campus environment, and student life. With a focus on the academic environment, initiatives include developing

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methods to identify students in need of support and implementing interventions to better assist them. Additionally, course completion rates are targeted for analysis with a focus on revision to course and program areas that show low retention. Academic support initiatives focus on helping students see the value of their degree and helping them identify more strongly with their program. Finally, a review of academic policy is highlighted as a means of ensuring the removal of unnecessary barriers to retention.

In addition to the efforts in the academic environment, AC retention initiatives focused on the campus environment, seeking to enhance a sense of community and provide personal follow-up to address individual student needs. Finally, student life initiatives encourage school spirit and pride through formal and informal opportunities for students to interact with their faculty, staff, and peers. Additional focus on non-academic support is also outlined to promote student success through avenues such as orientation and student recognition programs. Applewood College recently hired a full-time student success coach to advise pre-program students. Additionally, the Director of Student Services and discipline-specific program directors and chairs provide course advising for specific cohorts of students. The student success coach is also responsible for running an Academic Resource Center, which links students with success resources when needed. In addition to administration support, AC utilizes Federal Work Study positions to provide peer tutoring in a variety of academic areas. The Math Director provides individual math tutoring, and a Writing Lab, directed by English faculty, provides workshops and individual tutoring on writing support. Similar to CCC, AC provides Smarthinking as a resource for students to receive virtual tutoring in a variety of subjects. Math faculty across the AC system have also recently launched virtual, live tutoring sessions that are also recorded for students to access on their own time. The most recent focus areas for AC's last

two QEPs were on Writing Across the Curriculum and improving Math course success. The

College is preparing for its next QEP, with the process of choosing its focus area to begin in

early 2020. College goals for 2020 are focused on improving retention and course completion.

The Director of Student Services and administrative supervisor plan student events, such

as cooking competitions, college night at sporting events, and student appreciation events.

Additionally, with the support of academic departments, "lunch and learn" sessions are

frequently held that focus on a variety of topics for presentation and discussion to an audience of

students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, students are encouraged to participate in community

service with their programs.

Applewood College currently utilizes a reporting and tracking system to notify support

personnel of at-risk students. The system is linked to the college Learning Management System

(LMS) and automatically flags students who have been inactive or fall below 70% in their

coursework. Faculty are also expected to flag or enter notes to draw attention to at-risk students

who stop attending class, show signs of struggle, or miss assignments. This flag is generated to

the student's advisor for outreach. Before raising a flag, faculty members are expected to reach

out personally to students to offer assistance. Once a flag is raised, the expectation is then

extended to the student advisor to offer additional outreach and communicate updates back to the

faculty member. While this system helps keep a record of outreach attempts, the small size of

AC enables faculty and student support personnel to communicate directly about student

concerns instead of, or in addition to, using the system.

Room for Improvement

Early Alert Systems at Connected Community College and Applewood College

The reporting systems at CCC and AC have the potential to increase communication between faculty and support staff to identify at-risk students; however, the systems are reactive rather than proactive. While involving support staff when a student shows signs of struggle is an important step in the support process, emphasis should be focused primarily on how the faculty member can serve in a support role through regular interaction and classroom-based engagement early in the semester. We are missing the mark by waiting until a student shows signs of struggle in the classroom to offer extra support. Instead, the classroom environment must be established on day one to promote engagement and support.

It is the responsibility of the school to address the needs of multiple cultures and to embrace the fact that students will enter the institution with multiple and different lenses and backgrounds (Gordon and Yowell, 1999). Rather than simply defining a student as at-risk because of low grades or academic struggle, both the institution as a whole and the faculty member as an institutional agent must recognize the ways in which they contribute to creating an environment that Gordon and Yowell (1999) describe as "risk-inducing" (p. 42). Gordon and Yowell (1999) explain that environments should meet students where they are and that "education resources not be equal but be sufficient to the needs that students bring to the schools" (p. 51). By having a proactive approach that meets the individual needs of students before they fall behind in class and by creating a classroom environment that promotes opportunity and relationship building while being grounded in reciprocity and engagement, support can be both more meaningful and successful.

We worry that the early alert systems at both institutions are not meaningful interventions that result in retaining students. Both systems are cumbersome, time consuming for faculty to complete, and do not seem to be effective. If a more effective system could be developed, faculty might be more invested in the process and view it as a productive use of their time. Because academic success in the first year of college is a major predictor of retention (Miller & Scarnati, 2014), improvement efforts in this area are needed.

Community's Need for the Improvement

An overarching goal of higher education is to improve and advance society through education. CCC's (n.d.a) vision statement demonstrates this goal: "[CCC] will continue to provide programs of excellence in academics and training that foster economic vitality in our community" (para. 2). Increasing the number of students who complete their programs improves the local community by enhancing the skills and knowledge of the students who will be entering the workforce. Connected Community College works directly with industry in its service area to provide occupational training. For example, the manufacturing and business apprenticeship programs allow students to complete job training at CCC and work at a local business. Similarly, healthcare students complete clinical training in the community, and many find work in the local community.

Applewood College's mission is to provide quality educational opportunities and support structures for the productive growth of a diverse student body ("Applewood College Academic Catalog," 2017). Being at an institution that works directly with the community through several partnerships and clinical assignments, AC students directly impact community members. Giving these students a strong foundation and encouraging their success through retention directly

impacts the community in terms of the quality and quantity of students participating in clinical

rotations and eventually going on to serve the local community full time.

Both institutions are assisting students who are retained through to degree or transfer

completion in order to increase their individual earning potential. For many students, this

corresponds directly to their ability to take care of not only themselves, but also their families.

They are also meeting local market needs to strengthen the economic foundation of the regional

area.

Causal Analysis

There are many root causes impacting students completing first-year classes. Figure 2 uses the Ishikawa (1986) diagram to depict six major causes contributing to student completion of first-year classes. Underneath each cause, the specific factors contributing toward the problem are detailed. The six major factors identified are (1) intake and student advising, (2) connection to the institutional community, (3) the academic environment, (4) faculty relationships, (5) student skills, and (6) student load and stressors. While there are most certainly other factors contributing to the problem, Figure 2 outlines the primary causes impacting student course completion. This analysis comes from our institutional knowledge and feedback from colleagues during formal and informal conversation. For the purposes of this initiative, we focused on three areas that have the most potential to impact the problem: connection to institutional community, the academic environment, and faculty relationships.

Figure 2

Ishikawa Diagram: Causal Analysis of Factors Impacting Student Course Completion
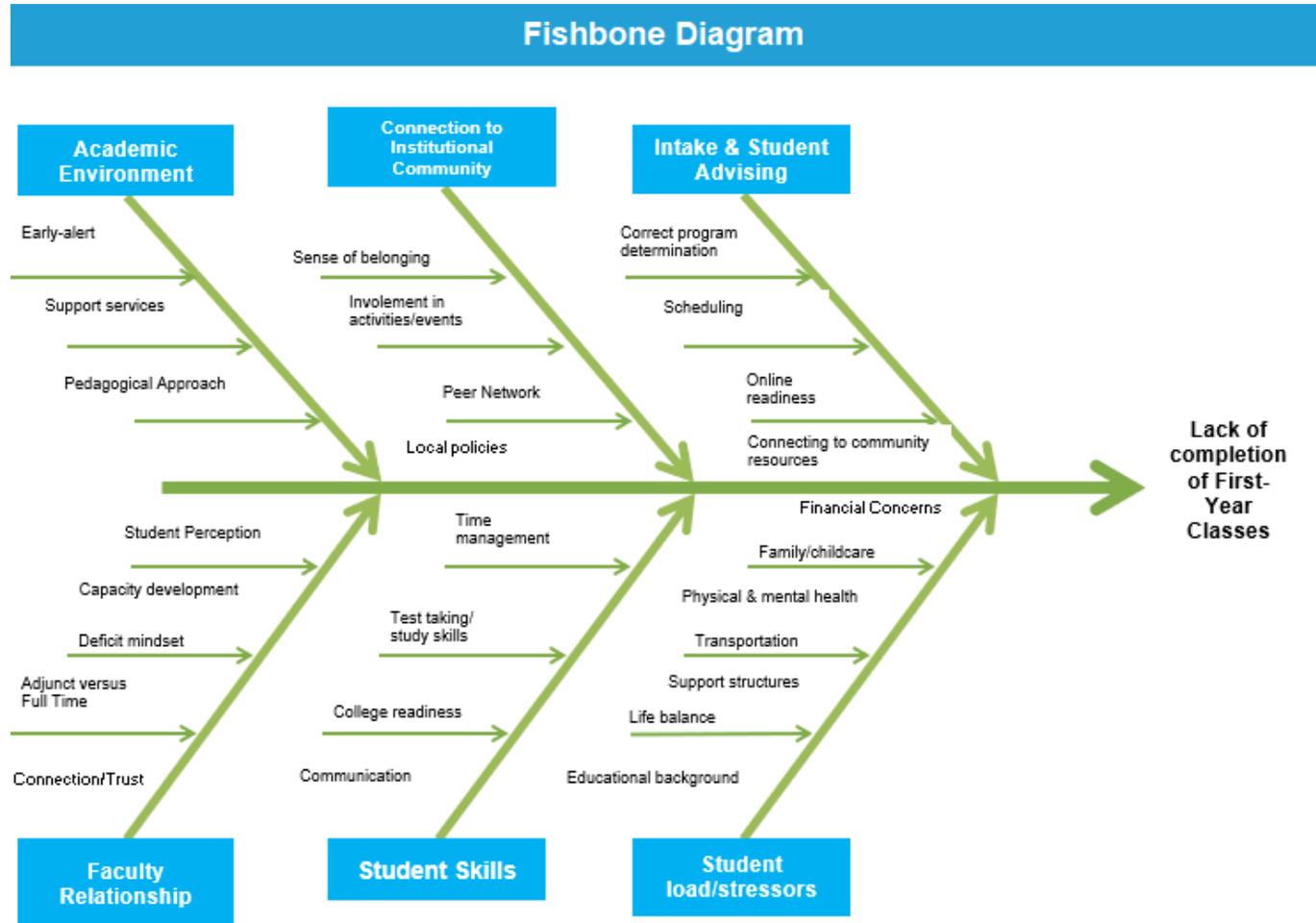
Connection to Institutional Community

While many factors, such as a student's background and prior educational experiences, are beyond the control of the college, the institutional environment and culture are primary factors that both contribute to the student's transition to college and are within the college's control. A student's beliefs about the college they attend has a profound impact on their behavior and attitude, which ultimately influences their sense of belonging to the institution (Kuh, et al., 2006). Although rarely explicitly stated, students enter college with expectations about the relationship they will form with the institution (Kuh, et al., 2006). Some of these expectations may be formed through college visits and are influenced by marketing materials or conversations with admissions representatives; however, retention depends largely on the experience students have after admission (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). Whether or not students' expectations are met when they enter the institution as an enrolled student impacts their successful adjustment to college (Kuh, et al., 2006).

Entrance to college can present a profound adjustment for any student, but it can be especially complex for first-generation students who may not have peer or family guidance to assist them in navigating the process (Bivens & Wood, 2016; Miller & Harrell, 2017). Karp and Bork (2014) note that, as students transition into higher education, their role becomes more fluid and flexible; it is less structured with fewer opportunities for clear feedback. Compared to high school, college students have more freedom so they must develop independence and discover how to find needed resources. Self-awareness, time management, and "cultural know how" is also needed to navigate the college world (Karp & Bork, 2014, p. 13-19).

For minoritized students, there is often a lack of faculty and administrative support from individuals who look like them, in addition to a curriculum that often does not represent their

background or world view. This greatly affects a student's ability to transition to college with a strong personal connection. According to Yosso (2005), recognizing the cultural skills and knowledge of marginalized groups in the classroom can help institutions move toward a more socially-just society; however, institutions continue to discount and undervalue students of color, deeming them "lacking" in knowledge, skills, and ability. Martin and Dowson (2009) claim that a student's ability to relate to the academic environment helps them understand and negotiate the values, beliefs, and norms of the college environment, making them more likely to remain enrolled. Colleges that lack the ability to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment that encourages a student's sense of belonging can create an isolating experience for new college students.

A student's peer network is also an instrumental resource in establishing a connection to the institutional community. In fact, Astin (1993) prioritizes peer influence as the most impactful source of cognitive, psychological, and behavioral aspects of a student's development. Additionally, Tinto (1994, 2012a, 2012b) contends that social integration into the college environment through strong peer interaction increases a student's likelihood to stay in school. Moreover, peer learning contributes to increased academic engagement, producing greater learning and conceptual thought (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, Baier et al., (2019) found that classroom learning communities in developmental math and English classes improved students' GPAs during their first two years of college and helped them connect with each other, peer mentors, advisors, and faculty. Following theories that posit a strong correlation between student social interaction and positive aspects of learning and development, it follows then that weak social interactions negatively impact retention (Bean, 2005).

Academic Environment

Research demonstrates that first-year students often learn in isolation, a key factor that contributes to low student retention (Tinto, 1999, 2012b). The pedagogical approach in the college classroom is often structured less as a community environment and more around what Friere (2018) termed the "banking concept of education," in which faculty members serve as the expert, filling students with knowledge through traditional lectures. In this type of structure student interaction is minimal, which leads to disengagement, disassociation, and disinterest. Additionally, courses may have little social or academic coherence, building little relevance and interest for students during the foundational time when they are first being introduced to the college classroom (Tinto, 1999).

Institutional support services, such as advising and student services, also impact student retention. Mu and Fosnacht (2019) found a positive relationship between advising and student learning. They suggested that advising models should be developed to meet the specific needs of an institution's student body. For example, an institution serving Latinx students should develop advising practices to best meet those students' needs. Unfortunately, poor advising is often used as a rationale for students leaving school (Bean, 2005). However, Bean (2005) also warns that support staff who strive to provide competent services understand their role in a limited sense. They need to move beyond simple competence and instead value their role as one of shaping students' attitudes, developing positive relationships with students and the college, and profoundly influencing retention (Bean, 2005; Kot, 2014).

A strategy that has often been used to support struggling students and promote student success is an early alert system. A quantitative study on the early alert system being used at community colleges in Virginia found mixed results depending on the course (Dwyer et al.,

2019). Developmental math students experienced a positive impact, while the early alert system was not as effective for students in developmental English and college-level classes (Dwyer et al., 2019). Dwyer et al. (2019) suggest that the early alert system cannot be the only solution for student retention since it does not work for all students. They advise institutions to refine the system to more adequately address specific student populations.

Faculty Relationship

Pinpointing policies and classroom practices as areas for institutional focus, Tinto (1999, 2006-2007, 2012a, 2012b) suggests that faculty play an important role in retaining students. He explains that students who feel valued and have frequent, meaningful connections with faculty, staff, and fellow students are more likely to persist. Additionally, Bean (2005) advocates the importance of student-faculty informal connections because they have the ability to reinforce a student's self-image and self-efficacy. According to Martin and Dowson (2009), an emerging theory of "connective instruction" supports the idea that students benefit in a multitude of ways when they develop interpersonal relationships with their instructors. These relationships are fostered and result in more engaged and motivated students when students believe that their instructor cares, when they feel accepted by their instructors, and when their instructors exhibit warmth (Martin & Dowson, 2009, pg. 344). However, it cannot simply be assumed that faculty members exhibit the capacity to create these relationships nor that they are inherently motivated to support students toward success. Instead, Bensimon (2007) argues that faculty have, over time, developed implicit theories about students and their ability to succeed based on their own unidentified judgments. For example, faculty may assume that students have a multitude of available resources and institutional support systems and any failure to take advantage of those lies inherently on the student. When faculty exhibit this deficit mindset and lack true

understanding of the reasons students may struggle, they neglect their duty and ability to serve as a primary support resource for entry-level students (Bensimon, 2007).

Within the discourse on student success, Bensimon (2007) argues, faculty are largely missing from change ideas focused on persistence and retention. Blekic (2019) calls particular attention to this disconnect as a missed opportunity because faculty are often the first person at the institution to know when a student is struggling or thinking of leaving. Particularly, there is little research into the value of informal faculty-student relationships, a noticeable contrast when compared to the literature in K-12 education (Bensimon, 2007). Bensimon (2007) argues that research in higher education instead focuses on student attributes - those characteristics and traits a student inherently brings into the classroom - as predictors of success, neglecting the impact that the institutional environment and structure plays in their success. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report that most studies on faculty and student interactions focus on residential institutions and not as much work has been done on the faculty role at commuter institutions. As commuter institutions, CCC and AC both have a unique role in accessible higher education.

Improving Retention to Increase Equity in Educational Outcomes

Colleges promote the image of opportunity, growth, and a better life when recruiting and admitting students; however, those goals cannot simply be moved aside when a student enters their first term. Increasing completion rates in first-year classes ensures that more students have the opportunity to achieve their educational goals, whether it is personal fulfillment, a certification, job training, transferring to a four-year school, or degree completion. Moreover, the economic benefit of post-secondary education promotes astounding opportunities for students.

As more African-American students enroll in both community college and for-profit colleges than ever before (Iloh & Toldson, 2013), these institutions must not only focus on access, but they must exert efforts on retention specific to the needs of students who have historically not been supported. According to Heelan and Mellow (2018), "The role of the community college in paving the way for people to be economically viable, to contribute to society as a whole, and to move away from poverty and inequality continues to be a major emphasis and responsibility" (p. 23). Yet the reality is that African-American students perform lower in most tabulated student outcomes, including graduation, persistence, grade point average, and transfer rates (Moore & Bush, 2016). Simultaneously, while the Latinx population represents the fastest growing ethnic group in America with growing enrollment in postsecondary institutions, their degree attainment lags disproportionately far behind their enrollment (Santiago, 2016).

Access to college also presents opportunity and hope for many post-traditional students who enter college after many years away from school or who have had prior negative educational experiences. Many of these students are entering school to create a better life for

themselves and their families. However, the very nature of higher education itself, argues

Pendakur (2016), rewards those students who bring with them the cultural and social capital that

they have learned as members of dominant society. Bordieu and Passeron (1977) articulated that

the knowledge of the upper and middle class is considered valuable to hierarchical society and

that this cultural knowledge helps those students move through school. Constructing the view

that what is normal and valuable mirrors privileged society means that those who "know how to

play the game" are rewarded by a system that finds their behavior normal and expected

(Pendakur, 2016). Middle- and upper-class students, therefore, are more likely to "decode the

hidden curriculum," while faculty and administration may take for granted that post-traditional

students need more support in negotiating access to institutional norms, resources, and

opportunities (Pendakur, 2016, p. 112). Meanwhile, post-traditional students who enter the

institution without these normative predispositions are viewed as needing remediation and are

responsible for their lack of prior educational success (Pendakur, 2016).

Faculty members, however, may feel challenged to provide extra support to

underprepared students and may hold beliefs that all students should be treated the same

regardless of their backgrounds or experiences. Many hold views that extra support for some

students is not fair to all students. This deficit mindset once again neglects to find the educational

system itself as structuring a system of inequity. As Lomotey and Lowery (2015) state,

"Treating all students the same is, by definition, treating some students unfairly" (p. 130). By

helping faculty unpack this statement and explore issues of equity and how to meet students

where they are, we aim to shift the mindset and improve student success. If faculty are able to

view their students not as deficient, but as individuals bringing with them valuable "cultural

capital wealth," transformative potential exists (Yosso, 2005).

Theory of Improvement

Institutions of higher education have an ethical obligation to support students as they transition into college life. Students who do not progress in their coursework lose opportunities to increase their social and economic capital. Through causal analysis, various root causes are identified that contribute to the problem of low student completion in first-year courses. Failure to connect to the institutional community, a non-engaging academic environment, and a lack of meaningful relationships between students and faculty are the three areas of focus for this initiative.

Drawing from Langley et al. (2009), participants in improvement efforts predict theories based on rational knowledge of the current system. The stronger the degree of belief, which is based on past change results and the similarity of the environments, the greater the chance that change will result in improvement (Langley et al., 2009). We predict that by addressing the root causes of the academic environment and faculty relationships, student success in first-year coursework will improve and contribute to increased retention. Our theory of improvement asserts that implementing more meaningful engagement strategies and faculty-student connection opportunities into first-year courses will increase students' sense of belonging, thus improving course completion.

Based on the framework from Langley et al. (2009), researchers must conceptualize theories focused on why a proposed solution would result in positive change, particularly if fundamental changes are sought in the current systems. Creating theories allows all invested in an improvement initiative to understand the foundation of the predicted change to result in improvement (Langley, et al., 2009). Drawing on this improvement framework, a driver diagram is used to map out and display the theory of improvement. This diagram, serving as a "working

theory of practice improvement," focuses on only a small number of change ideas that form the

hypothesis for target efforts (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 79). Shown in Figure 3, the driver diagram

leading this initiative is based on institutional feedback, investigator discussion, and research.

Guided by theory developed by Bryk et al. (2017), the primary driver is a good choice to address

in order to impact change. We hypothesize that sense of belonging could impact completion

improvement in first-year classes. However, as this driver is too general to direct the change

initiative, secondary drivers are specified as a set of subhypotheses that work to activate the

primary driver (Bryk et al., 2017). Key secondary drivers that serve as pillars of change include

institutional systems, faculty and student interactions, pedagogical content knowledge, and

community resources. Finally, change ideas identify specific alterations to the current system

that work toward improving the primary driver (Bryk et al., 2017).

Figure 3

Driver Diagram Aimed at Improving First-Year Course Completion Rates
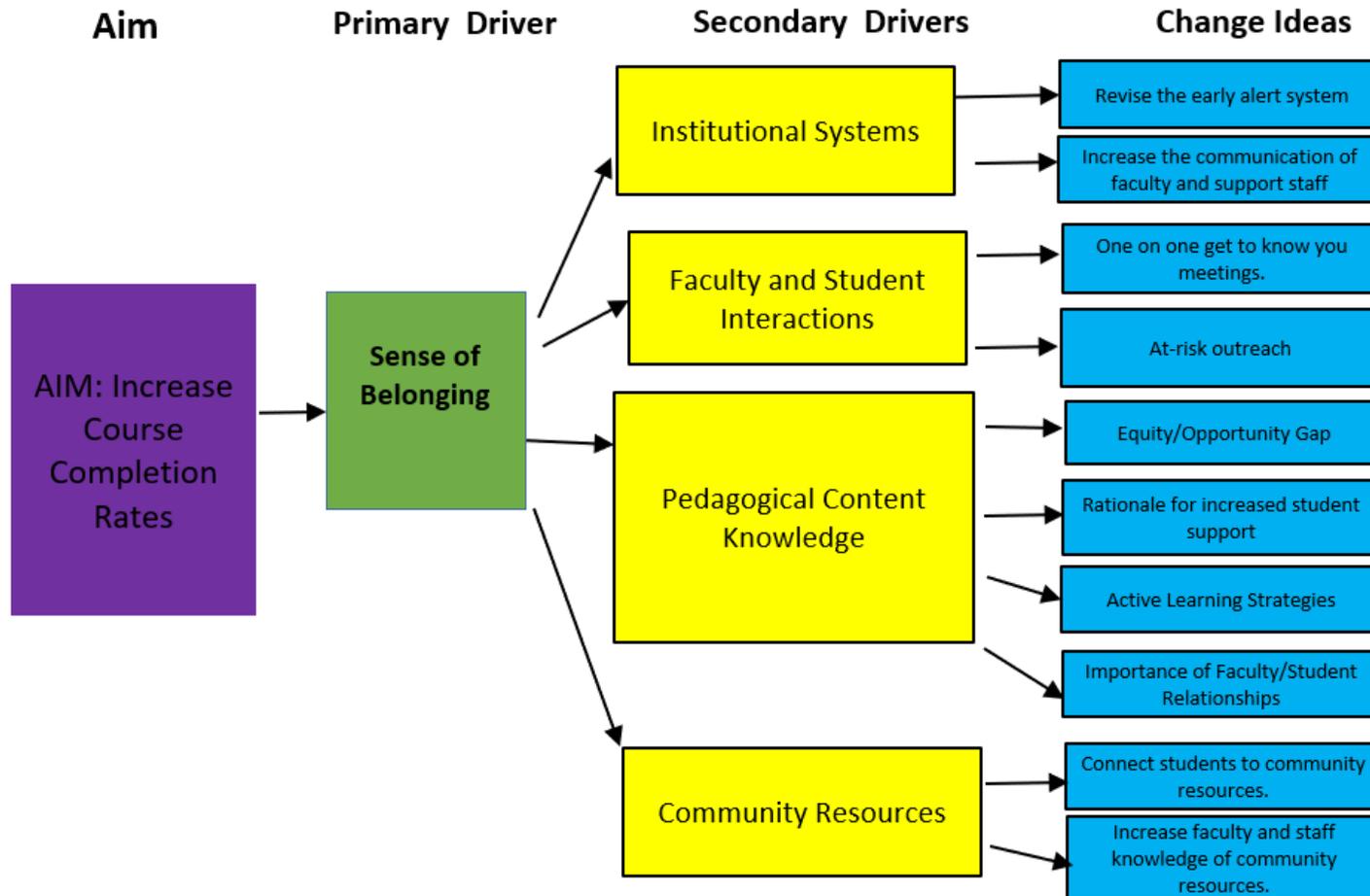
Faculty-Student Interactions and Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Improving retention is a key area of research and strategic planning in higher education across locations, populations, and types of institutions. Ample literature supports the idea that the student-faculty connection is paramount in increasing student retention. Pendakur (2016), for example, calls upon staff and faculty to challenge the higher education institution from the inside as "empowerment agents" who adopt "a reflective, identity-conscious framework that actively grapples with the hegemonic nature of power, inside and outside our institutions of learning" (p. 110). Similarly, Bensimon (2007) describes "institutional agents" as instrumental to post-traditional student success because they are in a position to transmit normative information and knowledge that is more readily and independently accessible to middle- and upper-class students. Bensimon (2007) found that these agents were positively working outside of their institutional role and were guided by their own ethical obligations to help students navigate academia.

The key to the success of institutional empowerment agents does not lie simply on the ability of one person to act in a support role, but on a network of individuals, resources, and support structures that are embedded into institutional culture (Pendakur, 2016). To create a culture within the institutional system that helps retain and support students, we investigate a layered approach examining the secondary drivers of faculty-student interactions and pedagogical content knowledge with a focus on change ideas that encompass capacity building and increasing faculty-student connection. By building faculty capacity to support at-risk students in first-year classes, the potential opportunities for these students will increase.

In his foundational work on retention, Tinto (1994) outlines three principles of effective retention. These include student welfare, education of all students, and the importance of community. To realize Tinto's first principle, a commitment to student welfare, all members

within institutions of higher education must prioritize student welfare among all other institutional priorities. Tinto (1994) posits that successful retention is gained less through formal programs and more through a strong student-focused commitment that "results in an identifiable ethos of caring which permeates the character of institutional life" (p. 146). Beyond establishing this commitment to students, Tinto (1994) also stresses the importance of an institution's educational commitment. This second principle is guided by a mission of student learning, which challenges the educational setting to set this as a priority during the crucial first year. These learning environments prioritize active learning, frequent feedback, and collaborative environments focused on peer interaction. Finally, Tinto's (1994) third principle stresses the importance of community with primary emphasis on frequent contact with faculty, staff, and other students in supportive settings. While an integral component of successful educational communities includes encouraging student voice inside the classroom, it also calls upon out-of-class opportunities for students to meet informally with faculty.

Building from Tinto's three principles, our drivers for change focus on prioritizing student welfare, promoting active classroom pedagogy, and building the student-faculty relationship. One key strategy to effectively accomplish these goals is through professional development with faculty. Providing meaningful and equity-minded professional development for instructors is a necessary step in establishing an institutional culture that prioritizes students, adjusts teaching practices, and emphasizes relationship building. Professional development should be based on evidence-based pedagogy that emphasizes the faculty role, helps instructors customize teaching for diverse students, and includes intentional spaces for instructors to self-reflect and share experiences (Heelan & Mellow, 2017).

The importance of building relationships with students is a key component of professional development. In her interviews with economically disadvantaged students who successfully transferred from open-admissions community colleges into selective institutions of higher education, Bensimon (2007) found that students attributed their success, in part, to a faculty member or administrator. Students reported that these individuals not only motivated them and helped build their confidence, but also provided informational resources, including academic and cultural context, to help them be successful (Bensimon, 2007). While the research on positive and quality faculty-student relationships demonstrates successful correlations, it is important to realize that students, particularly in their first year of college, may not know how to be engaged in the classroom. Additionally, some students may not feel entitled to be engaged and may appear withdrawn from class due to fear of rejection (Bensimon, 2007). If faculty, however, can develop meaningful personal relationships with individual students, this threat of failure or risk of rejection lessens (Miller & Scarnati, 2014). The overarching message for instructors is to approach their students with an asset-based lens that removes assumptions.

For students to stay in school, they must find their place on a college campus and feel a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) defines sense of belonging as a "...a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (p. 3). When relating this to postsecondary education, a student's sense of belonging refers to their "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (p. 3). Strayhorn (2012) explains that some people in certain contexts are more likely to feel unsupported, particularly first-generation and minority students. According to Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging, when students feel they belong in

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various spaces, such as a classroom or a department, and this sense of belonging is cultivated,

they are more likely to reach their goals and stay in school. Juarez (2017) investigated first-

generation community college student perception of sense of belonging and found that positive

faculty-student interactions can improve their belief that they are capable academic success.

Further, positive faculty-student relationships were able to take the place of parental support

during college (Juarez, 2017).

While we know that student retention is directly tied to frequency and quality of contact

among students and faculty (Tinto, 1999, 2012a, 2012b), simply interacting with a faculty

member is not a magic cure-all for student success. Students also must engage inside the

classroom with the course content, the instructor, and with other students. Creating active

learning environments inside the classroom is integral to student retention, particularly for

commuter college students who are often only on campus during class time (Tinto, 1999, 2012a,

2012b). Ample research supports the success of classroom structures that move away from

lecture-style, passive pedagogy and instead embrace more peer-to-peer interaction, engagement,

and active learning (Miller & Scarnati, 2014). For this reason, it is imperative that the classroom

structure itself serves as a main focus for study and improvement.

Oakton Community College in Chicago's suburbs provides one example that

demonstrates success at increasing retention through a faculty-level initiative (Smith, 2018). The

key activity implemented through the College's broader "Persistence Project" initiative was a 15-

minute "one-on-one conference" between the student and professor during the first three weeks

of the semester, which focused on building informal personal relationships rather than focusing

solely on academics (Smith, 2018). Oakton's overall persistence rate from fall 2017 to fall 2018

was 51.4%; however, for students who had an instructor participating in the project, their

persistence rate rose to 65.7% (Supiano, 2020). For the College's Black students, the overall

persistence rate was 42.2%, and the rate for those in the persistence project was 60.7% (Supiano,

2020). Students involved in the project had higher retention than the overall student population

(Supiano, 2020).

According to one of the study leaders, it worked so well because "this project emphasizes

human connection. If a student makes that connection, the student is more likely to persist, but it

also makes us better teachers" (Smith, 2018, para 21). Another project leader emphasized the

strength the individual conferences provided students who would normally be hesitant to ask a

question or to seek help in front of peers in the classroom (Supiano, 2020). Through these

informal meetings, held in an instructor's office, faculty often gained insight into the context of

their students' lives, which, in turn, helped the faculty better engage with students in the

classroom and connect them to school and community resources. Thus, the one-on-one

conference served as a first step or a springboard to then allow the instructor to have more

insight into how they might help the student connect to other campus resources that may be

beneficial (Supiano, 2020). I (Laura) first heard of this project at the 2018 Achieving the Dream

Conference and was so impressed with this simple idea that did so much to improve retention

and made the instructors' teaching more meaningful. This presentation further shaped my

realization about the importance of the faculty member helping students feel they belong in

college.

Improvement Initiative Methodology and Design

Drawing from the established framework of Langley et al. (2009), we implemented a change initiative with the goal of improving students' sense of belonging to the institution. In the first component, we began with professional development for instructors teaching first-year courses focused on defining and discussing equity, the opportunity gap, prioritizing and strategizing active learning teaching methods, highlighting the importance of faculty and student relationships, and planning for the one-on-one meetings. The second component focused on the implementation of the one-on-one student-faculty "Get to Know You" (GTKY) meetings early in the semester. Finally, the end of the cycle involved academic outreach between the professor and students who demonstrated difficulty progressing through the course.

Design Team

Each site had a design team including the scholar-practitioner and members of the institution. We sought the input of these stakeholders and considered any modifications based on feedback and recommendations. The design teams provided insight and approved the implementation plan. These teams met in spring 2020 to discuss the fall 2020 implementation. Each design team operated with the goal of creating *collaborative professionalism.* In an interview, educational researcher Michael Fullan explained that collaborative professionalism occurs when teachers are given high levels of autonomy to work together to best serve their particular students (Thiers, 2017). We selected leaders from a variety of areas of both colleges to hear their experience and views on the project. In alignment with social change leadership, these individuals were chosen for their commitment to the common purpose of student success and possessed a willingness to collaborate to promote change at each institution (Komives & Wagner, 2017). The social change model theory also posits leadership as a process that relies on

the assistance of a team to create positive change (Komives & Wagner, 2017). We provided the design team with updates on the progress of the initiative and the final results to promote internal accountability and a culture where data are shared and analyzed. According to Fullan, a culture where results are shared openly and feedback is given helps to set the stage for educational change and reform (as cited in Thiers, 2017).

The design team at CCC included the Vice President of Instruction, the Chair of English and Humanities, the Chair of Business Programs, a math instructor, the Academic Success Coordinator, and the Director of Enrollment Management. The Vice President of Instruction has worked at CCC for over 15 years as an instructor, dean, and vice president. The Chair of English and Humanities has been a psychology instructor for about 21 years, serving as an adjunct at two other institutions. The Chair of the Business Program has worked at CCC for about 14 years and previously worked in the accounting field. The math instructor has over 24 years of experience teaching in the community college setting. She is an avid supporter of advising and encouraging student success. The academic success coordinator has served in this role for just over a year, but is an experienced faculty member known for teaching engaging classes and being very interested in exposing community college students to new experiences. The Director of Enrollment Management has 13 years of experience in the community college setting and is leading efforts to improve retention at CCC; this initiative will complement that work.

The design team at AC represented student support staff, program-level administration, admissions, and faculty in order to bring a range of experiences and perspectives to the initiative. Included among this group was the Director of Student Services and a student success advisor, both of whom advise pre-program students. Both individuals in this role began their careers at AC as advisors specific to nursing students and then were promoted into roles in which they

advise additional cohorts of students. A program department chair was also included; she brings

with her the insight of skills students need to develop to be prepared for program entry. The

Director of Admissions was also included in order to bring the perspective of student needs and

expectations before they enroll in college. Finally, a psychology and sociology professor

complemented the design team by adding his pedagogical expertise with first-year students, in

addition to social science theories that investigate the ways students learn and the impacts of

relationships.

Implementation Plan

Due to CCC and AC having different academic calendars, the implementation plan varied

between contexts. However, the general timeframe for each component of the initiative followed

a similar schedule (e.g., beginning, middle, end of the session). Figure 4 gives the timeline. The

improvement cycle for both contexts began with professional development for instructors who

volunteered to participate. The goal was to focus the initiative on general education and

introductory-level program classes in order to maximize courses that generally enroll students in

their first year of college. Due to enrollment concerns, primarily as a result of the COVID-19

pandemic and the thought that the initiative could benefit all students, the scope of classes was

expanded at CCC.   Volunteer faculty members selected one to two classes depending on the

number of students in the class to participate in the project.

Figure 4

Proposed Initiative Schedule (exact dates depend on context)

	Spring 2020	Aug./Sept 2020	Sept/Oct. 2020	Oct/Nov 2020	December 2020	January 2021
Design Team						
Planning Meeting	▬					
Results Meeting						▬
Initiative Design						
Capacity Building		▬				
1-on-1 Meetings			▬			
Academic Outreach				▬		
Data Collection						
Assess Capacity Building	▬					
Assess 1-on-1 Meeting			▬			
Assess Academic Outreach				▬		
Faculty Engagement Survey		▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬				
Final Student Survey and Class Pass Rates					▬	

We led a one-hour professional development meeting, which was planned to be face-to-face, but was moved to virtual and recorded due to the pandemic. Professional development focused on establishing the need for strong student-faculty relationship building through an equity lens. Activities and discussions focused on the opportunity gap and prioritizing student learning outcomes through an asset-based philosophy that promotes engagement and sense of belonging. This professional development encouraged open dialogue as we introduced new concepts to faculty participants and explained the rationale behind the improvement initiative.

While the specific weeks for the remaining components varied based on context, the one-on-one faculty-student meetings occurred in the early part of the session. The purpose of the one-on-one meeting was for students and faculty to get to know one another in an informal way. Faculty focused on relationship-building with the student rather than academic engagement during this meeting with a goal of establishing an early connection.

Faculty engaged students in academic outreach around the midterm weeks of the session if they showed signs of struggling with course completion. These meetings focused on academic guidance and support toward course content areas in which the student was struggling. These may have been short discussions before or after class when it is easy to catch students or a more formal, scheduled office meeting. This outreach was designed to engage students in an academic-focused discussion at a critical point in the session when there was still enough time to move toward successful course completion.

This initiative design was shared with the Vice President of Instruction at CCC who was supportive and interested in pursuing this idea. She agreed that retention is an area where the College needs to improve and approved this plan to help students and faculty connect early in the semester. Similarly, the President of AC believed the initiative presented a positive step in building stronger connections between faculty and students with an overall goal of improving retention. She also supported the implementation of this initiative.

Initiative Outcomes

This initiative sought to meet the following goals:

1. An increased knowledge and awareness among faculty about the importance of

connection in the classroom following the professional development session as measured by

the Professional Development Survey (Appendix A).

2. A 5% increase in the fall 2020 class pass rates in classes that use the initiative as

compared to their fall 2019 pass rates. Pass rates were assessed by the number of students

making an A, B, or C. While this was an initial outcome goal, we did not compare class pass

rates due to the timing of the initiative with the COVID-19 pandemic and the differences that

resulted in class delivery.

3. An increased sense of belonging among students at the end of the semester in

participating classes, as measured by the Student Engagement Survey (Appendix C).

The goals of this initiative centered around an increased sense of belonging among

students and increased instructor knowledge around the importance of connection. Ultimately,

developing these elements was expected to contribute to an increase in student retention and

graduation. However, the improved retention and graduation were not measured during the

timeframe of this initiative. The short- and long-term goals of increasing class pass rates and

graduation rates are visualized in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Long- and Short-term Initiative Outcomes

Curriculum Level Intervention	→	↑Sense of Belonging	→	↑Class Pass Rates	→	↑Graduation

Formative Evaluation of Improvement Methodology

According to Langley et al. (2009), the researcher's goal is to answer three questions to determine if change results in improvement: "What are we trying to accomplish? How will we know that a change is an improvement?" and "What change can we make that will result in an improvement?" (p. 24). These three questions work in conjunction with the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle to assess if successful change is occurring (Langley et al, 2009).

The PDSA Cycle is used to put ideas into action connected to learning and improvement (Langley et al., 2009). During the Planning phase, the design team met to plan the content of the professional development training and implementation plan. During the Do phase, the professional development, one-on-one meetings, and academic outreach occurred. Data were collected through class surveys. During the Study phase, the evaluators assessed the data collected and shared results with the design team. Finally, during the Act stage, the investigators, guided by the results of data analysis, made recommendations about future implementations of the protocol. Our evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to determine if an improvement occurred. Surveys primarily used quantitative questions, but qualitative questions were included to frame the context and gain insight into the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2015).

Formative Evaluation Plan

During the initiative, formative evaluations were collected to assess how the initiative progressed. The investigation was guided by practical measurements, defined by Bryk et al. (2016) as data that are embedded in regular work to guide improvement efforts. Data collection, such as surveys, must fit into the workload of a busy faculty schedule (Bryk et al., 2016). As practical measurements, surveys should not be cumbersome, must include clear language, and should take minimal time to administer, preferably as an ingrained component of the class (Bryk et al., 2016). Similarly, the researchers must predict future consequences and identify potential change ideas to maximize improvement during data collection (Bryk et al., 2016). Practical measurement data should be collected and analyzed frequently with a goal that researchers will act upon it quickly to learn what is working (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019).

Process measures were collected to ensure that the steps being followed led to the intended outcome (Langley et al., 2009). Process measures also relay information regarding how components of the initiative are performing under different circumstances (Bryk et al., 2016). The process measures for this initiative measured if volunteer participants completed the professional development, if one-on-one meetings were held, and if academic outreach meetings were conducted. Beyond simply completing the steps, process measures also assessed if participants were actively engaged and carried out these components in the intention established during professional development. Participants completed evaluator-designed surveys after each of these points, and the data were assessed for fidelity, unintended outcomes, and potential change ideas. For example, following the professional development session, faculty completed the 12-question Professional Development survey that assessed their experience (see Appendix A). A sample question from this survey was:

2) On a scale of 0-10, how useful did you find the training in terms of providing ideas to

improve your teaching? (0=not useful at all; 10=very useful).

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Not useful   Moderately Useful   Very Useful

Following each Get to Know You meeting, faculty completed the five question GTKY

survey (see Appendix B). This survey asked about the effectiveness of the meeting and if the

student showed signs of needing extra support. For example, question four asked:

4) Did the student show signs of needing extra support this semester/quarter?

> a. Yes

> b. No

> 4a) If yes, did you refer them to any of the campus resources listed below (yes/no)?

>> a. Academic resource center/student success center

>> b. Student services/counselors

>> c. Student/peer tutors

>> d. Faculty members

>> e. Other (if yes, fill in)

Each week, faculty completed a 10-question survey about faculty engagement and stress

levels to see if they were implementing the strategies from the professional development and

how their stress may or may not have been impacted (see Appendix C). For example:

1) How many student outreach efforts did you complete this week? Note that an outreach effort is one initiated by you rather than the student. While it may be academic in nature, an outreach effort might also be a general check-in or personal conversation.

7) How would you rate your current stress level? (0=no stress; 10=high stress).

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

No stress   Moderate Stress   High Stress

If the response is 5 or higher, respondents were prompted to a follow-up question:

> If you rated your stress level as 5 or higher, what do you attribute as the primary cause (select one)?
>
> > a. Personal
> >
> > b. Professional workload aside from teaching (committees, other duties)
> >
> > c. Teaching workload (grading, class prep)
> >
> > d. Implementing this initiative.
> >
> > e. Other (fill in)

Descriptive statistics for each of these surveys were compiled and analyzed. Each survey contained an open-ended question to collect qualitative data in order to seek the story behind the numbers. Qualitative coding methods of descriptive coding ("topic coding") and in vivo coding (using words or phrases represented in the data) were used to summarize and find patterns within the data (Saldaña, 2016). We selected descriptive coding to look for patterns and summarize the data, and in vivo coding was selected to create an opportunity to hear the student and faculty voice.

The faculty engagement survey asked faculty to report on (1) the number of student outreach efforts made on a weekly basis, (2) whether or not the instructor utilized community building activities in the class, and (3) the level of engagement faculty observed in the classroom community (see Appendix C). We sent weekly reminders for faculty to take the survey, which included links to information about the initiative and/or relevant information to teaching during the pandemic. These process measures worked together to accomplish the driver measures of focus: faculty and student interactions, sense of belonging, and pedagogical content knowledge. As the primary drivers of the initiative, they led the measurement of testing the working theory of improvement (Bryk et al., 2016).

Balancing measures determine if changes have had an unintended impact. These measure other parts of the system, and they often may seem unrelated to the overall outcome intended by the initiative (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). We assessed increased instructor workload and stress as a result of this initiative. The weekly faculty engagement survey had two questions about the instructor stress level. The first asked about their stress level on a scale of one to 10, and, if it was higher than a five, the next asks if the stress was related to different categories, including personal, grading, committee work, or the initiative (see Appendix C). We had planned to reach out to instructors whose stress was both higher than seven on the scale and related to the initiative workload. However, reported stress was due to personal and professional factors and was not related to the initiative. We were also concerned that students who felt a strong connection to their faculty member may divulge personal information that the faculty member may not be equipped to handle. However, that was not reported on our results and it would have been difficult to address due to the de-identification of the data. Two open-ended, qualitative questions, "Please explain why you will or will not use these strategies" and "Please share any

story around this initiative that has been surprising or helpful based on this work," were included

to enable instructors to provide feedback that may not be covered in the quantitative survey

questions (see Appendix C).

Summative Evaluation of Improvement Methodology

Along with the formative evaluation points, a summative evaluation was conducted to

determine if the overall aims of the initiative were met. Outcome measures explain the

performance of the system and demonstrate results in relation to the aim statement of the driver

diagram (Bryk et al., 2016). As the ultimate aim was an increase in course completion in the

first-year courses selected for the initiative, outcome measures assessed final course completion

rates and if an increased sense of belonging correlated with increased pass rates. In the end, we

did not evaluate pass rates because of the various changes due to COVID-19. However, we did

examine the relationship between the percentage of Get to Know You meetings an instructor had

with engagement ratings. Because causal relationships can be difficult to validate, particularly in

research with people, the data must be analyzed to assess if measures co-vary in a nonrandom

fashion (Tanner, 2016). While leading outcome measures will demonstrate the immediate results

of course completion, lagging outcome measures not collected in the timeframe of the

investigation of semester-to-semester retention and graduation rates will determine the longer-

term impact of the initiative (Bryk et al., 2016).

The summative evaluation provides a comparative analysis of course completion and

student sense of belonging. Students completed a 16-question survey at the end of the semester

to assess their experience in the class (see Appendix D). The survey was mainly quantitative in

nature with several open-ended questions to allow participants to share feedback on their

experience. For example, question two is:

2) I felt a strong sense of community in this class.

> Strongly Disagree
> Disagree
> Neither Agree or Disagree
> Agree
> Strongly Agree

Questions 11 allows students to share their experience: "Please share any feedback about your instructor's support and outreach during this class."

We examined the following outcomes in the student survey: (1) sense of relationship and support with faculty, (2) level of connection/sense of belonging to the institution, and (3) in-class engagement. The student survey was administered electronically by the instructor. While we had hoped it could be in class, the move of many classes to virtual formats or ground classes not held in computer labs prevented this. Instructors emailed the class the link or posted it in their online class and students competed it on their own. Descriptive statistics from the student survey were compiled. The open-ended questions were evaluated using in vivo and descriptive coding (Saldaña 2016).

Compiled results will be shared with the design team and faculty volunteers before the start of the Summer 2021 term so that instructors may learn from the initiative, make adjustments, and continue with a second phase. This final step will complete the Act phase in the PDSA cycle, compelling the team to spread improvement by conducting further testing, drawing on successes, implementing some alternative change ideas, and implementing the change on a larger scale (Langley et al., 2009).

Implementation Process

Implementation occurred at both Connected Community College and Applewood College in the Fall 2020 terms. While the process at each location was similar, some differences occurred. Therefore, process descriptions will be given separately for CCC and AC.

Plans were altered at both locations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began shortly after approval of the proposal. The primary changes for the initiative focused on moving all plans to a virtual format; this included virtual design team meetings, virtual professional development sessions with an option for participants to watch a recording, and expansion to include online classes. Due to the pandemic, many classes that planned to meet in-person moved to an online or a hybrid HyFlex format, causing a decrease in the number of seated classes available for participation at both locations. We had to modify the plans for the initiative to fit a virtual context within a fairly short time frame. Both institutions were uncertain of how classes would be delivered in the fall as the impact of COVID-19 created the need to be flexible. We needed to be ready to move forward with the initiative regardless of modality.

During Summer 2020, we developed the professional development session. A 28-slide PowerPoint presentation covered the rationale of initiative and the implementation procedures (see Appendix E). The rationale included identifying the challenges our students face, the importance of faculty and student relationships, equity, the opportunity gap, sense of belonging, and the impact a successful retention effort can have on individual students and the institution. We introduced the motivational story of "The Star Thrower," which describes a boy who saves starfish that have been washed into shore from the tide (Eiseley, 1969). Although the number of starfish in need of saving is too great to count, the boy understands that each starfish he throws back into the water is one saved. We used this story to model the impact of helping just one

student succeed, encouraging faculty to remember that "it matters to this one" each time they support a student. To model engagement strategies, we paused frequently in the live virtual sessions to seek participation, provided scenarios to think through the many identities students bring with them to class (some that faculty see and others that they do not), included an online word cloud poll, and provided a handout with supplemental resources (see Appendix F).

Scholar-Practitioner Role

As scholar-practitioners, it was important for us to approach the initiative from leadership and participant roles. Scholar-practitioners develop the ability to not only conduct research studies, but also to apply those studies and convey results in practice to solve institutional problems (Rokinson-Szapkiw, 2018). Therefore, to truly understand the experience of the investigation and understand its value in the practical classroom environment, we led the initiative and conducted it in our own classes. We both held GTKY meetings and completed the weekly engagement survey. We reported the results with and without our data to be transparent.

Throughout the intervention process, we both kept research journals in an effort to employ reflexivity and to have a space that allowed us to understand our experiences and to review lessons learned. As scholar-practitioners, this was particularly important since our dual roles as both insiders within our institutions and evaluators of the initiative creates a unique perspective of the process (Drake & Heath, 2011). Still, as our workplace identities are a large part of who we are, we have sought to improve practices within our institutions, but also to do so while developing what Drake and Heath (2011) refer to as a "deepening awareness of what research integrity must entail, especially in the case of small-scale projects" (p. 31). Placing ourselves as active participants of the initiative allowed us a unique perspective from both a scholar and a practitioner angle.

Implementation of the Improvement Process: Connected Community College Plan

The design team at CCC met in May 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the meeting occurred virtually with five members meeting using Google Meet. One person could not attend the virtual meeting so we talked over the phone. I (Laura) explained the initiative to the team and then asked for their input. The members who participated were the Chair of Humanities, the Vice President of Instruction, Chair of Business Programs, a math faculty member, the Academic Success Class Coordinator, and the Director of Enrollment Management.   One member who had also heard the Oakton Community College presentation at the Achieving the Dream Conference suggested highlighting the success of their retention results as these had been compelling. Since the professional development would only be an hour, the team suggested we provide a handout with more in-depth resources about our topic. The team also discussed the challenges of engaging online students since it was anticipated that many fall classes would be online due to COVID-19 restrictions. Additionally, we thought about how classroom engagement ideas would need to be revised as social distancing rules required students and instructors to remain six feet apart from one another, thus challenging many traditional engagement ideas and group dynamics. One question was how the intervention would interact with our current early alert system, and we discussed that this would be a supplement to that system. Instructors would still need to complete the early alert process. The two actions were intended to supplement each other and offer students different avenues of support.

I met with one participant separately by phone. They felt the concept of increasing connections with students fit with their personal philosophy. They suggested changing the term "office hours" to "drop-in hours" to make office hours more approachable. They also suggested

that we focus on seated classes and move away from online when we are trying to increase

connections, although they recognized that due to the initiative occurring during the COVID-19

pandemic that may not be possible. They suggested that online instructors have drop-in hours

for students to stop by and connect with instructors. Overall, the design team liked the idea of

the initiative and thought that it had good potential.

Eventually it was decided that, instead of traditional seated classes, CCC would offer

HyFlex classes for the fall semester. CCC defined HyFlex as an instructional delivery model

with some students attending in the physical classroom while others join the class synchronously

using the learning management system (CCC, n.d.e). In HyFlex classes students would have the

option to attend the lecture as classroom space allowed, or to join virtually. As plans for fall

developed, we realized that we would need to include online and HyFlex classes in our

investigation or we would not have enough participants since so many classes had moved into

alternate formats due to the pandemic.

Do

Faculty returned to CCC from summer break in mid-August to a changed environment in

which we would be offering HyFlex and online classes. Some faculty completed HyFlex

training over the summer, but others did not. It was a hectic time for faculty. Maureen sent the

first recruitment email to CCC faculty on August 18th, 2020. The email contained the informed

consent and the dates of the Sense of Belonging professional development. I (Laura) moved the

professional development to the second week of the semester as I felt like the first week of such

a challenging semester would be a hard time to recruit faculty volunteers. I also added the

recorded option to give faculty more flexibility to attend.   Maureen sent a follow-up email the

next week asking for volunteers. Initially, 14 faculty members at CCC signed up to participate.

During this time, the College had to close two buildings due to a student testing positive for COVID-19. Many instructors were overwhelmed with the new teaching delivery methods and additional duties such as classroom cleaning protocols, wearing masks, and enforcing social distancing guidelines. Given the circumstances, we were pleased with the initial response.

Professional Development

The first Sense of Belonging virtual professional development was held on August 25, 2020; three people attended. The second virtual training was held on August 26, 202; two people attended. Following the second training, I made a recording that was 33-minutes long and incorporated any questions brought up in the first two trainings by participants. Instructors were asked to complete the training by Sunday, August 30th. Eight faculty elected to complete the training using the recording. Faculty characteristics of participants can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Characteristics of Faculty Participating in the Initiative at Connected Community College

Connected Community College

Number of Participants	10*
Gender	
Female	6
Male	3
Self-Identify	1
Ethnicity	
White	10
Years of Teaching Experience	
6-10	3
More than 10 Years	7
Last time they taught a class they met with every student.	
Yes	3
No	7
Last time teaching, they initiated outreach:	
to all students at several points throughout the semester	1
to all students at least once during quarter	4
to all students only when there was a need	5
Last time teaching, engagement strategies were used:	
Very Frequently (each class)	2
Frequently (every other class)	2
Somewhat Frequently (about half of class meetings)	4
Infrequently (one in every four meetings)	2

Note. Laura did not complete the professional development survey since she led the session. Ten instructors of the 14 who originally signed up completed the professional development survey.

Ten participants completed the professional development survey. Of these 10, six identified as female, three as male, and one chose to self-identify as a woman. All 10 participants identified as White. Three participants had 6-10 years of teaching experience, seven had more than 10 years. Six were very satisfied with the quality of the training, three were satisfied, and one was neutral. On a scale of 0-10, the participants found the training a 7.8 on the helpfulness of the training. The training covered a variety of topics and participants were asked which would be most helpful in their teaching. Three responded equity, two classroom engagement, one opportunity gap, and four the importance of faculty/student relationships. For equity, opportunity gap, and rationale of support, eight participants identified the topic as relevant to their teaching and two ranked it as "maybe" relevant. For the importance of faculty/student relationships, all 10 said yes, it was important to their teaching. For classroom engagement, nine said it was important to their teaching, and one said maybe.

Two participants reported using engagement strategies very frequently (each class), two reported using them somewhat frequently (every other class), four reported using them somewhat frequently (about half of class meetings), and two reported using them infrequently (one in every four class meetings). Seven participants reported that they did not meet with each student individually the last time they taught a class, while three reported that they did meet with each student individually. When reflecting on the last time they taught, five instructors reported that they initiated outreach to students only when there was an academic need such as late work, missed class, or low grades, while five reported that they initiated outreach to all students at least once during the semester. Based on the strategies discussed in the training, one participant felt very confident, seven felt confident, and two felt unconfident in their ability to build

relationships with their students. Two participants suggested we include more engagement

strategies for the online environment due to COVID-19.

Instructor Withdraws

Almost immediately (August 30, September 4 and 11), three participants withdrew from

the project. One withdrew due to personal challenges occurring during the semester and the

other two withdrew due to increased teaching responsibilities and administrative workload for

the semester.

Classes Selected

CCC classes were offered in a variety of formats: regular and late start, full 16-week, first

eight-week, and second eight-week. There were seven HyFlex and four online classes. Due to

the pandemic, CCC did not offer many seated classes.   The average class size was 16 students

with a smallest enrolling four and a largest with 32 students.   This variety of classes is

representative of the varied class formats at CCC. Subjects represented by classes in the

investigation included study skills, psychology, computers, criminal justice, math, accounting,

biology, chemistry, nursing, and sociology. These classes fulfill requirements for a variety of

programs at CCC, such as Associate in Arts Transfer, Associate in Science Transfer, Associate

in Applied Science Accounting, Associate in Applied Science Criminal Justice, and others.

Get to Know You Meetings

As the semester began, we asked instructors to complete the GTNY meetings in the early

weeks of their class. The general deadline given to CCC faculty to complete the meetings was

September 13th. However, with the variety of class formats and start dates, there was some

flexibility. Faculty were instructed to do this outside of class as a personalized opportunity to get

to know students on an individual basis. Implementation was varied. Some offered extra credit while others did not. After each meeting, instructors completed the GTKY meeting survey.

Weekly Engagement Surveys

Weekly engagement surveys were sent out each Friday to participants at CCC. The emails contained a link to the engagement survey with various reminders about the initiative. For example, early on we connected participants to articles about the Oakton Community College project as a way to provide positive results from a comparative initiative. We felt this might emphasize the value in the work they were doing. Around fall break, we included an article about managing stress. We also included links to articles and videos on sense of belonging and online engagement to align with the initiative goals. We encouraged participants to write comments in the survey to provide feedback on how the initiative was working in their class. The weekly reminder emails were a good way to expand on the topics introduced in the professional development sessions. In total, 12 weekly updates were sent.

Student Surveys

At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete the student survey. In one of the first eight-week classes the instructor sent the survey only to the students who did the Get to Know You meeting. For future emails, we reworded our request to ask instructors to send the survey to the full class.

Study

Get to Know You Meetings

At CCC, 45 total GTKY meeting surveys were completed following the meetings. There were 168 students within the sections in the initiative at the beginning of the semester when the GTKY meetings were held, demonstrating that 22.5% of possible students participated in the

meetings. Five faculty participants did not report on any GTKY meetings, but continued to complete the weekly engagement survey. Of the six that completed the meetings, the highest percentage of class participation was 51.4% followed by 42%. I (Laura) personally met with 45% of my students. Several faculty participants reported difficulty in scheduling the meetings, having only two (8%), three (11%) or four (21%) of their students complete the meeting.

Twenty-three of the students who did participate were in online classes, and 22 were in HyFlex Classes. In rating the overall effectiveness of the GTKY meeting to start a relationship with the student, 42% of instructors found the meeting very helpful, 42% found the meeting helpful, 5% were neutral, and 11% found the meeting very unhelpful (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Instructor Perception of GTKY Meetings at CCC
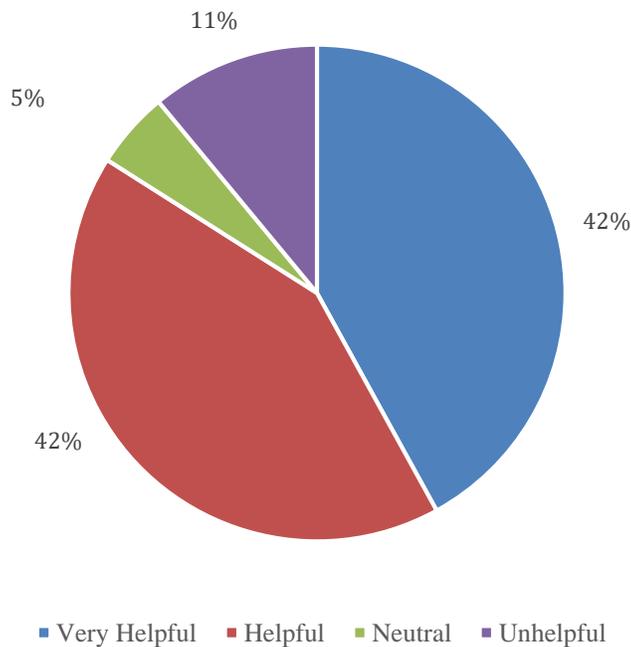
Of the four faculty who reported that the meeting was very unhelpful, three gave comments indicating the meeting actually was helpful. They specifically responded that "technology issues were resolved," "a student was on the right track," and that the instructor "learned a lot about the

student's struggles." Only one comment, that the "student was reserved and did not divulge much information," indicated that the meeting truly was very unhelpful, leading us to speculate that there may have been some reporting error.

At CCC, 29% of the students showed signs in their GTKY meeting that they were likely to need extra support during the semester. The most prevalent campus resource that students were referred to was other faculty (44%), followed by the student success center (38%), other (30%), and student services/peer tutors (15%) (see Figure 7). Other resources included technology support and the faculty members themselves. Faculty members offered assistance with reading, class support, and technology.

Figure 7

*Referral of Students to Campus Resources During Get to Know You Meeting at CCC*
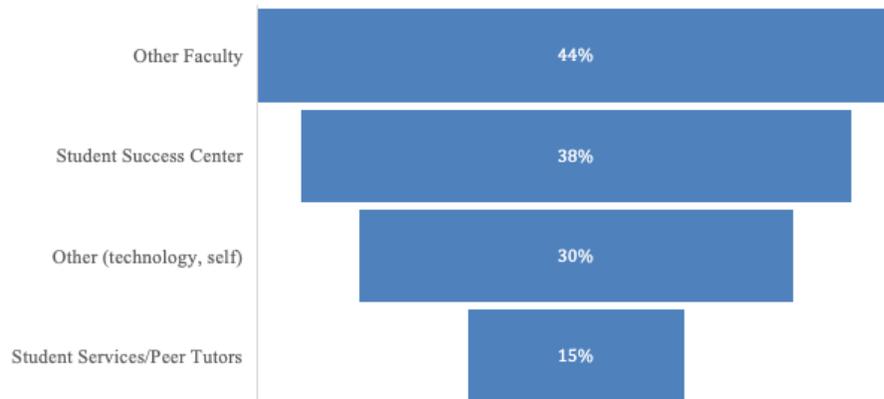
Seventy-three percent of the surveys indicated that the student shared information that would be helpful for them during the semester, while 27% reported that no helpful information was shared. As noted in Figure 8, of those reporting helpful information, the most prevalent area

was reported at 89% for academic/study skills (25), then 86% personal/family (24), 86% time

management (24), 21% emotional behavior (6), and 46% other (13) (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Helpful Information Students Shared During the GTKY Meetings at CCC (of 28 responses)
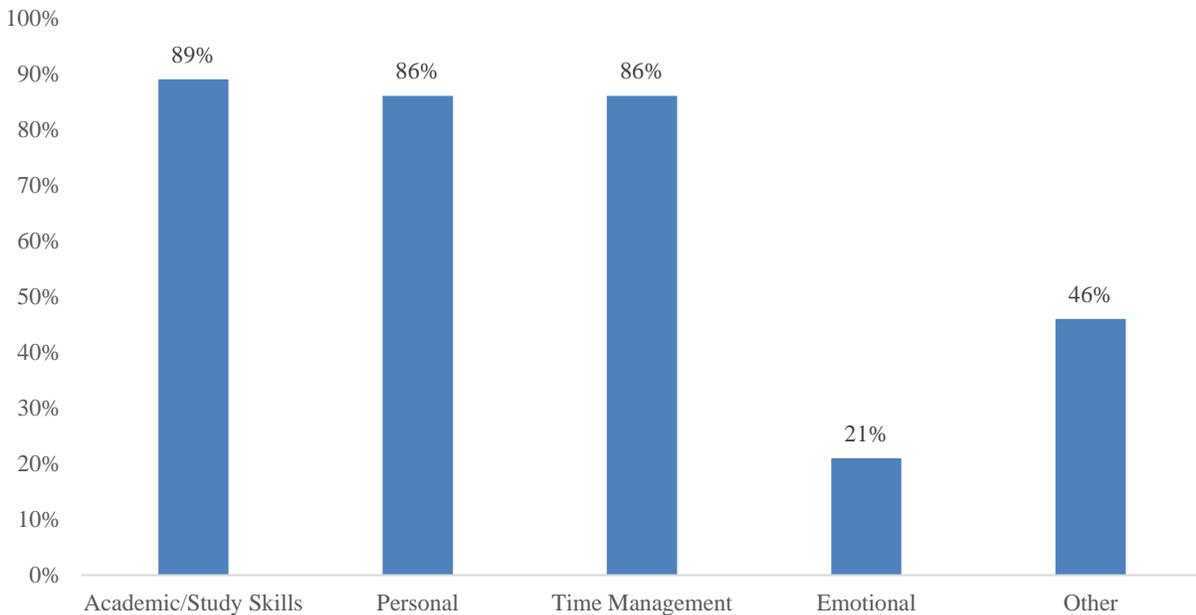
When coding the open-ended question, "Did the student share any information that will

aid you in assisting them this semester?" the descriptive codes of academic (42%), busy (21%),

administrative (14%), and personal (14%) were the most represented themes. For example,

comments around academics focused on academic history and future goals. Students shared

about their busy personal life such as having three kids and the challenges of their work schedule

in relation to completing work. For administrative themes, a student reported their book was

backordered. The other open-ended question was, "Please offer any other additional feedback

about the Get to Know You meeting," and the descriptive codes of personal (47%), support

(17%), academic (11%), goals (5%) and administrative (5%) emerged as themes. In vivo coding

revealed that students shared personal information, asked for support in online classes, shared

details of their chaotic life, needed to complete work at night, had a family crisis, and someone

shared about their puppy. One instructor commented, "I am surprised how effective the 10

minutes can be at getting to know my students," and that, "the get to know you meetings made

the course feel more familiar." Two comments indicated that the faculty member and student

found connection through each having children in middle school, being from the same place, and

liking a common area. One student shared that they were getting married soon and asked if they

could turn work in early. One faculty member learned that the student had interest in another

program and needed to connect with another faculty member. Two comments (11%) indicated

that students were reserved and did not share much information. One instructor shared that they

gave students the option to complete an introduction forum post or do the GTKY meeting. For

the meeting, the instructor offered an extended due date to encourage participation; however,

only two students (6%) selected the GTKY meeting option.

My (Laura's) class was a first eight-week fully online course. I completed 10 Get to

Know You meetings, which are included in the numbers above. My class had 22 students, so

45% of the students participated in the meetings, which was a higher rate than the total study

group (22.5%). I offered extra credit to students who participated, and I made the additional

effort to follow up with two students who missed their initial time to reschedule. This extra

effort may have resulted in a higher completion of meetings than others. During the course of

the 10 GTKY meetings, I learned that many of my students were close to graduating, so my class

did not fit the goal of reaching first-year students. However, while our focus was intended to be

on first-year students, I feel the GTKY meeting had the potential to benefit all students and could

be beneficial for higher-level courses, particularly those with low success rates. I reported that

30% of my meetings were very helpful, 50% were helpful, and 20% were neutral. I reported

that, during 50% of the meetings, I learned something that would aid students over the course of the semester compared to 73% when all surveys were evaluated. The top area that students shared that they needed assistance with was academic and study skills. From one student I learned their book was backordered and would arrive late.

In my meetings, 40% of the students indicated they might need extra support. The only campus support I referred students to was the student success center. This feedback was surprising to me, and I realized I need to do a better job of connecting students to campus resources.

In contrast to the limited comments about the meetings from participants, I made comments about every meeting to capture how they went. I had one meeting that was very awkward; I also commented that it was my first one so I had to find my flow with guiding the meeting. With one student, we had to reschedule twice before we connected. I commented that the student seemed to have a chaotic life with work and school, but we had a good chat once we connected. Two students indicated that they had trouble keeping up in online classes. Two students indicated that they had taken online classes before and were comfortable in the environment. Two students were very appreciative of the meeting for the class and said they really enjoyed the chance to interact. One student is planning to shift her program to nursing, and, as my husband is a nurse, we were able to discuss the benefits of this career change. The most beneficial meeting was a student who shared some personal health struggles. From this meeting I was able to adjust her assignments and support her in being successful in the course. This meeting opened the door for communication between us that continued the entire semester. I think it really made a difference in her ability to be successful and complete this class. My

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personal interest and commitment to this project resulted in the more detailed comments given in the survey.

The data and my personal experience indicate that the Get to Know You meetings were helpful in learning student academic goals and struggles, as well as personal information that could aid instructors. With practice and persistence, the meetings have the potential to become a positive part of Connected Community College culture.

Weekly Engagement Survey

At CCC, 85 faculty engagement surveys were collected -- 79 excluding mine. Two participants only completed the survey one week. Of the 85 surveys collected over the semester, weekly outreach occurred 92% of the time. Instructors reported that email (51%) was the most popular way to reach out to students, followed by before/after class (31%), phone calls (11%), with the least popular being text (7%). Our office phones do not have a texting option. Students reached out to instructors an average of 3.9 times per week with a max of 19 and a minimum of 0. The most popular way for students to reach out to instructors was also email (49%), followed by before/after class (24%), office hours (14%), phone calls (9%), and texts (4%).

Faculty reported using engagement strategies 63% of the weeks in which surveys were reported. When asked what level of engagement they saw in the class as a community of learners, an average of 5.84 on a scale of 1-10 was reported with a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 9. Faculty overwhelmingly indicated that, yes, they would continue to use engagement strategies in the long term; only one participant indicated consistently (three weeks) that they would not use them. In the comments, the overwhelming theme of why they would continue to use engagement strategies was effectiveness (68%). Specific comments indicated that "faculty see the positive difference engagement makes in student learning," such as

"increasing a student's confidence," "their locus of control," and "leading to improved study habits in class." Faculty also mentioned that the meetings helped them learn about students' stress and how they can help. As we move forward with changes in course delivery, one instructor shared that, in the HyFlex model, having intentional and routine outreach plans was needed to engage with students. My personal comments centered around student support and I felt that students were reaching out after the meeting with additional questions and feedback.

The final survey question gave participants the opportunity to share any story around this initiative that was surprising or helpful based on this work. The descriptive coding themes were effective (40%), student success (25%), support (20%), administrative (16%), and challenge (8%) (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Emerging Themes from Faculty Feedback at CCC
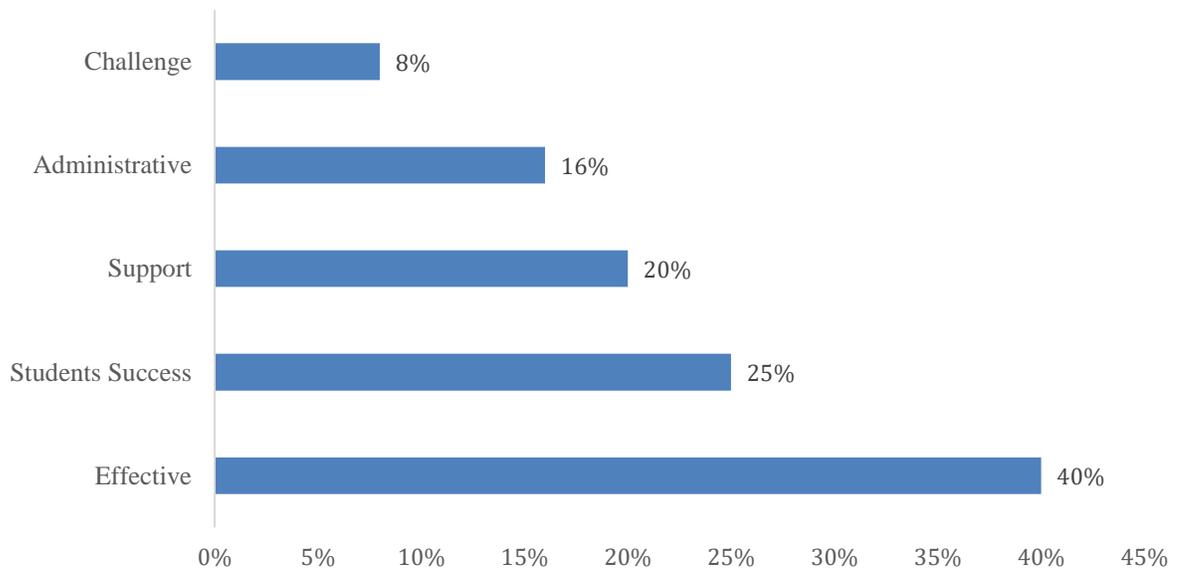
One instructor shared a success of having a virtual class review with students during which the instructor held a private chat with every student to allow them to share concerns. Another instructor shared that, by establishing the relationship in the GTKY meeting, they were able to learn about the student's frustration with having to take a support-level class; the instructor commented that this would inform their teaching next semester. Student successes included a day of perfect attendance, improved study habits, students visiting the student success center, and students sharing joy over a good grade. For support, instructors shared about a post they made acknowledging the challenges of fall 2020, the advantage of the virtual classroom allowing students to attend class after giving birth, and students seeking out instructor feedback. My personal comments indicated that I thought the meetings were effective, as they allowed me to put a name with a face in an online class, as it turns out I had registered the student for the fall semester online but never met them in person. I was also able to follow up with a student about some personal issues following the meeting, and I noted that changing a discussion forum post to a video post proved to be a more engaging class activity. Overall, the comments indicated that the engagement strategies were effective and well received by the faculty and contributed to a supportive classroom environment.

As a balancing measure to determine if the initiative had unintended consequences, instructors were asked to report on their weekly stress level on a scale of 0-10. The average stress response was 5.71. However, when looking at individual class responses, some instructors had higher stress levels. For example, four participants reported average stress of six or above, while five participants reported an average of five or below. For the instructors reporting a five or higher, the most popular response was professional workload aside from teaching (56%), followed by a combination of personal and professional workload aside from teaching (23%),

personal (13%), and other (8%). One participant with consistently high stress levels commented

that "conducting online engagement is challenging due to the time it takes and the competing

priorities they have on their time."   Eleven comments were made regarding stress and eight

comments focused on technology and delivering classes online. Only one faculty member

reported stress from implementing this initiative on three surveys. I (Laura) reported an average

stress rating of 8.01 due to my professional and personal responsibilities. As a chair, I carry a lot

of responsibility for my area in addition to working on my doctorate during the pandemic.

The weekly engagement survey indicated that this was a stressful semester for faculty,

primarily due to professional workload aside from teaching. Despite the stress, faculty were

utilizing engagement strategies in class and reaching out to students primarily through email.

The comments revealed the importance of routine and planned outreach and engagement to help

students navigate a complex semester.

Student Survey

The student survey was emailed or posted to the class during the final week of the session

and did not track back to a particular instructor.   Of the 18 students who started the survey, 15

said they had a Get to Know You meeting with their instructor, while three did not.   That was

the only question answered by two students. The rest of the results include 16 responses.

Sixteen responses represent just 10% of the potential 153 students who could have taken the

survey based on faculty reported enrollment at the end of the semester, which was down from

168 students the first week of the semester. Ten males and six females completed the survey.

Eleven students were in the 18-24 age range, and five were 25-34 years old. Fifteen were White,

and one preferred not to answer. Nine of the students were enrolled full-time and seven were

part-time. Four were the first in their immediate family to attend higher education and 12 were

not. CCC was the first college for 11 students, while five had attended another college in the

past. Nine students worked part time (less than 30 hours), three worked full time (more than 30

hours), and four were not working while attending school. Six students (37.5%) said the GTKY

meeting was very beneficial in getting the class off to a good start, five (31%) said it was

beneficial, three (19%) said it was somewhat beneficial, and two (12.5%) did not respond (see

Figure 10).

Figure 10

Student View of the Get to Know You Meeting at CCC (n=16)
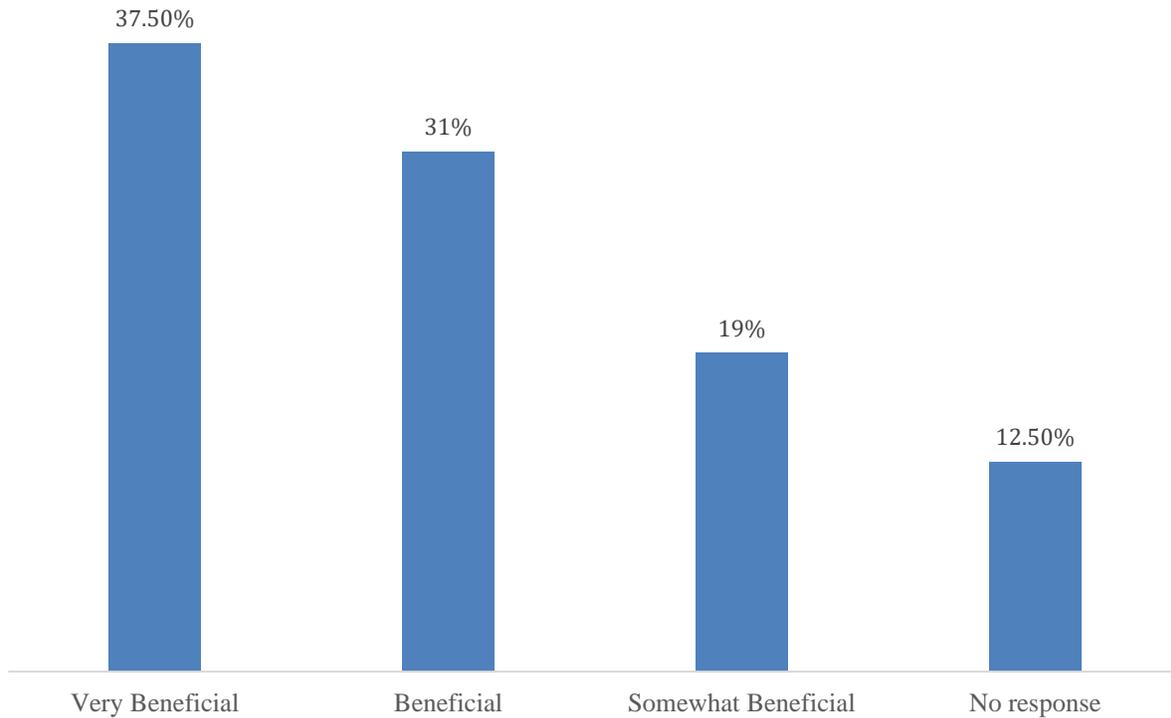
Forty percent of the students strongly agreed with the statement, "I felt a strong sense of

community in this class;" 40% agreed; 13% neither agreed nor disagreed; 0% disagreed; and 7%

gave no response. Twenty-five percent of students strongly agreed with the statement, "I felt

encouraged to participate in this class;" 50% agreed; 6% neither agreed nor disagreed; 6%

strongly disagreed; and 13% gave no response. Fifty-six percent strongly agreed with the

statement, "I felt encouraged to reach out to my instructor if I had questions or concerns;" 31% agreed; 7% strongly disagreed; and 6% gave no response. Sixty-nine percent of students strongly agreed with the statement, "I felt supported by my instructor in the class;" 19% agreed; 6% strongly disagreed; and 6% gave no response (see Figure 11).

Figure 11
*Student Perception of the Class at CCC (n=16)*
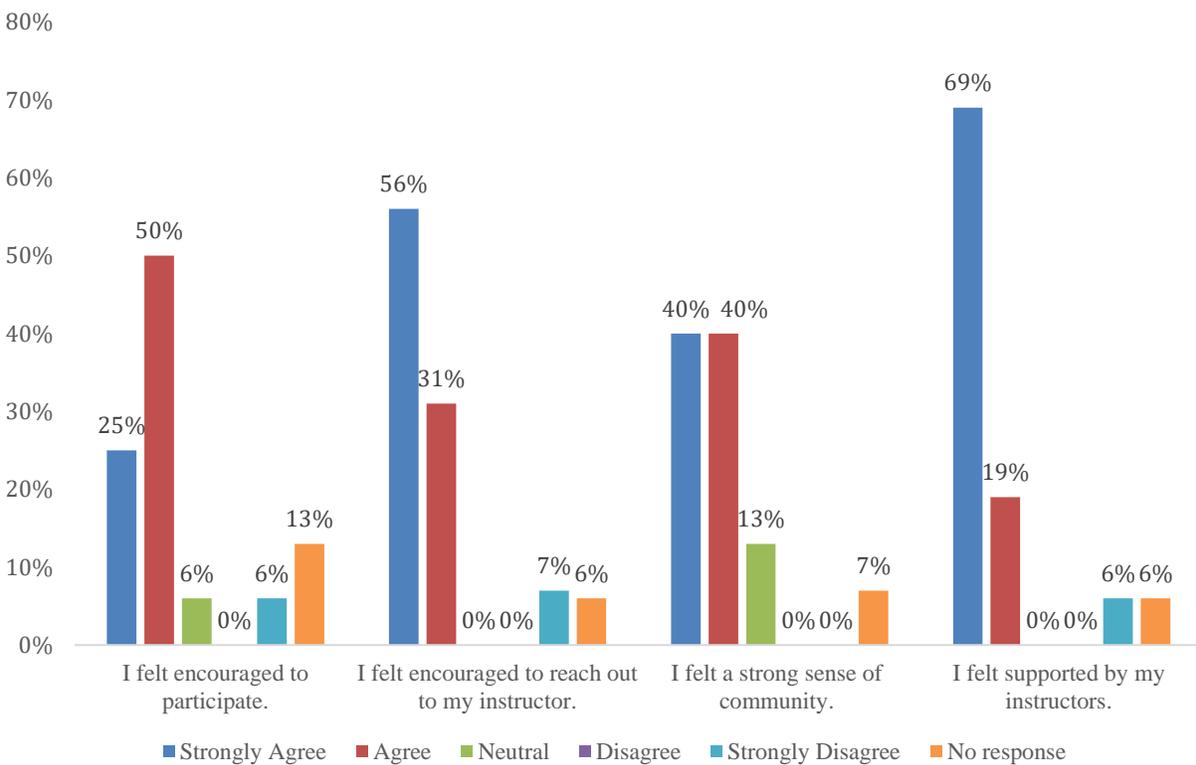
The next set of questions asked if instructors connected students with a variety of campus resources. First, for the question, "did your instructor connect you to student services," 11 reported yes, four reported no, and one gave no response. Second, when asked, "did your instructor connect you to your advisor," 12 reported yes, three responded no, and one gave no response. Finally, students were asked, "did your instructor connect you to the student success center," and 14 said yes with two reporting no.

Students were asked about their perception of connection and engagement (see Figure 12). Nine students answered, "I felt less connected to my other instructor(s) compared to this instructor," one answered, "I felt more connected to my other instructors(s) compared to this instructor," and six answered, "I felt neither more or less connected to my other instructors compared to this instructor." In terms of engagement, 13 felt more engaged in this class compared to their other class(es), and three felt neither more or less engaged in this class compared to their other class(es).

Figure 12

Student Perception of Engagement and Connection in Participating Classes at CCC (n=16)
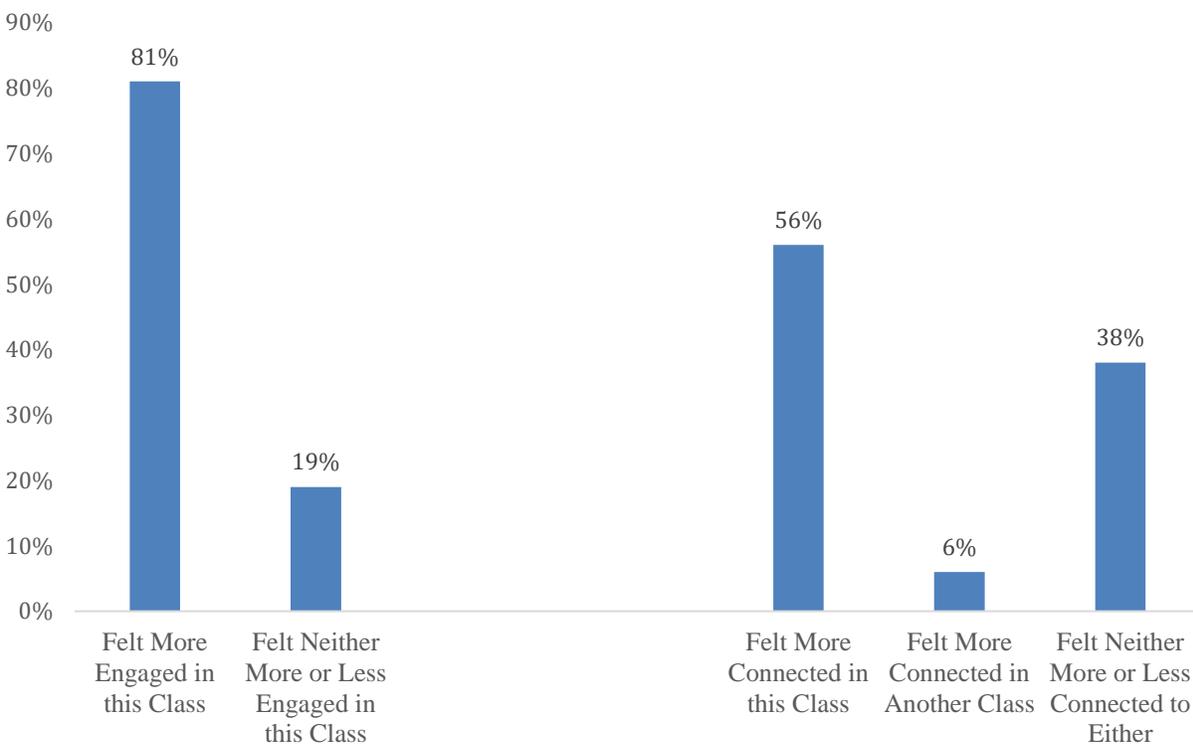
Students were asked approximately how many times the instructor initiated outreach to them during the class. Write-in comments indicate that students felt supported (58%), got email from their instructors (25%), and a few were unsure (16%). Regarding email, students said they

got weekly emails that kept them engaged and that instructors checked in through email. The

unsure students reported comments such as, "I don't know" and "at least 5-10 times." The

supported students said, "a lot," "an appropriate number of times," "multiple," and "every day."

Nine students made comments about their instructor's outreach and support during the

class, and 100% of them indicated that they felt supported and appreciated the instructor

outreach. One student said, "The instructor's support and outreach throughout the course

created a conducive learning environment," while another said, "My instructor was amazing.

We got to have a Zoom chat and she made me feel welcomed and feel like I could go to her for

anything." From the student survey data collected, we learned that the majority of students

found the Get to Know You meetings beneficial, felt supported by the instructor, felt connected

to the instructor, and found the participating class engaging.

Act

Due to the complex nature of the Fall 2020 semester, it was challenging to get faculty and

students to participate in the initiative at Connected Community College. For a second round, I

would emphasize the potential positive impacts of the initiative with faculty more in the

professional development and increase emphasis on the benefits of the faculty-student

relationship. As faculty members found it difficult to get students to participate, I would suggest

they offer extra credit to encourage participation of students. It would also be nice to incentivize

faculty participation; perhaps food at the kick-off training would be a good way to get more

interest. Faculty appreciated the recorded professional development session with their busy

schedules, but I am not sure the recorded option builds as much interest and understanding as a

live session.

The goal of the investigation was to see if the increased connection would benefit first-

year students. Due to lower-than-expected participation and my belief that this practice would

benefit all students, any classes that wanted to participate were included rather than selecting classes that primarily enrolled first-year students. At CCC classes tend to have a mix of students. In a second cycle, the results might be more conclusive if more first-year classes participated, such as study skills and first-level English classes.

In this scholar-practitioner model, I was able to review my own data and this self-reflection proved valuable. When reviewing my own Get to Know You meeting data, I was able to realize that I was not connecting students to campus resources as much as I thought. From this information, I can adjust my practices. Since data were de-identified for the participating instructors, there was no way for participants to reflect on their individual results. However, creating an opportunity for faculty to see their data and self-reflect has valuable potential in another study cycle. This observation is in alignment with suggestions in the literature by Hammond (2015), who recommends that teachers investigate their questions, collect data, analyze the data, and reflect on the results to make decisions on future practice. Overall, this initiative has the potential to benefit faculty, students, and the institution; however, more participation is needed across campus to see more conclusive results.

Implementation of the Improvement Process: Applewood College

Plan

The design team from Applewood College met in early June to weigh in on the initiative

plans and the professional development session, and to consider necessary adjustments due to

COVID-19. While Applewood College was planning to bring students back to ground classes

for the upcoming summer quarter, we anticipated that ground enrollment would be lower. Many

students would opt to take classes online due to concerns about COVID-19 exposure, childcare

needs, or other unforeseen challenges. The design team met via Zoom and included the Director

of Student Services, a student success advisor, the Director of Admissions, and a department

chair. A faculty member who planned to attend was unable to make the meeting, but provided

insight during a one-on-one call.

Overall, the design team was excited about the improvement initiative plan and felt it had

the ability to make a powerful impact on student retention; however, there were concerns about

how COVID-19 would impact the number of available courses for the initiative. Online classes

are offered from a different AC location. In this arrangement, AC students enroll in online

classes, but the classes are normally staffed by faculty from other locations. We discussed the

importance of keeping this a local initiative with local faculty, particularly as a first PDSA cycle,

and determined that it made sense to include online classes only if they were taught by local

faculty. The design team also provided suggestions on courses to target outside of the general

education curriculum, which included introductory courses from the legal studies and medical

assisting programs that typically enroll first-year students.

Many felt that the professional development would be an important – and welcomed –

opportunity for faculty, partially because AC offers few opportunities for faculty to discuss

pedagogy and retention. Similarly, aside from required computer-based trainings that do not

allow for engagement or discussion, AC has not begun to engage faculty and staff in conversations regarding equity or the opportunity gap. Bringing these topics to the forefront was seen as an important step. Simultaneously, because these are large topics that take time to discuss and reflect upon, the challenge to present them all, along with the initiative design and background in just one hour, was a concern. Because opportunities to have these discussions have been infrequent, we discussed the importance of planning the session without an assumption that the faculty were familiar with the concepts addressed.

This led me (Maureen) to reach out to two additional individuals, the chair of the AC Quality Enhancement Plan (who works from another campus location) and a colleague from another institution of higher education who often delivers workshops on equity. The conversation with the QEP chair allowed me to better understand how AC approaches retention from a larger organizational standpoint as the topic of the QEP is focused on first-year retention. The conversation with the colleague from another institution provided ideas for engaging participants who may not normally be familiar with or may even be skeptical about approaching teaching from an equity lens. This colleague provided strategies and suggestions for making comparisons and using examples to which a wide audience can relate. This is one difference to note between CCC and AC. While CCC had a culture of delivering professional development topics to faculty, which included equity, and while Laura also had experience leading sessions on equity, neither AC or Maureen did.

Do

As Applewood College runs on a quarter schedule, faculty started the new fall quarter in late September after a short break following the previous summer quarter. Before leaving for that break, Laura sent a recruitment email to the eight faculty whose classes identified as enrolling first-year students. A live Sense of Belonging professional development session was

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scheduled, and a recorded version was made available to participants. Of the eight faculty Laura emailed for recruitment, six agreed to take part in the initiative. Additionally, approaching the initiative from a scholar-practitioner perspective, I included two of my own classes.

While AC did resume ground classes in the fall quarter with safety precautions in place, student enrollment for ground classes was lower than a typical fall quarter, as the design team expected. Not only were fewer students enrolling in ground classes, but several classes were cancelled due to the low enrollment, leading students to take more online classes based from the parent campus in a different location. This was particularly true in our general education curriculum, which offers the bulk of first-year classes. In these cases, students were scheduled for an online class staffed by faculty in other locations, which resulted in the classes no longer meeting the recruiting needs for this investigation. This lowered the potential number of participants as we decided to keep the initiative localized to faculty from our individual campus location.

Professional Development

Three instructors attended the live virtual Sense of Belonging professional development session. Due to the smaller number of participants and the hopes that it would be interactive, I offered one live training in an effort to increase numbers. The professional development followed the same slide presentation and topics that Laura delivered at CCC. As mentioned, many of the topics were outside of the normal discussions at AC, and I often felt that I needed to spend more time discussing specific issues when there was robust faculty discussion, or when I felt clarification or additional dialogue was important. For example, one faculty member expressed that her students enter college with the assumption that it will be easy, and then they do not meet expectations when they realize the reality of the workload. This led us to devote

more time to defining our student population and sharing all the many stressors and roles we witness them bringing with them to college. We were able to agree that the problem may not be that students do not want to work hard, but that instead the reality of adding college as one more responsibility to their lives may mean they need more support or encouragement. Because of these types of moments, some sections of the professional development had to be shortened.

Overall, I felt we needed a longer timeframe to present so much information, particularly in an interactive fashion that sought engagement. However, as an introduction to the initiative and several new concepts, the professional development seemed successful overall. After the live meeting, I recorded a 29-minute session that incorporated discussion summary from the live session. Three participants listened to the recording. Five of six participants took the Professional Development survey as requested; however, one participant did not.

Survey results, as shown in Table 4, demonstrate that four females and one male attended or watched the training. Four participants are White, and one is Latinx. The group was comprised of three individuals who have been teaching in higher education between 6-10 years and two who have been teaching more than 10 years. In terms of the level of classroom engagement strategies participants reported from past experiences, two responded that they used engagement strategies very frequently, two reported using them somewhat frequently, and one reported not using engagement strategies in the past. Two of five participants met with each student in their previous class individually while three did not. Two faculty reported that they initiated individualized outreach to all students at least once during the previous quarter, and three reported initiating outreach on an as-needed basis. Two felt very confident in their ability to build strong relationships with students, and three felt confident.

Table 4

Characteristics of Faculty Participating in the Initiative at Applewood College

Applewood College	
Number of participants	7*
Gender	
Female	4
Male	1
Ethnicity	
White	4
Latinx	1
Years of Teaching Experience	
6-10	3
More than 10 years	2
Last time teaching, they met with every student:	
Yes	2
No	3
Last time teaching, they initiated outreach:	
to all students at several points throughout the quarter	1
to all students at least once during quarter	1
to students only when there was a need	3
Last time teaching, engagement strategies were used:	
Very frequently (each class)	2
Frequently (every other class)	1
Somewhat frequently (about half of the classes)	1
None	1

Note. While six instructors attended the professional development, only five reported data back on the survey. Maureen also did not complete the professional development survey since she led it. In total, seven instructors participated in the initiative with a total of eight classes.

Overall, participants were "very satisfied" with the training, with four selecting that rating, while one selected "neutral." When asked to rank the usefulness of the training in terms of providing ideas to improve their teaching, selections ranged from 7 to 10 with an average of 9. The topics participants felt were most helpful to their teaching were classroom engagement

activities (two responses), importance of faculty/student relationships (two responses), and rationale of increased support (one response).

When asked if specific topics covered in the training are relevant to their teaching, participants responded in the following ways: Equity - four of five responded "yes" (one reported "maybe"); Opportunity Gap - three of five responded "yes" (two reported "maybe"); Rationale of Increased Support, Importance of Faculty/Student Relationships, and Classroom Engagement Activities - all responded "yes."   Only one suggestion was provided as a write-in response for improving the training, and that was to provide more focus specific to teaching large online classes.

Overall, results from the professional development survey showed that faculty (1) agreed with the goals of increasing support, (2) understood the importance of the faculty-student relationship, and (3) agreed that classroom engagement is important. As the results also showed that a majority of faculty agreed that equity and the opportunity gap are important to their teaching, the fact that not all faculty reported these topics as relevant shows the need to continue conversations and development in these areas. Additionally, as no faculty reported equity or opportunity gap as the most useful part of the training, it provides me with areas in which I can improve emphasis and delivery. Finally, faculty demonstrated overall that they are typically supportive and provide outreach to students, but that there is still room for increased support and outreach.

Classes Selected

Classes represented in the initiative included general education requirements, such as College Management, in addition to pre-program electives, such as a sociology course. Also included was Introduction to Paralegal Studies, a first-year class for students in the Associate of

Applied Science for Paralegal Studies and the Bachelor of Science in Legal Studies programs.

Three first-year courses from the general science program were included, which enroll pre-

program students from a range of health-related programs. Finally, two of Maureen's own

seated classes, English Composition I and English Composition II, were included. The first

course in this sequence is a typical class for first-quarter students, and the second is often taken

in the second quarter. Of the entire group of classes, two were delivered fully online; one was

just five weeks in length. The remaining six classes were seated and extended the length of the

full 10-week quarter. Class sizes at AC are much smaller than those at CCC, and this was

particularly true for the fall quarter with the added impact of COVID-19. Of those represented in

the initiative, class enrollment ranged from one student to 27 students with an average of 7.6

students per class.

Get to Know You Meetings

Applewood College faculty were asked to complete these individual meetings with

students in the first two weeks of the 10-week quarter. On account of students spending less

time on campus due to COVID-19, in addition to both students and faculty juggling multiple

obligations, there was leniency with this timeframe. Faculty were encouraged to conduct these

meetings in-person or via Zoom before or after class, during office hours, or during classroom

breaks. Applewood College faculty cannot modify their course assignment or gradebook, so

they were not able to offer extra credit; student sign-ups were on a voluntary basis. Some faculty

expressed difficulty in having students attend the meetings. In one online class, for example, the

students all signed up for time slots via a Google doc, but only one attended.

Weekly Engagement Surveys

Laura sent the reminder to AC faculty to complete the weekly engagement survey at the end of each academic week, replicating the process Maureen maintained for CCC. In the email, faculty were provided the survey link, encouraged to provide write-in feedback on their experiences, and were given supplemental resources. Resources that were timely to current events were often included, such as suggestions for helping students cope with stress during the 2020 presidential election season. In addition, supplemental resources on key components of the investigation, such as sense of belonging and the importance of classroom engagement were included.

Student Surveys

Faculty participants were asked to send a link to the student survey during the last week of class. Since the majority of classes were not being held in computer labs, instructors asked students to take the survey on their own.

Study

Get to Know You Meetings

Twenty-one GTKY meetings were held at AC, six of which were held by Maureen. In all, only two meetings were held with students enrolled in online classes, leaving 90% of the GTKY meetings held with ground students. One faculty member who signed up to participate in the initiative and who attended professional development did not report results on any GTKY meetings. There were a total of 53 students represented in the classes in the initiative, showing that 40% of students attended a meeting. Faculty reported that the meetings were "very helpful" (43%), "helpful" (52%), or "neutral" (5%) (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

*Instructor Perception of GTKY meetings at AC*
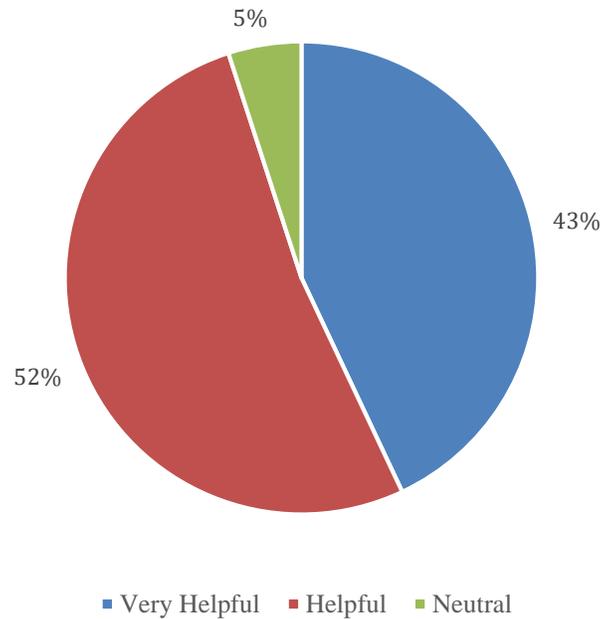
In all but two of the meetings (90%), faculty reported that students shared information that would help them better assist their students during the quarter. Conversations focused mostly on personal and academic-related topics. Eighty-one percent of students shared personal/family information, 81% shared information relating to academic/study skills, 71% shared information relating to time management, and 19% shared emotional/behavioral information (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Helpful Information Students Shared During the GTKY Meetings at AC.
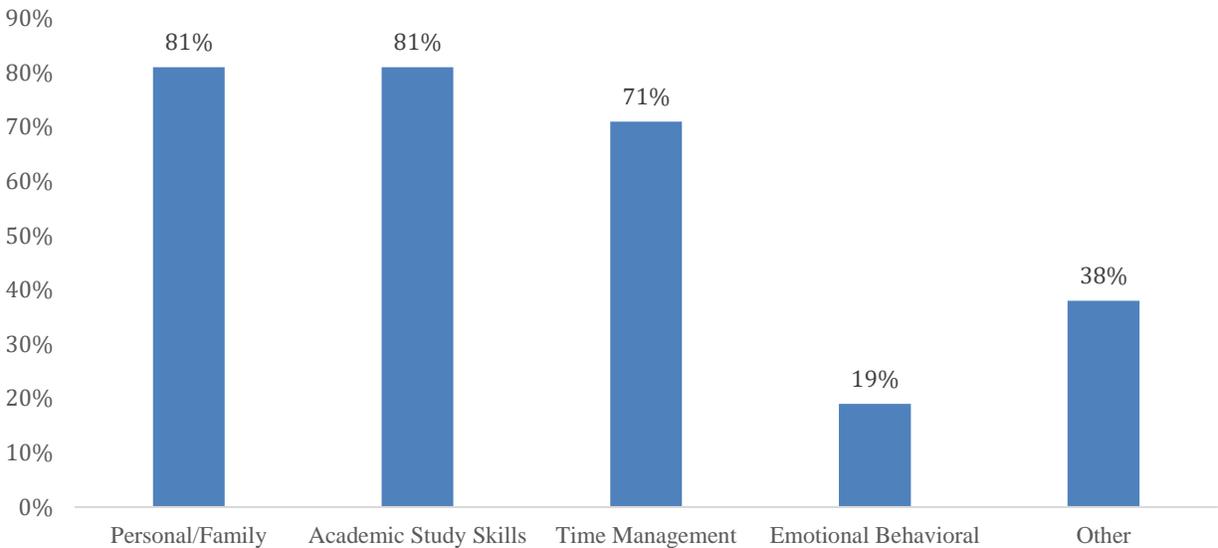
Using descriptive and in vivo coding qualitative methods to better understand these results, faculty wrote in responses to explain how the information learned during the meetings would aid them in assisting students throughout the quarter. Of those write-in responses, 50% of them focused on learning personal information, such as family and work responsibilities, in addition to personal characteristics such as that the student was "apprehensive" or "responsible." Thirty percent of write-in responses centered around a professional theme, such as future careers and aspirations. Finally, 20% of the write-in responses discussed academic issues, such as one student being a slow reader and another showing interest in another field of study.

Faculty reported that 24% of students showed signs indicating they were likely to need extra support during the quarter. Of those 24%, faculty were most likely to refer students to the Academic Resource Center (60%) or to faculty (60%), followed by referrals to student services (20%); no students were referred to peer tutors (peer tutors normally work from campus at AC, but were moved to Zoom in the fall) (see Figure 15).

Figure 15

Referral of Students to Campus Resources During GTKY Meetings at AC
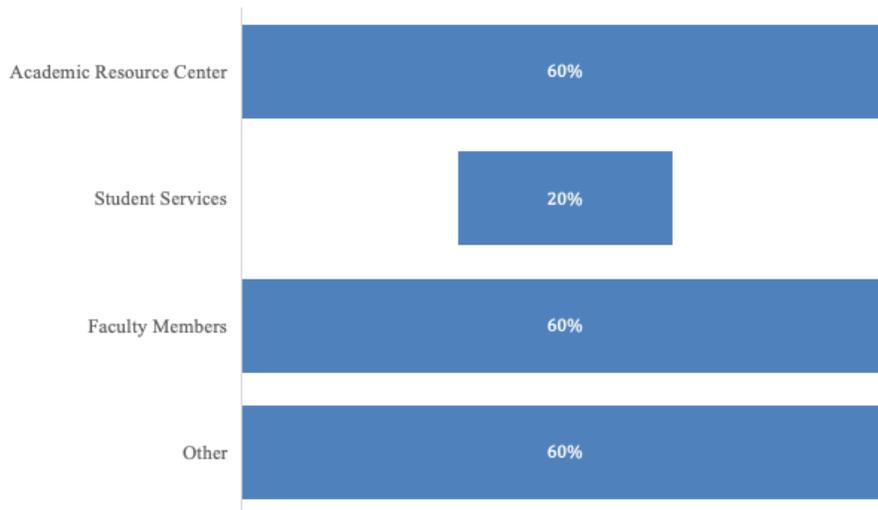
When reporting other resources to which faculty referred students, written responses indicated that faculty recommended students utilize them as their first line of support. Faculty communicated to students that (1) they could come to them with any problems that might impact their work, (2) they should come to them early when problems arise, and (3) they were willing to offer assistance in the form of extensions.

Faculty were given an opportunity to provide any additional feedback about each meeting, and written responses were again coded to themes. The most common of these themes was that the meetings were informative (41%) and assisted the faculty member in learning more about the student. In some cases, students identified their academic struggles, such as conveying specific details about their prior college experience and concerns with balancing school with other obligations; other times, students shared personal details such as being new to the area. In

25% of the written comments, faculty shared that the meetings were helpful in contributing to the openness of the faculty-student relationship and in helping the faculty member "get a sense of what [the student] is dealing with." Seventeen percent of comments revealed that students were appreciative of the conversations; one faculty commented that the student "appreciated the connection." Finally, 17% of the written responses noted that the meetings felt more casual and less effective than others, with rationales attributing to factors such as the student being "very shy."

When removing Maureen's results from the Get to Know You survey feedback, results remain fairly consistent. I was the one faculty member to report a meeting as "neutral" in terms of effectiveness, showing that the other faculty members involved in the initiative reported all their meetings as either "very helpful" (53%) or "helpful" (46%). Additionally, 100% of faculty participants (aside from me) believed the students shared information that would help them to better assist their students during the quarter, and 100% of their conversations included discussion of family/personal nature.

I reported that in 67% of my meetings information was shared that would aid me in better assisting the students during the quarter. The two responses that did not indicate this outcome came from the class with students I had taught previously and already knew. The most prevalent topic students shared during the meetings were focused on academic/study skills (50%) and time management (50%), while 33% shared personal/family information, and no students shared emotional/behavioral issues.

I found the meetings helpful in establishing an early relationship with the students, particularly those who were new. One student shared that he transferred from community college and experienced prior hurdles in time management and finding a quiet place to study

since he lived at home with siblings. Another student shared how motivated he was to do well, but that he was concerned with having to take some of his other classes online as he wanted all seated classes. Another student, who was brand new to the area, expressed comfort in receiving so much support from faculty and staff at AC, noting that he previously never took advantage of these resources in his educational pursuits, but would now. Meeting with the two students I previously taught had a different feel. I based conversations on things I already knew about them. They felt less effective in terms of gaining knowledge about their potential struggles; however, it did allow us to resume from our last quarter together and continue building a relationship.

Overall, faculty survey responses indicated that the Get to Know You meetings were largely successful at accomplishing the intended goal. Faculty found them helpful in establishing a relationship with students and learned information that helped them get to know their students and learn about aspects of the students that would enable them to provide better support throughout the quarter. While the meetings may have been difficult to schedule, faculty largely found them enjoyable and reported that they focused on building personal and academic connections.

Weekly Engagement Survey

Applewood College faculty were asked to complete the engagement survey each week of the quarter. A total of 67 surveys were reported (with a total of 47 surveys when my own data are excluded). Faculty made some attempt (one or more) at outreach to students in 94% of the weeks reported. When faculty reported outreach attempts to students, email was the most common method of communication (90% overall), followed by conducting outreach before or after class or during a break (46%), other (25%), phone (17%), and text messaging (6%).

Among faculty who reported "other," outreach efforts were commonly through the early alert system (which allows the faculty member to email the student with a record left for an advisor), the learning management system (which also has an option to deliver email to the student), video chat, or by enlisting colleague support to reach the student (such as student services, the registrar, or a department chair).

Of the 67 completed surveys, faculty reported that students initiated outreach in 85% of the weeks reported. Similar to faculty outreach attempts, students also used email as the most popular method of communication during those weeks when they initiated outreach (81%), followed by before or after class or during a break (25%), phone (14%), text messaging (9%), other (7%), and office hours (2%). Of the reported surveys, faculty reported that they used engagement activities 79% of the time, they did not use engagement 18% of the time reported, and 3% of the survey respondents did not answer the question of whether or not they used engagement strategies during the week (see Figure 16). When averaged as a collective group with seven of the eight classes represented (one faculty member did not respond), the faculty group reported the level of engagement in their classes as a 5.52 on a scale of 1-10 (0 = lowest engagement; 10 = highest engagement). When asked if they would continue to use engagement strategies in future classes, 9% of faculty did not respond to this question when completing the survey. Of those who did respond, 97% said they would continue to use engagement strategies long-term while 3% said they would not. The 3% represented two faculty members teaching different classes, and both of them reported that yes, they would continue using engagement strategies long-term in all the other weeks in which they responded to this question. This seems to indicate that these faculty experienced a week when the engagement strategy they attempted

was unsuccessful, and, although they would not replicate that same strategy in the future, it did

not mean that they would not continue to use engagement strategies overall.

Figure 16

Faculty Use of Engagement Strategies at Applewood College
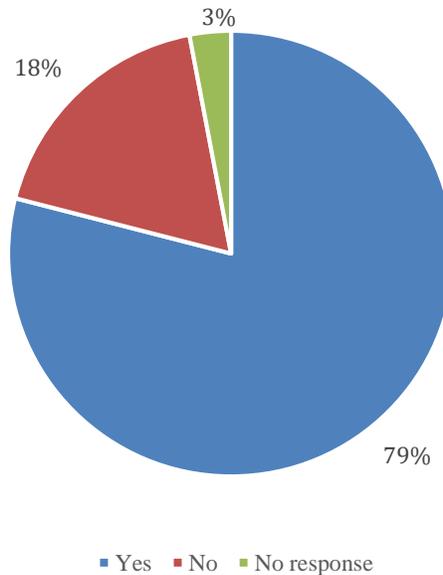
When asked why they would or would not continue to use engagement strategies, faculty

were given a write-in option to share feedback, which was then coded using descriptive and in

vivo coding. The class environment was a theme in 34% of the written responses with faculty

commenting that using engagement strategies made students more confident, less nervous, more

comfortable, and more relaxed. Twenty percent of faculty wrote that engagement strategies

contributed to the theme of class participation, further explaining that it seemed easier for

students to participate in discussions, open up, and share. In 12% of written responses, faculty

members commented on the effectiveness of engagement strategies, noting that they worked, but

also admitting that they take time to perfect. One faculty member commented that engagement

provides a "large benefit for relatively little effort." Ten percent of the written responses focused

on the theme of student-faculty connection with comments that engagement helped the teacher know their students and made the students more comfortable approaching them. In this area, I personally noted that opening the class with more personal conversations broke down barriers, particularly with shy students (a strategy I wish I had employed from the start of the initiative). In two responses (4%), faculty commented that smaller class sizes often made engagement challenging. One faculty commented that a small class can make it both easy and difficult to engage. Another two responses (4%) focused on the theme of support, noting that engagement aided the instructor in helping and encouraging the student to complete work.

In my own write-in responses for my classes, I focused more on how engagement connected to learning (represented in 16% of the overall written responses). I felt it increased my ability to gauge student learning, promoted more critical thinking, and that classroom engagement benefited students by allowing them to learn from their peers. I expressed that the students who were more engaged were also the ones performing better in class, and that I had trouble connecting to a couple of students who were shy or seemed disconnected from class. However, working with these students individually helped some open up. I experienced some frustration with not having group work due to social distancing restrictions. These restrictions challenged me to rethink the class structure to promote engagement, particularly for common activities such as peer review.

When given the opportunity to share any stories around the initiative, faculty largely wrote about benefits to the classroom community (30% of written responses centered around this theme). Faculty shared that their students exchanged phone numbers with one another and were building personal connections with the instructor. Challenges were also expressed regarding the classroom community, particularly as it related to class attendance inconsistencies. Due to

student drops or absences, faculty expressed that it was sometimes challenging to build community. Additionally, 15% of faculty wrote around the theme of COVID-19, expressing that they had students out with COVID-19 or that the social distancing restrictions challenged their ability to conduct group work. In two responses (10%), faculty wrote about personal/family themes, expressing that students shared personal information with faculty. One faculty member learned about a sick family member in hospice and another talked with a shy student about how challenging it is for her to open up. In these cases, responses indicated that faculty were making progress connecting with students on a personal level. In another 10% of responses, faculty wrote about support as a theme, expressing that students were appreciative of the instructor's assistance.

My own responses were more critical and focused around challenges presented (35% of total responses). Attendance was very low in my classes, and my first-quarter class experienced a significant drop rate. In addition, I discussed that scheduling Get to Know You meeting was more challenging than I expected, and that I was having trouble connecting to students in one class.

Of the faculty who did report on the balancing measure of rating their stress level, the average response showed a low rate of stress at 3.73 on a scale of 0-10 (0 = low stress; 10 = high stress). When faculty did report a stress level of 5 or more, the rationale was always personal; however, when my own stress level was higher than 5, the rationale was personal and professional workload. One faculty member did not report a stress level during any of the weeks in which a survey was submitted, and several surveys indicated faculty stress levels of 0. The accuracy of their reported stress level as a 0 is questionable, not only due to the fact that we were

in a pandemic, but also due to personal knowledge of other professional and personal responsibilities.

The key takeaways from the faculty engagement data show that faculty were conducting outreach to students and using engagement strategies in their classes. While faculty largely reported that they would continue to use engagement strategies and found them helpful in establishing a more relaxed and supportive classroom environment, faculty perception of classroom engagement was moderate. Challenges, such as low attendance and COVID-19 restrictions, were obstacles faculty faced during the initiative.

Student Survey

Only nine students attempted to take the student survey at the end of the quarter, an equivalent of just 18% of potential students in the initiative. Enrollment numbers, as reported by faculty, in the last week of class show that 49 students were represented in the classes conducting the initiative (down from 53 at the start of the initiative, meaning that four students likely dropped or withdrew from the classes at some point). Of the nine students who began the survey, only four consented to participate and completed the full survey, leaving just an 8% response rate from potential student participants. It is unclear why five students chose not to consent and complete the survey; however, they may have been overwhelmed by the consent statement, confused as to why they were being asked to participate in a study, or simply chose not to allow their data to be tracked.

Of those who did consent, two respondents were male, and two were female. Two were between 18 - 24, and the other two were between 25-34. Two were White, and two selected "two or more" as their race. None of the students were the first in their family to enter higher education. Two attended another college in the past, and this was the first college for the other

two. Two reported working part-time while the other two reported that they were not working while attending school. All four were full-time students.

  With the low number of the student responses, it is not possible to glean much from the student experience. Still, of those four students who did report, 100% of them confirmed that they did have a Get to Know You meeting; one rated it very beneficial, two found it beneficial, and one responded that it was somewhat beneficial. When asked if they felt a strong sense of community in the class, two strongly agreed that they did, one agreed, and one strongly disagreed. All four students strongly agreed that they felt encouraged to participate in class. Similarly, all four strongly agreed that they felt encouraged to reach out to their instructor with questions or concerns, and they all strongly agreed that they felt supported by their instructor. When asked if they were connected to other resources, three students were connected to student services and one to an advisor. As demonstrated in Figure 17, three of four students reported that they felt neither more nor less connected to their other instructors compared to the class in which they were reporting; one felt more connected to their instructor in the represented class. Three of four students felt more engaged in the class represented in the survey when compared to their other classes; one reported feeling neither more or less engaged. Write-in feedback was limited; just one student reported that the instructor constantly did her best to ensure students understood the material presented and that they had support when they needed it with additional resources such as Zoom calls.

Figure 17

Student Perception of Engagement and Connection in Participating Classes at AC (n=4)
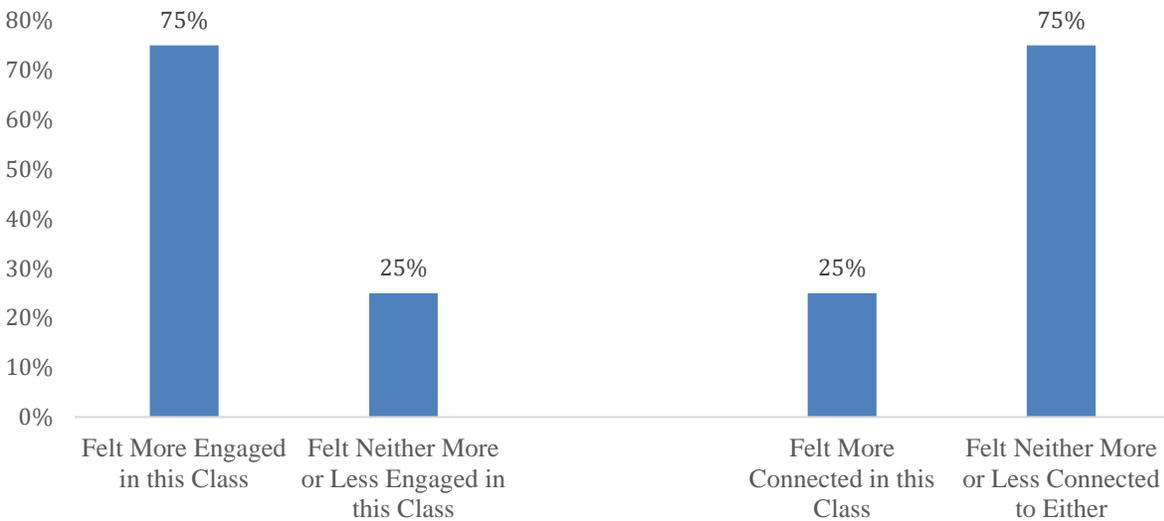
Overall, student feedback was largely positive. Students found the Get to Know You

meetings beneficial, found their instructor to be supportive, and felt engaged in the class.

Responses were mixed in terms of feeling a sense of community in the class, which somewhat

mirrors some of the faculty responses in terms of the challenges experienced in the initiative

during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Act

The Fall 2020 quarter brought many unexpected challenges, including lower than

expected ground course offerings and lower than expected enrollment in those ground classes.

At the same time, some students were thankful to have ground classes offered as they felt online

courses would have been too challenging for their learning style. In that respect, the premise

behind the initiative brought real value to those students who were attending seated classes

during the pandemic; yet it also brought challenges to the normal classroom structure with

students and faculty having to wear masks and sit at a distance. COVID-19-restrictions

eliminated the ability for classes to engage in group work and relied more on whole class

discussion for engagement. Simultaneously, some students were either forced to take classes online due to limited offerings or they opted for online classes due to concerns about COVID-19 or having other personal conflicts, such as caring for children at home, which prevented them from attending ground classes. As such, in a second round of the initiative at AC under the same circumstances, it would be beneficial to seek out more classes to capture a larger group of faculty and students.

The small group of faculty who attended the live professional development session created an intimate meeting where we spent a great deal of time discussing our students' needs and struggles. With just three participants, it felt more conducive to have discussion rather than to use chat; however, that put us over time in some areas and then some topics were rushed because of this. In a second round of the initiative, I would circulate a poll to find the best time for most faculty to be able to meet together. As I saw great benefit in the discussion that did occur during the live session, I would also scale back the length of the presentation to accommodate more conversation and engagement. Professional development is encouraged at AC; however, it is largely focused on opportunities for faculty to stay current in their fields rather than to build capacity in pedagogy. Faculty meetings where discussions center on retention, student support, and equity are not common. I felt we needed more time to come to a common understanding through discussion. Continuing these discussions through ongoing professional development at AC is an important goal for the institution.

As faculty began to offer and hold their Get to Know You meetings, many found it difficult to encourage students to attend. Students attending seated classes were less likely to spend extra time on campus due to COVID-19-restrictions, and many online students were already overwhelmed with virtual meetings. During the fall quarter, faculty and student support

staff reported that students overall were less engaged and more stressed. In a second round of the initiative, I would seek administrative approval to offer extra credit for attendance or even build the GTKY meeting into the course as a required activity receiving credit. It is important to be mindful of the additional time commitment this poses to both students and faculty; however, the outcome appears to be worth this investment. With small class sizes at AC, this is less of a concern for the faculty. Thinking about the initiative at a larger scale across other institutions, it may be valuable to limit the class size for first-term classes to allow faculty the necessary time to build enhanced relationships with their students.

It would have also been helpful to receive more candid feedback from faculty regarding their successes or struggles with student participation in the Get to Know You meetings. Adding a question on the survey asking faculty to report strategies used to promote the meetings and the results of these efforts would help us identify any strategies that were more effective than others. Additionally, including a focus group meeting would have allowed us to receive more thorough feedback and to develop an understanding of faculty experiences outside of the write-in responses. Finally, developing a better understanding of what specific engagement strategies were used, and what their outcomes were, would be beneficial.

Intervention Progress Between Different Sites

Faculty Participants' Perception

Faculty participants from both CCC and AC collectively represent similar demographics with the majority being White females having worked in higher education for at least six years. As shown in Figure 18, while some CCC faculty chose equity and opportunity gap as the most important topics covered, no faculty from AC selected these topics. However, Laura has presented similar material on two previous occasions. Several of the participants attended these other presentations and were familiar with these concepts. For faculty at AC, this was new material. While faculty from both CCC and AC selected "maybe" when asked if equity and opportunity gap were relevant to their teaching, all faculty at both locations felt the importance of faculty/student relationships was relevant, also shown in Figure 18 by a total of six faculty reporting this as the most helpful topic.

Figure 18

Most Helpful Topics of the Professional Development Session at AC and CCC
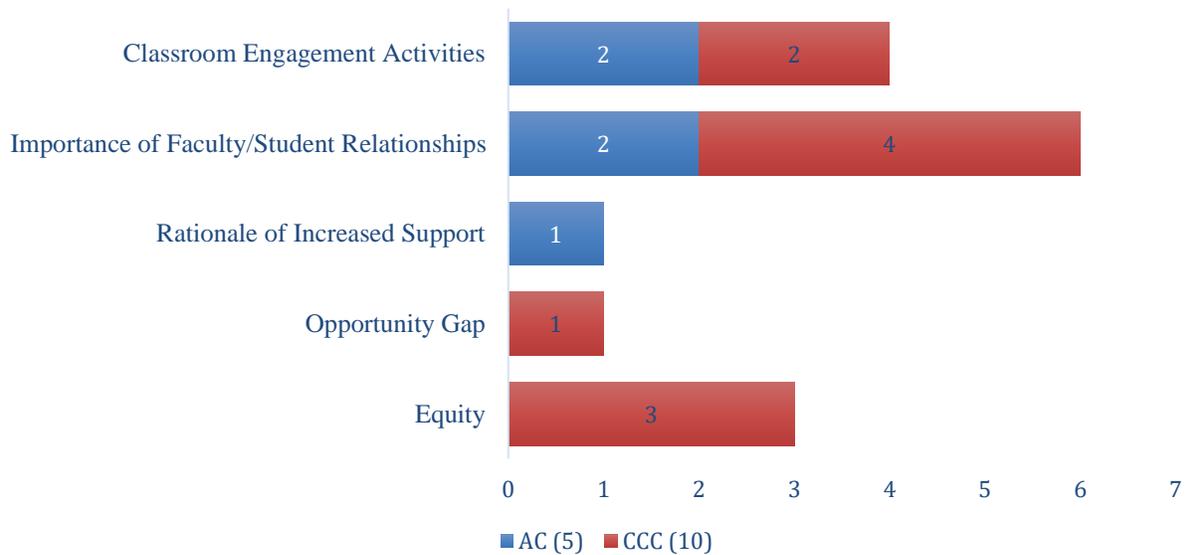
Participants from both sites reported a varying level of using engagement activities and initiating outreach in their previous classes. While the majority of faculty from both locations largely felt confident or very confident in their abilities to build relationships with students, only two faculty (both from CCC) reported feeling unconfident in this area. Overall, when both faculty groups are analyzed holistically, it seems there was an understanding of the importance of this type of initiative, some acceptance of equity and the opportunity gap, and acknowledgement of the value in engagement strategies; however, room for improvement is also apparent.

Get to Know You Meetings

Student participation from both CCC and AC in GTKY meetings proved to be challenging. While AC had a 40% turnout rate for the meetings, CCC had 22.5%. The lower number at CCC may be attributed to the fact that most students took classes either online or in the Hyflex format, meaning fewer students were on campus to meet face-to-face. While AC experienced a higher turnout of students participating in GTKY meetings, 90% of those meetings represented seated classes, where it may be easier to ask a student to stay after class or even speak with them during a class break. Drawing from Maureen's experiences, her smaller class sizes and the fact that they were face-to-face enabled her to pull students out of class and meet with them while other students worked on assignments. This ability to hold the meetings during class time removed the barrier students had in terms of scheduling, something that may be difficult to replicate on a larger scale. Laura's participation was also higher as she offered students extra credit for attending, which seemed to entice participation.

Across both institutions, faculty found the meetings largely helpful or very helpful in establishing a relationship with the student (see Figure 19). Faculty from both institutions also

overwhelmingly reported that information was shared during the meetings that would help the faculty better assist their students over the course of the quarter/semester, particularly around academics, stress, and administrative issues. About a quarter of student participants in Get to Know You meetings at both institutions showed signs that they needed additional assistance, another point of consistency between CCC and AC (29% at CCC and 24% at AC). At both institutions, faculty encouraged students to reach out to other faculty (44% at CCC and 60% at AC) or themselves (comments at both CCC and AC). This supports our idea that faculty relationships are a key to retention and that faculty have multiple opportunities to interact with students. Comments from both institutions reveal that the meetings were informative around academics and personal stories. Both institutions also had several comments that meetings with some students were more reserved, so exploring strategies for connecting with shy students is needed.

Figure 19

Helpfulness of GTKY Meetings in Establishing a Relationship at AC and CCC
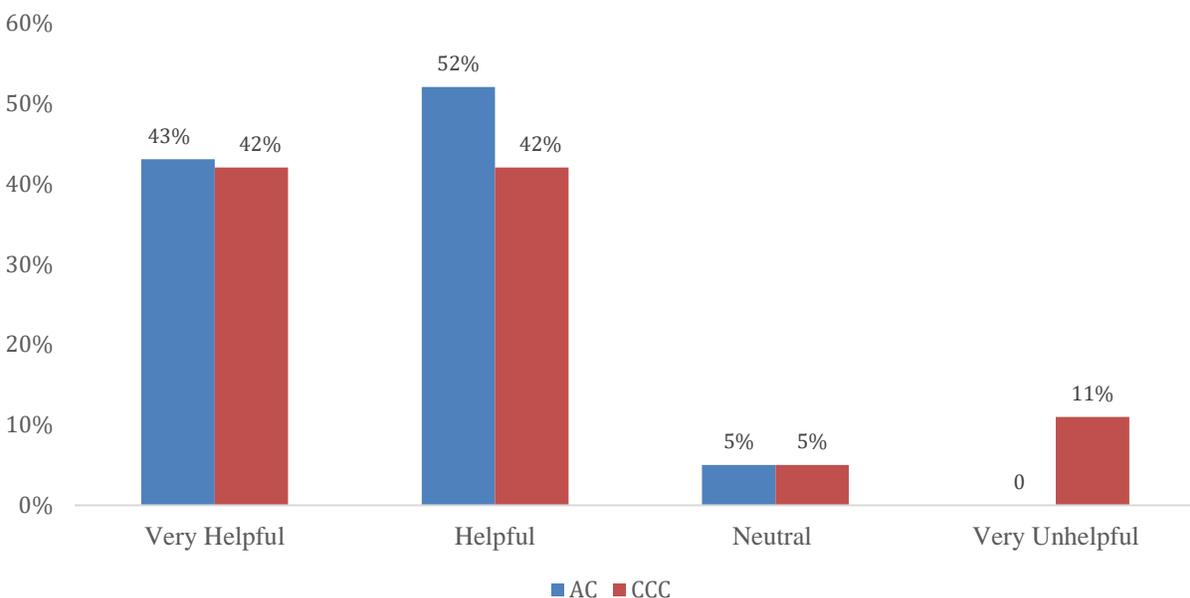
While COVID-19 restrictions likely contributed to the challenges with scheduling GTKY meetings, improvement is needed in building enthusiasm around the meetings and helping faculty and students see the value in them. Setting them more as an expectation built into the class rather than an option may help increase participation. Because the faculty feedback from the meetings that were held was overwhelmingly positive, improvement in student participation is an integral goal for the next PDSA cycle.

Weekly Engagement Survey

Survey results at both institutions indicated that faculty initiated weekly outreach efforts to students (AC faculty reached out to students 94% of the weeks when data were reported, and CCC faculty conducted outreach 92% of the weeks reported). The most common method of outreach at both institutions was email. However, upon reviewing our results, we realized that we needed to define outreach reporting more clearly as some instructors included items such as grading and posting course announcements while others did not. In another PDSA cycle, we would more clearly define outreach as initiating individualized contact with students beyond normal teaching expectations.

At both institutions, instructors rated the engagement level of their students as an average of about 5 (5.52 AC and 5.84 CCC). AC reported using engagement strategies 79% of the time while CCC reported using them 63% of the time. Instructors at CCC were navigating teaching online and learning new teaching strategies, thus defining and using engagement strategies may have been more challenging. This new virtual classroom makes instructors rethink ideas of engagement, such as using the chat feature instead of a class discussion or moving into online breakout groups versus sitting at tables. Navigating this new modality can be overwhelming for

both students and faculty; however, both are also likely to become more confident with it as they have more experience using available resources. Additionally, in the HyFlex format, having some students in the classroom and others online can make discussion and interaction between students challenging.

One difference between institutions was that the stress level at AC was reported as 3.73 while at CCC it was 5.71 on a 0-10 scale. One reason could be that not as many faculty at AC reported their stress levels, and several who did report entered a 0, which may not be an accurate portrayal of stress. Faculty at CCC cited professional workload aside from teaching as the most common reason for stress, whereas AC faculty reported personal reasons for any high levels of stress. In the comments for CCC, technology was one of the largest sources of stress as many of them were navigating the HyFlex and online teaching model. COVID-19 restrictions forced the changes in instruction at CCC and contributed to the increased stress load of faculty. At both institutions, faculty teaching ground classes had to wear masks while teaching and maintain a distance from their students. They also had to take on the additional duty of enforcing students to wear masks and to keep a distance from one another that may have contributed to reported stress.

When the CCC and AC engagement survey data are reviewed together, we find that results are similar with the exception of reported stress levels. Faculty typically do provide some form of outreach to students on a weekly basis and they are using engagement strategies more often than they are not. In a second PDSA cycle that provides faculty with more experience teaching in the specific modality under the same restrictions, we would hope engagement strategies would increase as faculty would have more experience and lessons learned from the

previous semester/quarter. Because the sense of classroom engagement was rated moderately at both institutions, we would also expect to see a positive increase in this area with a second cycle.
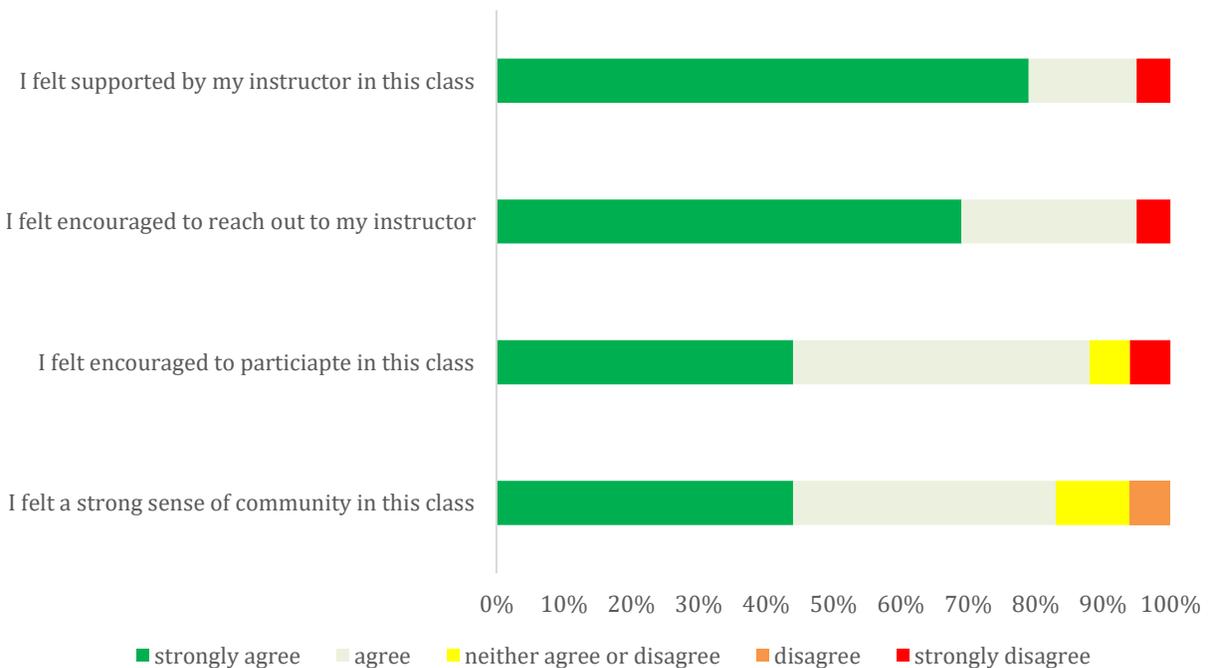
Student Survey

Both institutions had low response rates to the student survey with only 8% of potential participants completing the survey at AC and 10% at CCC. The student surveys confirmed that Get to Know You occurred (4 at AC and 15 at CCC). As shown in Figure 20, when combined, 70% of the reporting students found the GTKY meeting either very beneficial or somewhat beneficial. Seventy-five percent of the combined students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they felt a strong sense of community in this class, and 80% of the combined students reporting felt more engaged in the participating class versus their other classes. Comments from students indicate that they felt supported by their instructors at each institution.

Figure 20

Combined Student Feedback from Student Survey

The results point to a favorable experience in the classes participating; however, the low response rate prevents us from drawing strong conclusions from the reported data. The students who felt motivated to respond may have enjoyed the class or developed a strong relationship with the instructor and felt inclined to represent the class in a positive manner. However, collecting student feedback is typically challenging and institutions often struggle to have high participation in the standard end of course evaluations, particularly when the format is electronic (Chapman & Jones, 2017). In the next PDSA cycle, identifying strategies to increase student survey participation is an important goal. Still, based on the responses received, the Get to Know You meetings do show to be a promising class asset from the student perspective.

Influence of COVID-19

The timing of this initiative presented several challenges that we could not initially foresee due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although faculty entered the initiative with more stressors than normal, the emphasis on increasing student support and engagement was all the more relevant and necessary. The pandemic has forced us to transform the way we deliver instruction and engage with students. Not only have faculty and administrators had to rethink the logistics of classroom delivery, but we have also had to identify ways to support students who are coping with extreme stress and negotiating a new way of living. Even for those classes that did continue to run on-ground, social distancing measures were put in place that limited typical engagement strategies; activities such as group work or pairing students was no longer possible. In addition, faculty faced various personal stressors such as worrying about exposure and caring for children or family members. In short, COVID-19 impacted and posed challenges to some extent for each class in the investigation.

In general, many students who are suddenly transitioning to online learning face limitations due to fewer in-person interactions, less opportunity for collaboration, and the lack of familiarity with online classes. While online learning proves to be a good or even better option for students who choose it (Burke, 2020), the reality is that COVID-19 removed the choice for many students and forced those who would normally opt for in person classes to enroll in online classes. For many students who had no other choice, taking online classes decreased their motivation and increased feelings of isolation as it restricted their ability to connect to the college, their classmates, and their instructors during this important milestone in their lives (Burke, 2020).

To further complicate these struggles in the context of this investigation and from reports across institutions of higher education nationally, many instructors did not have a wealth of synchronous online teaching experience, leaving them to enter the semester adapting to a new mode of teaching with few strategies to engage online learners. Still, while the initial vision of the initiative changed to adapt to our reality under COVID-19 safety precautions, it also presented opportunities for us to consider how we might reframe our vision of student support and engagement, both in virtual formats and during times of extreme stress. The pandemic highlighted how much students value instructor support and how instructors need to make thoughtful attempts to reach out to students to determine the types of assistance they need to be successful. In so many areas of our lives, COVID-19 has reminded us of the importance of larger support systems, personalized attention, and empathic understanding, lessons that lay the foundation for retention work.

Outcomes

Our proposal had three initiative outcomes. The first was an increased knowledge and awareness about the importance of connection in the classroom. The professional development survey responses indicated that 100% of faculty were aware of the importance of faculty-student relationships, demonstrating that this outcome was met. Additionally, qualitative data collected from write-in responses on the Get to Know You meeting surveys indicate that faculty largely reported the meetings were enjoyable and helpful, demonstrating that they found value and importance in building early relationships with students. Written feedback on the engagement surveys also indicates that faculty found it helpful to develop an increased understanding of their students' lives and found it useful to connect with students more personally and informally. This initiative increased awareness among participants on issues of equity and sense of belonging and encouraged participants to take the time to get to know their students outside of class and start to build connections.

The second outcome was to compare pass rates between fall 2020 and fall 2019 classes. Due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic in fall 2020, this would not be a valid comparison. Because many classes moved to an online or HyFlex format and any in-person classes that did run were structured under social distancing restrictions, attempting to compare classes to the previous year, when none of these restrictions were in place and neither students nor faculty were altered by COVID-19, would not provide meaningful results.

Our third outcome was an increased sense of belonging felt by students in participating classes. Due to the low student response rate, this was difficult to determine. At CCC, 81.25% of students felt more engaged in the class participating in the initiative compared to other classes, and 56% of the students felt more connected to the instructor whose class was in the initiative

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compared to their other instructors, even considering the challenges presented during the pandemic. Of the AC students who took the student survey, 75% felt more engaged in the participating class compared to other classes (with 25% feeling neither more nor less connected compared to other classes). At AC, 25% of students felt more connected to their instructor teaching the class as part of the initiative (75% felt neither more nor less connected). These results show that the initiative has the potential to positively impact students, particularly when it comes to their sense of engagement to the class. While these results are promising for increasing a student's sense of belonging, a larger sample size is needed to develop more conclusive results.

Impacts

Impact of Get to Know You Meetings

We sought to identify what, if any, impact the Get to Know You meetings had on the classes involved in the initiative. While faculty across both institutions struggled to have high numbers of students participate in these meetings (particularly for students in the online modality), results demonstrate that the GTKY meetings have potential to impact engagement and warrant further investigation. To explore the relationship between GTKY meetings and engagement, a Pearson correlation was calculated using participants who reported on both the GTKY meetings and engagement (six at each institution). At CCC, we found a moderate, but not statistically significant, positive correlation, $r(4)=.55$, $p=.24$, between the percentage of students an instructor met with and engagement level in the class (see Figure 21). At AC we found a positive, but not statistically significant relationship, $r(4)=.46$, $p=.35$ (see Figure 22), and, when CCC and AC institutional data were combined, we found a positive relationship, $r(10)=.37$, $p=.23$ (see Figure 23). This represents a small sample size of six at both CCC and AC and 12 combined. The positive correlation is weak, but with a larger sample size we may see a stronger correlation between GTKY meetings and engagement.

Figure 21

Correlation of Students who Attended GTKY Meetings with Engagement at CCC (n=6)
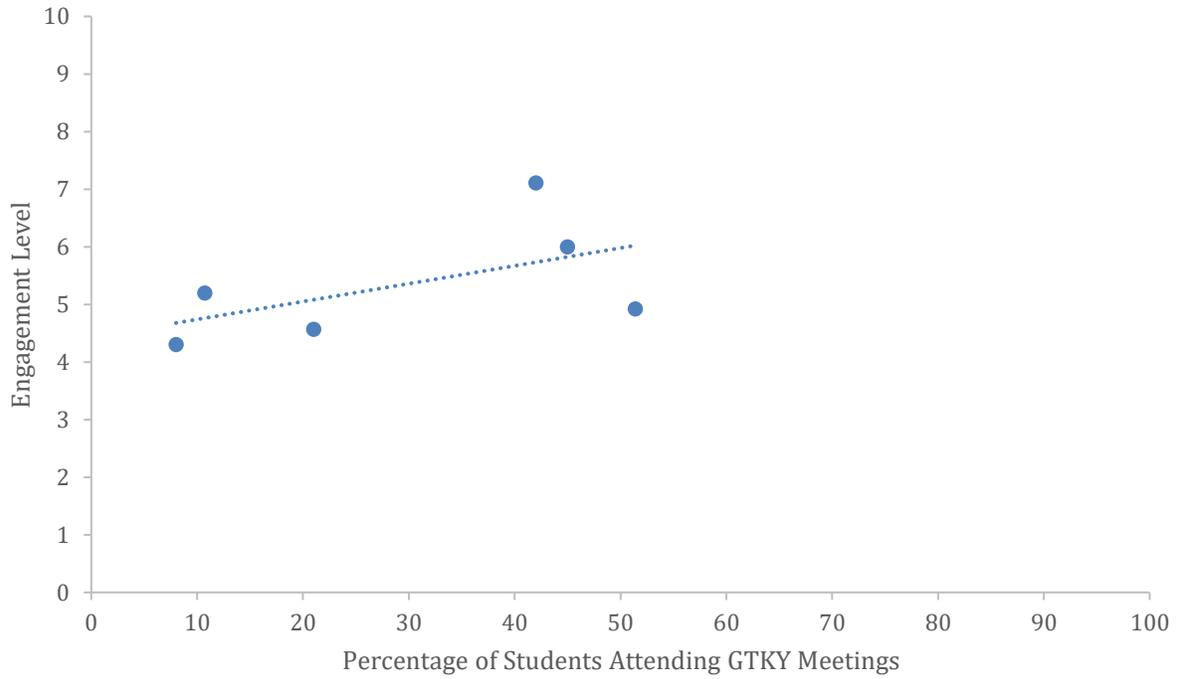
Figure 22

Correlation of Students who Attended GTKY Meetings with Engagement at AC (n=6)
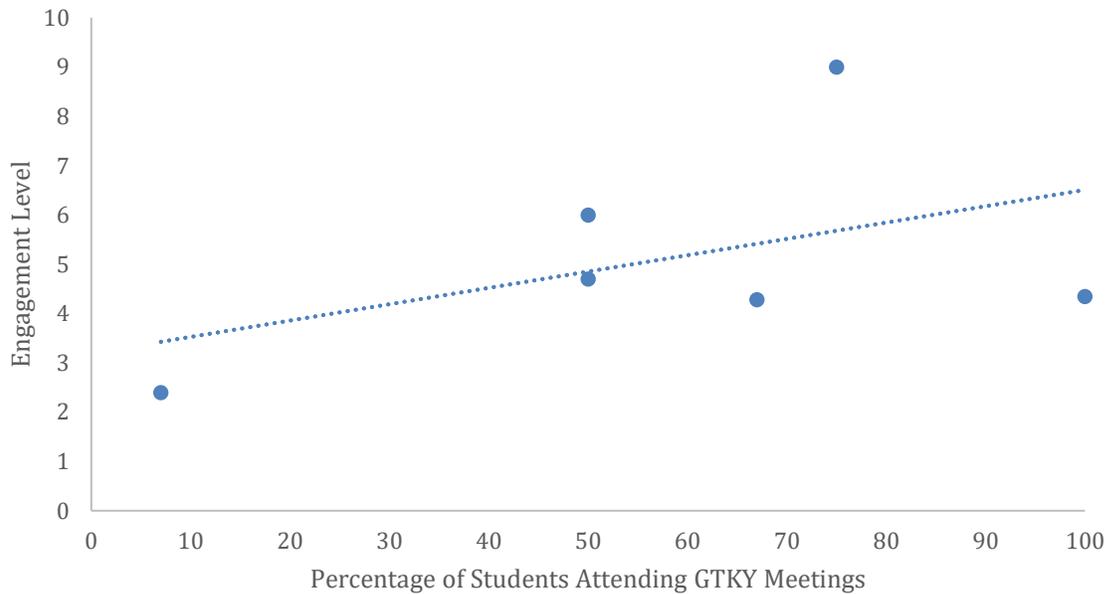
Figure 23

Correlation of Students who Attended GTKY meetings with Engagement at CCC and AC (n=12)
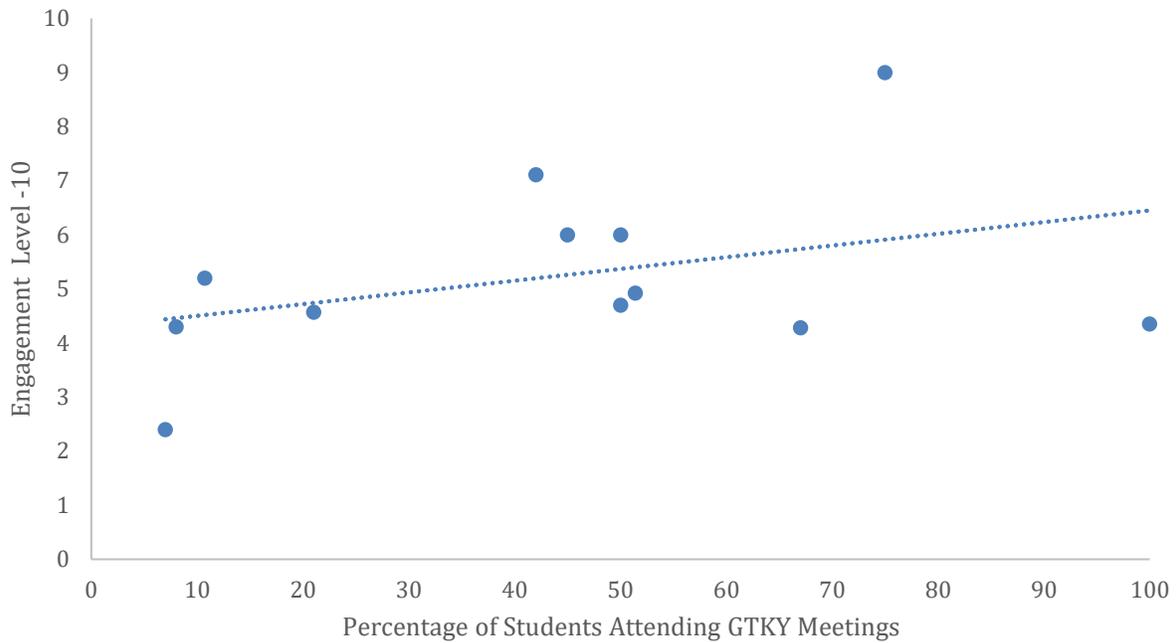
We wanted to discover if the GTKY meetings had an impact on instructor outreach in the classroom. We questioned if forming an early relationship would increase instructor outreach to students throughout the quarter. However, as we reviewed the data, we realized this component was not well defined in the survey and needed more specific parameters. For example, some faculty counted grading and course announcements as outreach while others did not. We envisioned that grading and course announcements were standard expectations of the instructor role and anticipated engagement to be more individualized to students' needs. Some faculty had very high numbers while others (who were likely doing similar work) were showing lower numbers, making a comparison inaccurate. Thus, we did not report the overall outreach numbers as they were reported so differently. In the next cycle of this initiative, we would more clearly define our vision of outreach as additional, individualized support or outreach to students based on their unique needs.

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When brainstorming and planning this initiative, the early alert system was one of the areas we both wanted to enhance. The GTKY meetings show promise as a way to support the early alert system. At both institutions, instructors identified students (29% at CCC and 24% at AC) at the GTKY meeting who seemed likely to need support and referred them to campus resources such as other faculty, the student success center, and the academic resource center. These meetings happened early in the session, so they have the potential to connect students to resources early and supplement the early alert systems at both institutions.

Impact on Student Perception

The results of the student survey are limited due to low response rates at both institutions. However, the feedback reported was positive. The majority of students who completed the student survey at CCC and AC reported that the GTKY meeting was very beneficial or beneficial in getting off to a good start in the class. They felt supported by their instructor in the class and felt more engaged in this class compared to other classes. Similarly, all of AC students and the majority of CCC students felt both encouraged to reach out to their instructor and to participate in class. The student comments about how often the instructors initiated outreach were all positive and included terms such as "appropriate amount of times," "many times," and "a lot." Increasing student participation in the survey, perhaps by asking students to do the survey right at the beginning or end of a class, using a paper copy for ground classes, or adding a focus group, would assist with getting a better idea the impact the initiative had on students.

Overall Impact

Our initiative was a good first test of a PDSA cycle at two institutions, and it provides encouraging results that demonstrate value in conducting a second PDSA cycle with modifications. Large organizations typically require more than one PDSA cycle for purposeful

improvement (Langely, et al., 2009), and this is certainly true for initiatives such as ours

conducted at institutions of higher education. Developing faculty understanding of the value and

opportunity in building more personal relationships with students as they transition into college

is an integral step in retention initiatives that target first-year students. Next, the GTKY

meetings, which were positively received by both faculty and students, have potential to support

relationship building. Finally, an added emphasis on engagement strategies points toward

increasing student sense of belonging in the class.

Regardless of modality, an instructor's ability to create opportunities to increase sense of

belonging and engagement is an important focal point for all institutions of higher education. It

is of critical importance now as we are grappling with the effects of COVID-19 on student

learning and college enrollment. Postsecondary enrollment decline is a concern for institutions

of higher education, one that has become even more alarming with the impact of COVID-19. As

rising freshmen often envision their college experience to include face-to-face classes, many

hopeful first-year students chose to postpone college entry rather than take online classes in fall

2020 (Nadworny, 2020). Fall 2020 saw a 3.6% decline in undergraduate postsecondary

enrollment overall, which is more than twice the rate of decline from the previous year (NSCRC,

2020). Among institutions of higher education, community colleges experienced the highest

decline in enrollment, and freshman enrollment saw the largest drop at 13.1% from fall 2019

overall with a 21% decrease at public two-year institutions (NSCRC, 2020). These declines,

referred to as "unprecedented" by National Student Clearinghouse leader Doug Shapiro, have

profound impacts on the future generation's education, skill set, and employability, not to

mention the economy as a whole (Nadworny, 2020). Along with impacts from the pandemic,

colleges are facing a looming "demographic cliff," a peak of high school graduates that will occur in 2025 and then decline sharply through 2037 (Nadworny, 2020).

Declining enrollment means many institutions of higher education are facing budget cuts, which could result in decreased employment for faculty, in addition to decreased funding for technology and supplies. Losing a generation of college students has lasting effects on society overall, affecting individual families, communities, and the economy. The potential institutional, societal, and personal impacts make the call for an increase in retention initiatives imperative. Initiatives that maximize the potential of relationship-building and classroom engagement are not only promising, but also come at a low-cost. With a stronger initiative design and clearer expectations of faculty involvement, a second PDSA cycle has the potential to meet the goal of increasing students' sense of belonging.

Implications and Recommendations

Lessons for Implementation

For the future intervention design, we recommend three elements: professional development, GTKY meetings, and three specific engagement strategies to be used and assessed by faculty participating in the initiative (see Figure 24). We recommend shortening the investigation to the first six weeks of the CCC semester and the first five weeks of the AC quarter so that the initiative would occur during the first half of the term.

Figure 24

Recommended Initiative Design for Next PDSA Cycle
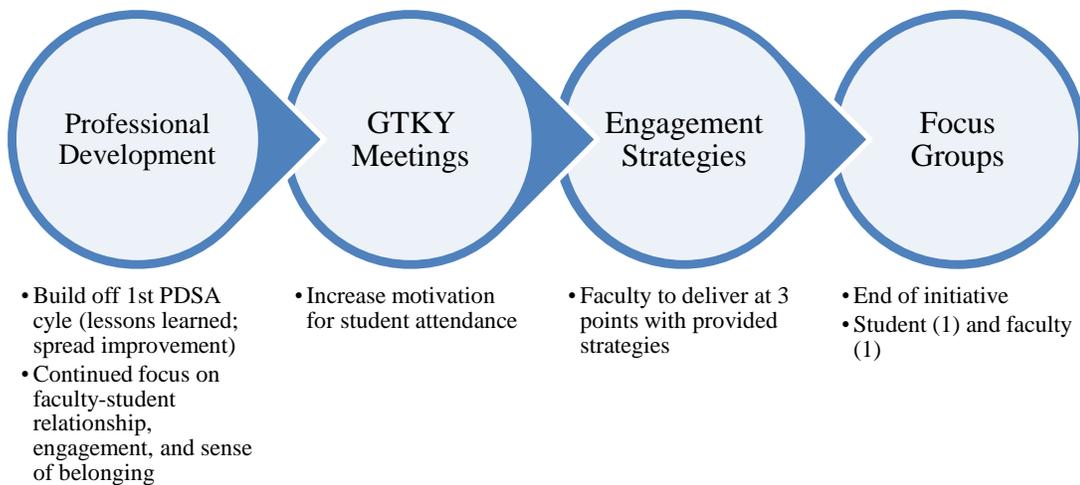
In the professional development, we would introduce three engagement strategies and ask faculty to utilize each of them in their classes. These include: 1) Snowball Activity: Each student writes a response to a prompt provided to the class, which they then ball up (the response should not show their name). Next, students form a circle or stand facing one another in two lines. They then throw their ball across the room so it is caught or picked up by another student. Each student then reads the response aloud. This allows all members of the class to have their

ideas shared anonymously, which usually leads to a variety of perspectives, a realization of common understanding, and shared information that might not have previously been expressed due to student hesitancy. 2) Chain Notes: The instructor writes a variety of questions on individual pieces of paper (one question per paper) and distributes them to each individual student. The student then records an answer and passes it along to the next student until each question has a variety of anonymous responses. Once the questions have been distributed enough to receive multiple responses, the passing ends and each student reports back on the question and answers. The class then works together to identify patterns, differences, and missing pieces. 3) Interpreting Quotes or Scenarios: The instructor passes around quotes or specific scenarios based on the class subject matter. Students are put in pairs or small groups to discuss the quote or scenario (what is its significance or meaning, or how would you approach this scenario?). After group time, the instructor projects each quote or scenario and the groups summarize their conversation to the rest of the class for discussion.

Faculty would provide feedback, via a survey, each week when the engagement strategy was used. This would allow us to more directly understand how engagement was conducted in the classroom and the outcome of that specific strategy. In this model, faculty would complete fewer surveys, but a focus group would be added as a point of data collection. As emphasized by Hargreaves, et al. (2015), using data in conjunction with professional experience and judgment is crucial to improvement, and therefore seeking more specific feedback regarding faculty experiences through focus groups is valuable. Students would also be surveyed at the end of the initiative to assess their experience and participate in a focus group.

The ideal way to secure faculty fidelity is to require instructor participation in selected first-year classes. In addition, for classes selected for the initiative, we suggest limiting class size

to 20 to help instructors have time to cultivate relationships, with a lower cap of 15 for English or other grading-intensive classes. To compare data more easily between institutions, we would identify key first-year classes to be included that are equivalent across institutions. For instance, a first-year English class or an introduction to business class, offered in the same delivery method, could be selected to allow a better comparison between the two sites.   Offering students some incentive to take the survey, or administering it and the focus group in class, would help with response rates.

We suggest that a small pilot initiative be conducted over the summer term for two instructors at each site to better understand how the implementation would work. Then the fall semester would be the next PDSA cycle, which would implement any lessons learned from the summer. Due to the timing of our proposal, followed by the start of the pandemic in spring 2020, we were not able to conduct a small initial cycle; however, we realize the usefulness this offers.

If possible, participating in the GTKY meeting should be required or earn a student extra credit. Data from the professional development survey indicate that instructors were not routinely meeting individually with students in their classes prior to the initiative (at CCC, 70% did not meet with each student individually; at AC, 60% did not meet with each student individually). Further, some instructors report that they typically only reach out if there is an academic need (60% AC and 50% CCC). If the GTKY meeting were required, participation would increase. This would give the opportunity to connect students to resources early and establish an early relationship helping the student feel more comfortable reaching out to the instructor.

Administrative suggestions include the following: give each site a separate copy of the survey to make it easier to separate the data by institution, give the instructors a code when they consent to participate in the initiative so that the researcher does not have to de-identify the data, connect the student surveys back to a particular class so that the researcher could more easily see if the instructors who did the most GTKY meetings experienced any differences in engagement or sense of belonging, clearly define outreach and engagement in faculty surveys, and, if two researchers are involved, deliver the professional development sessions together.

Lessons for Leadership

Leaders of higher education institutions, to a large extent, create the culture and atmosphere for student success. According to Bensimon (2005), the structures and culture at an institution can either promote or inhibit learning. Leaders must evaluate the institutional culture to determine whether or not it promotes learning and a sense of belonging. We must ask ourselves if we cultivate an environment that supports students in their transition to college and determine areas where improvement is necessary. As leaders, we seek to work within our roles to not only promote learning, but to challenge and improve existing structures that may inhibit faculty and student opportunities to be successful in college.

A key result from this experience is the importance of gathering stakeholder input and support to solve an institutional problem. For us, the design team was instrumental in offering differing perspectives on the project and creating interest and belief in the possibilities of the initiative. In alignment with the social change model of leadership, it is important that leaders seek out a variety of voices, particularly of underrepresented groups, when trying to make a change (Roberts, 2017). As we plan initiatives in the future, we will remember to seek diverse perspectives at our institutions. As leaders attempting to change a process or a culture, we must

take stakeholder perspective into account and help the group champion a common purpose. For many in education the common purpose is "the hope of helping to make a difference" (Skendall, 2017, p.19). Our design teams were committed to making improvements in the student experience.

We also value the role that faculty play in student success, and we believe they are an instrumental resource in first-year retention initiatives. Faculty workload is often under scrutiny due to added responsibilities and, in some cases, class sizes. Leading retention initiatives that involve faculty as key stakeholders requires leaders to determine if faculty have the time and resources to promote student success. For example, does the class size allow enough time to cultivate relationships? Regarding administrative load, are faculty given enough time to develop an engaging curriculum? If we are not able to confirm that faculty do have these resources, then leaders need to reexamine how our institutional culture must change in order to support faculty so that they can better support students.

It is vital that leaders understand the constraints the institutional culture places on faculty to combat problems as large as student retention. As expressed by Robinson and Donald (2015), "constraints are not obstacles to be overcome but conditions that enable problem solving" (p. 96). Cultivating student relationships, consistently improving class lesson plans to include more engagement, and establishing a supportive environment of belonging are necessary components to the first-year class. However, we must honestly admit that they take time, practice, and dedication, which faculty often feel constrained to find. Yet, as leaders, if we believe and value relationship building, engagement, and belonging, we must ground it in our institutional foundation through policies and practices that provide time and space for it. We must remove or alleviate the constraints that threaten success in these areas.

It is our belief that meaningful retention strategies, which include faculty as key stakeholders, are of integral importance to the institutional culture. Encouraging faculty to develop relationships and personal connections with students has the ability to help retain students. While leaders have to balance the cost of fewer students in a class, smaller classes that allow faculty to build relationships have the potential to help students learn about and navigate the college culture. We must not only encourage faculty to take on the roles of empowerment and institutional agents in a quest to help students navigate college (Bensimon, 2007; Pendakur, 2016), but we must also develop their capacity to see this as an integral part of their job, particularly for first-year instructors. Addressing knowledge deficits and building faculty capacity by funding and promoting professional development is integral to institutional growth. Leaders must decide what is most important and look for strategies to retain the students who do decide to attend higher education.

We continue to be guided by social change leadership, which posits that successful leadership relies on the assistance of a team to create positive, purposeful, and socially responsible change (Komives & Wagner, 2017). In this sense, we believe that leadership must be collaborative, based in shared values, and intended to promote improvement. As we reflect on the lessons learned in order to spread the improvement process, we are motivated by the early adopters who participated in this first PDSA cycle. We agree with Lumby and Coleman's (2007) assertion that "all educators are potentially leaders, in that all may create followers by influencing those around them" (p. 2). Because many faculty reported positive responses to the concepts presented in the professional development and shared positive outcomes from the initiative, we find there is potential in spreading a positive change from this work.

We aim to help establish educational environments as defined by Fullan (2018), where collaborative effort between teachers and administration is one of the key drivers in making successful change. Bringing groups together harnesses social capital and results in more successful change than individual efforts (Fullan, 2018). As such, a second PDSA cycle would start with acknowledging the lessons learned from this initiative and building investment among faculty by identifying improvement ideas for a second round. We value the time and commitment that faculty invested in this initiative, and we know that, moving forward, they are instrumental to helping us interpret results and assisting us in making decisions about the future of the initiative. Faculty are powerful contributors to help us learn, grow, and improve the initiative to ultimately create a change.

Laura's Reflection

As we reflect on our experience as leaders and scholar practitioners at our respective institutions, we have learned several concepts that will guide our practice as we move forward in our own leadership journey. For me, Laura, I serve as a Chair of Math and Science at CCC, so I am a bridge between faculty and leadership working to share faculty voices with administration and enforce expectations among faculty. My role is varied, but my primary responsibilities are to supervise full-time and adjunct faculty, teach physical education classes, advise students, serve on committees, work with various programs on campus to meet math and science class offering needs, and engage with community partners.

From the disquisition experience, I gained insight on the power of faculty coming together to support an initiative, as well as the challenges of getting widespread support for an idea. Inspiring faculty to believe in an idea during a stressful time period proved to be challenging. However, my college community is very encouraging, and I have received a lot of

support in this journey. I am truly grateful to all the participants and acknowledge that the pandemic made it difficult for some to participate who were interested.

Participating and reviewing the data from the GTKY meetings supported the idea that getting to know students at the beginning of the class can improve a faculty member's instruction. It was exciting to hear about this idea at a conference and eventually add it into our own practice. Often I hear ideas, but this time I had the chance to put it into action. I found that reflecting on my own data was an illuminating experience and I was reminded of the importance of taking the time to self-reflect on a regular basis. Habitual consideration of one's values and beliefs is an element of the social change model that stands out to me as a participant of the initiative (Early & Fincher, 2017). Moving forward, I would like to continue to support faculty and bring attention to social justice issues in education, thereby empowering faculty to move forward and create positive change. Our small initiative did not transform the world, but, like the story of the Star Thrower that we shared in the professional development, perhaps it made a difference for one faculty member and aided them in a new perspective.

Maureen's Reflection

As I, Maureen, reflect upon the process, I come away from this experience understanding the value of the scholar-practitioner role to a much deeper extent. As chair of the General Education Department at AC, my job responsibilities require me to teach first-year students, support full-time faculty and adjuncts in the Department, develop curriculum, and work closely with the Student Services Department to establish an environment of support for our pre-program students. Often, these various roles collide and uncover the complexities of the institution, showing that it's parts do not always work in harmony, and that we sometimes act in ways that contradict our own goals. The multiple lenses that come with my various roles

afforded a better view at the cracks in the system, the causes of those, and insight into how they might be addressed from a leadership perspective. When adding the role of scholar to this perspective through this initiative, I gained even more knowledge about the work that is so necessary and the challenges that it takes to accomplish it.

Going into the initiative, I thought I would be able to use my theoretical knowledge on retention and student support to quickly develop relationships with students that would help support them throughout their quarter. What I learned, however, is that relationship-building is challenging. Breaking barriers and establishing personal relationships is not something that happens quickly or as a result of a single meeting, but instead must be intentionally and meaningfully nurtured during each interaction. While these lessons came more through my role as a practitioner, they guided my understanding of the importance of approaching research studies such as this from an improvement science lens. It helped me realize that even small successes push larger lessons that can continue to spread improvement.

Beyond the obvious impacts that the pandemic had on the initiative, this process demonstrated the value that practitioner experience brings to scholarly initiatives. As Bensimon (2007) notes, "when scholars attempt to translate their findings into recommendations for actions, practitioners are rarely ever the target of change or intervention" (p. 444). This absence of practitioner insight leaves not only a gap in knowledge, but it obstructs retention initiatives from the inception. Throughout the process, I learned the value of seeking out and hearing the voices of stakeholders. I learned the importance of acknowledging their experiences and contributions to the work so that we can continue the conversations that only began during this initiative. In my environment, more opportunities to have open dialogue, particularly regarding equity in education, is an area where ongoing improvement is necessary. Addressing knowledge

deficits and building faculty capacity by funding and promoting professional development is integral to institutional growth and closing the disconnect in our vision versus our actions.

Shared Reflection

Working closely with another leader on this project proved to be a valuable experience for both of us. We shared the workload and we each brought different strengths to the process that complemented one another. Our conversations and discussion throughout the entire process deepened the experience and helped us see different perspectives. In addition, our scope of practice was expanded as we learned about the similarities and differences at our institutions. We are grateful for this shared experience.

Lessons for Social Justice

As we look to the future of higher education, it is imperative that we once again bring our attention back to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our current and future student body. As of October 2020, as many as three million K-12 students were not attending school nationwide (Korman et al., 2020). While the reasons for this sharp attendance decline are varied and range from technology issues to inadequate basic needs resources, those most negatively impacted are students from low-income households and are more likely to be Black, Latinx, or Native American (Korman et al., 2020). The COVID-19 disruption poses long-term consequences to these students' learning, potential graduation, path to college, and future earning potential (Korman et al, 2020). In turn, if higher education institutions see an increase in under-prepared students entering college in the coming years, we will need even more retention programs designed to support these students who still manage to enroll in postsecondary education. In other words, that critical first year will be even more critical, faculty will need to

be even more supportive to ease students through this transition, and leadership will need to be mindful to provide the time and resources for faculty to be successful in these endeavors.

However, the larger issue may be the extraordinary postsecondary student enrollment decline, which is disproportionately impacting first-generation students. Among the declining enrollment numbers, students graduating from high-poverty high schools and continuing to college declined by 32.6% in the Fall 2020 semester compared to the previous year (Nadworny, 2020). When compared against the 16.4% decline that low-poverty schools reported (Nadworny, 2020), it is apparent that the group most at risk of not earning a college degree are marginalized students who have long been disenfranchised from educational opportunities.

Facing enrollment decline, the retention of all students becomes of upmost importance. Faculty must meet students where they are and offer support to help them reach their educational goals (Harper & Quaye, 2015). While the Get to Know You meeting offers an opportunity for faculty to listen to all students, it highlights a chance for faculty to learn from marginalized students. According to Harper & Quaye (2015), faculty should take the time to listen to students and understand their educational goals and experiences. The GTKY meeting provides an opportunity to listen to the student early in the semester and to help support their connection and engagement to the classroom. Engagement has a positive impact on persistence (Harper & Quaye, 2015). When faculty listen and begin to understand student needs and experiences in education, they can start to address those needs individually, in the classroom, and on campus. Done consistently and with an open mind, the GTNY meeting is a chance for faculty to learn from students with different backgrounds and attempt to understand and contextualize their experiences in the scope of their education. Listening, followed by action, is one way we can help marginalized students succeed and is in alignment with Lewis' (2020) belief that, "Our

current context requires us to open our minds and hearts – fighting and softening at the same time – to understand perspectives that are different from our own, even when fundamental disagreement is imminent" (p. 262). Over time, as patterns and themes emerge in student stories, faculty can start to better understand students and perhaps take this understanding beyond the classroom to address systematic barriers on campus that students face.

Tinto's (2012b, 2017) work on effective retention strategies, which focuses on student welfare, education for all, and the importance of community, continues to guide our retention goals. We believe offering professional development to train faculty and providing them time to cultivate relationships will be important as institutions strive to retain the students brave enough to attend higher education institutions. Many higher education instructors are hired based on their content knowledge, so they may not be pedagogy or relationship experts. In fact, many may believe it is their job to demand rigor in a "sink or swim" environment. Focusing professional development on the importance of relationships and the need for greater support will help content experts reach their students in cultivating both rigor and relationships. While Bensimon (2009) notes the "invisibility of practitioners in the discourse on student success" (p. 443), she also highlights the very real promise they bring to retention initiatives, particularly for minority and low-income students who build informal communication channels with faculty. As higher education professionals committed to the idea that college provides a pathway to a better life, we cannot underestimate the power that faculty can bring to retention initiatives, particularly when we invest equity-minded professional development to support their pedagogical growth. In short, we must continue to find ways to make our classrooms supportive and engaging so that we can retain our students and help them reach their goals.

Conclusion and Significance

Through our disquisition, our leadership skills have been enhanced by evaluating a problem of practice, reviewing literature, developing a strategy to improve, leading and participating in the initiative, analyzing the data, and sharing the results. As scholar-practitioners, we have experienced the value of gathering stakeholder input and collaborating with colleagues to address a problem. Our data, collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicate that the Get to Know You Meetings were helpful, that students felt engaged, and that faculty developed an awareness of their students' perspectives. We have also speculated that continued, equity-minded professional development with faculty can continue to promote positive change by increasing faculty awareness of their students' experiences and needs. With more focus on strategies to help faculty reach all students, not just the ones they easily relate to, we believe a culture shift can occur. We have outlined strategies for a more robust second PDSA cycle of the improvement initiative, drawing from lessons learned and with an aim of spreading improvement. As a cumulating experience of our EdD, this disquisition has helped us reach the goal of enhancing our leadership skills and guiding an improvement initiative in a practical setting. We believe in the value of improvement science, particularly used in the context of the scholar-practitioner leader, and we look forward to implementing it throughout our careers in higher education. This initiative offers a snapshot of how to utilize improvement science in context, but the work continues as we strive to continuously improve higher education for our students.

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APPENDIX A: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSION SURVEY

This survey will be distributed to faculty who have participated in the professional development session. It will be given at the end of the session, and faculty will be asked to complete/submit it at that time.

Survey start:

We appreciate your attending the professional development session today and your willingness to take part in the initiative. Please complete the following questions regarding the session. Your answers to this survey and all data collected during this initiative are confidential.

1) Please select which gender you identify as:

      a) Male

      b) Female

      c) Non-binary/third gender

      d) Prefer not to answer

      e) Prefer to self-describe (write-in option)

2) Please specify your ethnicity:

      a) White

      b) Latinx

      c) African American

      d) Asian

      e) Native American

      f) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

      g) Other/unknown

h) Prefer not to say

3) How many years have you been teaching in higher education?

a) Less than 2 years

b) 2-5 years

c) 6-10 years

d) More than 10 years

4) Please rate your satisfaction with the training today.

Very Dissatisfied

Dissatisfied

Neutral

Satisfied

Very Satisfied

5) On a scale of 0-10, how useful did you find the training in terms of providing ideas to improve your teaching? (0= not useful at all; 10= very useful)

6) What topic from the training will be most helpful in your teaching (select the one most helpful)?

a) Equity

b) Opportunity Gap

c) Rationale of Increased Support

d) Importance of Faculty/Student Relationships

e) Classroom Engagement Activities

7) Do you feel the following topics are relevant to your teaching (yes/no):

a) Equity - yes/no

b) Opportunity Gap - yes/no

c) Rationale of Increased Support - yes/no

d) Importance of Faculty/Student Relationships - yes/no

e) Community Building - yes/no

8) Thinking back to the last time you taught a class, did you meet with every student in the class individually at some point during the quarter/semester (this may have occurred during office hours, during a classroom break, or via phone/skype)?

a) Yes

b) No

9) Thinking back to the last time you taught a class, did you meet with every student in the class individually at some point during the quarter/semester (this may have occurred during office hours, during a classroom break, or via phone/skype)?

a) Yes

b) No

10) Thinking back to the last time you taught a class, which statement best describes the level of individualized outreach you initiated to students by email, phone, and/or in-class conferencing?

a) I did not initiate outreach to any student throughout the semester or quarter

b) I initiated individualized outreach to students only when there was a need (such as class absences, missing assignments, or low grades)

c) I initiated individualized outreach to all students at least once during the semester or quarter

d) I initiated individualized outreach to all students at several points throughout the semester or quarter

11) Considering the strategies discussed today, how confident do you feel in your ability to build

strong relationships with your students?

Very unconfident

Unconfident

Neutral

Confident

Very confident

12) Do you have any suggestions for improvements or enhancements to this training?

APPENDIX B: GET TO KNOW YOU MEETING SURVEY

This survey will be completed by the faculty member right after each Get to Know You meeting. Faculty will be asked to complete this survey for any students in the class(es) in which they are implementing the initiative.

Survey start:

Thank you for your continued participation in the student retention initiative. Please complete the survey based on your experience conducting a Get to Know You meeting with individual students. Please only complete this survey for the courses that are part of the initiative and students who attended a meeting. All survey responses will be kept confidential.

1) Which class is this student a member of (select from the choices below):

2) Overall, how effective was the meeting in starting to build a relationship with the student?

Very unhelpful

Unhelpful

Neutral

Helpful

Very helpful

3) Did the student share information that will aid you in better assisting them this quarter/semester?

a) Yes

b) No

3a) If Yes, did the student share information related to the following topics (yes/no):

        a) Personal/family - yes/no

        b) Academic/study skills - yes/no

        c) Time management - yes/no

        d) Emotional/behavioral - yes/no

        e) Other (yes/no). If yes, please describe:

4) Did the student show signs of needing extra support this semester/quarter?

    a) Yes

    b) No

    4a) If Yes, did you refer them to any of the campus resources listed below (yes/no)?

        a) Academic Resource Center/Student Success Center - yes/no

        b) Student Services/Counselors - yes/no

        c) Student/Peer Tutors- yes/no

        d) Faculty Members - yes/no

        e) Other (yes/no). If yes, fill in

    5) (Optional): Please offer any additional feedback about the Get to Know You meeting.

APPENDIX C: FACULTY ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

This survey will be given to faculty to complete at the end of each week of the semester/quarter.

For this survey, please focus on the class(es) where you are implementing the initiative.

Survey start:

Thank you for your continued participation in the student retention initiative. Please complete the survey based on your activities with your class over the past week. Please only complete this survey for the courses that are part of the initiative. Your answers to this survey and all data collected during this initiative are confidential.

Class name:

Class size:

1) How many student outreach efforts did you complete this week? Note that an outreach effort is one initiated by you rather than the student. While it may be academic in nature, an outreach effort might also be a general check-in or personal conversation. (enter number)

2) Did you use any of the following methods to conduct outreach? yes/no

a) Email - yes/no

b) Phone Call - yes/no

c) Text - yes/no

d) Before/After Class/During break - yes/no

e) Other - yes/no. If yes, (insert response)

3) How many students initiated outreach to you with questions or for support? (enter number)

4) Did students use the following methods? yes/no

a) Email - yes/no

b) Phone call - yes/no

c) Text - yes/no

d) Before/After Class/During break - yes/no

e) Office Hours - yes/no

f) Other - yes/no. If yes, enter method

5) Did you use any community building activities in class this week?

a) Yes

b) No

6) Overall, what is the level of engagement you see in the class as a community of learners?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Low Engagement   Engaged   High Engagement

7) How would you rate your current stress level?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Low Stress   Moderate Stress   High Stress

8) If you rated your stress level as 5 or higher, what do you attribute as the primary cause (select one)?

a) Personal

b) Professional workload aside from teaching (committees, other duties)

c) Teaching workload (grading, class prep)

d) Implementing this initiative

e) Emotional commitment associated with implementing this initiative/developing relationships with students

f) Other (fill in)

8) Long term will you continue to use these strategies? Yes/No

9) Please explain why you believe you will or will not continue to use these strategies.

10 (Optional): Please share any story around this initiative that has been surprising or helpful based on this work.

APPENDIX D: END-OF-SEMESTER STUDENT SURVEY

This survey is for the student to take at the end of the semester. Students will take the survey in the class in which the initiative occurred.

Survey start:

By completing this survey, you are invited to participate in a research study titled, Fostering A Sense of Belonging in College: The Importance of Faculty in First Year Support. The purpose of the study is to explore faculty and student relationship building in this class. The study may help us better understand the importance of faculty support in the classroom. We anticipate it will take you 3 minutes to complete this survey. Participation is voluntary, you will not receive any compensation, and you can stop at any time. Some of the questions we will ask you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break, or stop your participation in this study at any time. You must be over 18 to participate in this survey.

The results of this survey will be collected as part the research project by Laura Baylor (828-694-1776, lsbaylor1@catamount.wcu.edu) and Maureen Lambert (828-782-0653, mdlambert2@catamount.wcu.edu), doctoral students at Western Carolina University. Your answers will be kept anonymous and confidential. The research team will work to protect your data to the extent permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that an unauthorized individual could gain access to your responses if you are responding online. This risk is similar to your everyday use of the internet. If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review

Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227- 7212 or emailing

irb@wcu.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

This survey should not be taken by students under the age of 18. If you are under 18,

please do not complete this survey.

1) Did you have a Get to Know You meeting with the professor in this class?

      a) Yes

      b) No

1a) If yes, how beneficial do you believe it was in getting you off to a strong start in this class (choose one)?

      Very Unbeneficial

      Unbeneficial

      Neither Unbeneficial or Beneficial

      Beneficial

      Very Beneficial

For questions 2-5, please select the response that most closely aligns with the statement

provided:

2) I felt a strong sense of community in this class.

      Strongly Disagree

      Disagree

      Neither Agree or Disagree

      Agree

      Strongly Agree

3) I felt encouraged to participate in class.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

4) I felt encouraged to reach out to my instructor if I had questions or concerns.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neither Agree or Disagree

 Agree

Strongly Agree

N/A - I did not have questions

5) I felt supported by my instructor in this class.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

 Neither Agree or Disagree

 Agree

 Strongly Agree

6) How many times did your instructor initiate outreach to you during the class (email;

before/after class, or during breaks; text; phone call)? (enter number)

7) Did your instructor connect you to any of the following campus resources* (yes/no):

a) Student Services - yes/no

b) Advisor - yes/no

      c) Counselor - yes/no

      d) Student Success Center/Tutoring Center - yes/no

      e) Office of Student Life - yes/no

      f) Clubs - yes/no

         *Not all resources may be available on your campus.

8) How many other classes did you take this quarter/semester?

9) Compared to other classes you took, how would you compare the level of connection you felt with the instructor (select one)?

      a)   I felt less connected to my other instructor(s) compared to this instructor.

      b)   I felt neither more or less connected to my other instructor(s) compared to this instructor.

      c)   I felt more connected to my other instructor(s) compared to this instructor.

      d)   I did not take any other classes.

10) Compared to other classes you took, how would you compare the level of engagement you

felt in this class (select one)?

      a)   I felt less engaged in this class compared to my other class(es).

      b)   I felt neither more or less engaged in this class compared to my other class(es).

      c)   I felt more engaged in this class compared to my other class(es).

      d)   I did not take any other classes.

  11) Please share any feedback about your instructor's support and outreach during this class.

12) Please select which gender you identify as:

      a)   Male

      b)   Female

    c) Third gender/non-binary

    d) Prefer not to answer

    e) Prefer to self-describe (write-in)

13) What is your age (note students under 18 should not complete the survey)?

    a) 18-24

    b) 25-34

    c) 35-44

    d) 45 and over

14) Please specify your ethnicity:

    a) White

    b) Latinx

    c) African American

    d) Asian

    e) Native American

    f) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

    g) Two or More

    h) Other/Unknown

    i) Prefer not to answer

15) Are you the first in your immediate family to attend higher education?

    a) Yes

    b) No

    c) Unsure

16) Is this the first college you have attended, or have you attended college at another institution before this one?

    a) This is my first college

    b) I attended another college in the past

17) Are you working attending school?

    a) Yes, I work part-time (less than 30 hours a week)

    b) Yes, I work full-time (30+ hours a week)

    c) No, I am not currently working while attending school

18) Are you a full-time or part-time student?

    a) Full-time

    b) Part-time

    c) Unsure

APPENDIX E: SENSE OF BELONGING SLIDES

Fostering a Sense of Belonging: The Importance of Faculty in First-Year Support

Improvement Initiative Overview
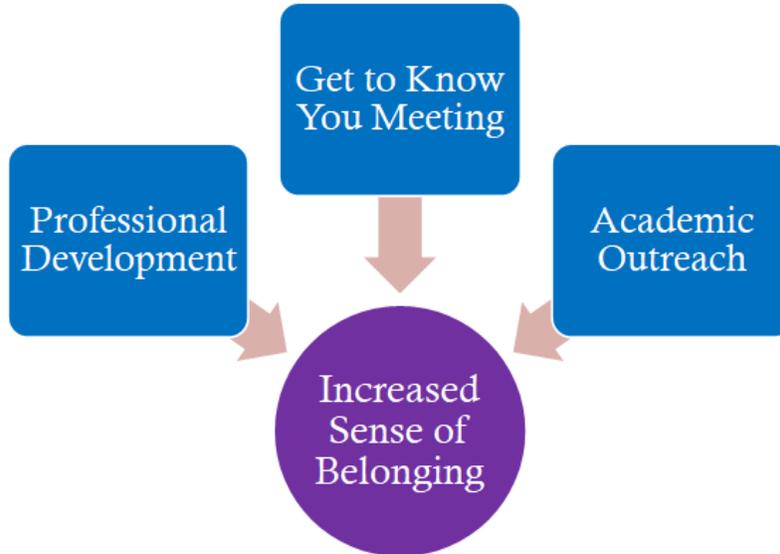
Sometimes, first-year students, particularly first-generation and post-traditional students, struggle to feel like they belong in college and find it difficult to navigate their way through. The intent of this initiative is to promote early relationship building between the student and instructor to help develop connections on a more personal basis with a goal of increasing the student's sense of belonging, opportunities for engagement, and academic support throughout the semester.

Instructors participating will do the following:

1. Attend the one-hour professional development session, which serves as the kick-off to the initiative. Instructors will select one or two classes in which to implement the initiative. Following the professional development, instructors will complete a survey about the

experience. Here is the link for the survey:

https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7Wo1L7kEIUUoBXT

2. In the first three weeks of the semester (deadline: September 13), complete the 15-minute

    "Get to Know You" meeting with each student. The purpose of the meeting is to get to

    know the student on a personal basis, not to discuss academics. Following the meeting,

    the instructor will complete the Get to Know You meeting survey. Here is the link for the

    survey: https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5vVU2zmmPeKUb2d

3. Complete the engagement survey based on the participating class on a weekly basis,

    starting on September 4th. We will email you the following link each Friday:

    https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0GQTeIznle63rlb

4. Provide academic outreach to struggling students as the semester progresses. This

    outreach is intended to be conducted on an as-needed basis for any students showing

    signs of struggling academically or personally. This is in addition to completing the

    academic early alert form to student services.

5. Ask students in your class to complete the student survey at the end of the semester. We

    will email the following link to you the week of December 7-11:

    https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4HGlnRXtlsJGQ9n

Please reach out to me with any questions or challenges.

Schedule (*variations due to institution)

August 25th-29th

Attend one of the Professional Development sessions this week or next (or view recording)

Professional Development options:
- Tuesday, August 25th, 2:00 - 3:00 pm
- Wednesday, August 26th, 1:30-2:30 pm

August 26th -September 13th

Complete the 10-15-minutes Get to Know You Meeting

Complete the Get to Know You Survey

September 4-December 5th

Complete the weekly engagement survey on Friday's

September 17th on

Academic outreach as needed based on student performance and engagement such as assignment

and test grades, attendance, participation, and classroom engagement.

December 7-11

Students complete the student survey

Get to Know You Meeting

Purpose

  The purpose of the "Get to Know You" meeting is to connect with your students and learn about them on a more personal, genuine level. The best way to approach these meetings is by being prepared to listen and hear the student perspective. Each meeting with a student will be very different based on their personality, responses to your questions, and their unique circumstances. For example, one student may be concerned about returning to school after a career while another is worried about what college they wish to attend. It is best to let students lead the meeting and offer support when appropriate. Please give the students a chance to ask any questions they may have. The ideal outcome of the meeting is for both you and the student to enhance your perceptions of one another. Hopefully you will come away with a greater understanding of your student on a personal level, and they will also see you as approachable and as someone interested in their success. You may want to consider offering some kind of extra credit for attending the meeting.

Possible Questions
*Is this your first semester at Connected Community College (if not, how long have you been here)? What do you like best? What do you like least?

*What program/field of study do you hope to enter?

*Do you have career plans?

*What are your interests outside of school?

*Are you working right now? How many hours? How do you balance school and work?

*How can I help you to be successful? Do you have any concerns about being in school that I might be able to help with?

*Do you have any questions for me?

*Do you have any concerns about the course requirements? If so, how can I help?

If students indicate they need any support outside of your abilities or area of expertise, please refer them to our campus resources.

Closing

Thank the student for attending. Invite them to contact you for support as needed. Remind them of your office hours and that they are welcome to contact you then or other times, in addition to your preferred way of connecting

Survey

Please complete the Get to Know You Meeting Survey after each student meeting:

https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5vVU2zmmPeKUb2d

Sample Student Email/Course Announcement to Set up Get to Know You Meetings

Here is an email I plan to post and email to my class to set up the meetings. I decided to give extra credit to encourage participation, but that is up to each instructor and not required.

Hello Class,

In an effort to get to know each other better this semester, I would like to schedule 10 minute Get to Know You meetings this week and next. This is a time to talk and for me to learn about you as a student. We can do these meetings virtually via google meet (you could use google appointments, or just a sign up sheet) or we can meet on campus on Monday and Wednesday. For a virtual meeting sign up here and we will meet in collaborate (insert link).

For your participation I will give you an extra 8 points on your first project.

Thank You,

Laura

Academic Outreach

Purpose: As we move through the semester some of our students will need extra support. As we discussed at the professional development, equity work asks us to reach out to students and support them to reach their goals. Remember some of our students may not have had enough support in early school interactions and may not have people at home to assist them during college. Even students who enter college feeling prepared can hit roadblocks that impact their confidence, and this is particularly true throughout the first year. Each student is important, and your support and encouragement can make a difference.

Signs Students Need Help:

- Missing class/not logging into My Courses

- Missing assignments

- Lack of participation/engagement

- Change in attitude

Academic Outreach Meeting

This can be a short informal meeting or a formal appointment. The instructor will need to decide based on the situation. Here are some ways to reach out:

- Email or message sent through LMS

- Short chat before or after class

- Phone call/Virtual chat using google

- Formal meeting set up using email/google chat

The meeting content will vary based on the situation. Instructors should check in with the student about what is going on, refer to campus resources (Student Success Center, counselors), and set goals and deadlines to make up work.

****Instructors should still complete the Academic Early Alert form for students in share point. These two things are meant to work together.

Your academic outreach efforts should be reflected in the academic engagement survey:

https://wcu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0GQTeIznle63rlb

Engagement Ideas

Purpose: In higher education, we are learning that the sage on the stage/long lecture model is not reaching our students or helping them thrive in college. How can faculty adjust their classes to reach more students and help create an engaging space where students feel welcome and excited to learn? We want to have clear expectations and high standards for classroom engagement.

*Please note: Because some classes will be meeting virtually and others will be face-to-face, engagement strategies for both modalities have been included.

Learn Student Names Early

*Review your roster several times before class begins

**Use Table Tents for student names the first few classes

*Write students' names down and something they share in their introduction. Make note of any nicknames or preferred names.

*Have prepared questions to prompt student introductions, and have a few introduce themselves each class time. Make sure the questions are something everyone can answer.

*Pair students up and ask them to interview one another and then introduce their peer to the class. Provide them with "50 Life Questions to Ask" to encourage them to generate more meaningful and memorable conversations.

- Remote option: provide handout to students, ask them to select one question to use as a guide to introduce themselves to the class.

*Ask students to complete a note card the first day of class with their name, education goal, something interesting, and pronouns. Review notecards.

**10 Slides 10 Seconds Intro-have students make 10 slides that are just 10 seconds each to introduce themselves. You could do this online or in the classroom. You could model this for them first.

*[5 Things](#)

Use Icebreakers early in the semester

*Syllabus scavenger hunt - pair/group students and give them a list of questions about the course that can be answered via the syllabus. Have students hunt for the answers and then share back with class. This helps avoid the long, boring syllabus review by the instructor, but allows the instructor to offer clarification.

- Remote option: Distribute groups of questions individually to students (making sure more than one student gets the same group of questions - question group A, B, etc.). Call on question groups to provide responses (groups of students won't be able to sit together to find the answers, but can be responsible for the same questions).

*Use the same small groups frequently at the start of class, and then mix those groups up after the first couple of weeks so students get to know different students.

Feedback Early in the Semester

Give early feedback (ideally in the first three weeks), and help students learn expectations and how to develop study skills.

Seated

- **Think-Pair-Repair:** Pose an open-ended question and ask students to free write/brainstorm their own answers. Then, pair them with a peer and challenge them to work together to agree upon a response. Next, get two pairs together and repeat the process. Continue until the class is divided into two groups. Have they come to a consensus? Where do they disagree? Where do they agree? What new perspectives have they considered?

- **Jigsaw:** Assign students to small "home" groups. Each student in that group is assigned a different topic to explore. Students then join with students from other groups assigned their same topic to investigate/understand their topic together. Once they have mastered their topic, they rejoin with their home group to share their new learning.

- **Chain Notes:** Write a question on a piece of paper and pass to each student, who records an answer and passes it along to the next student. Have multiple questions that are

passed simultaneously to get a variety of anonymous responses. Identify patterns, differences, missing pieces.

- **Real-time Reactions:** Ask a question, deliver a mini lecture, or share a video and ask students to share their reactions via text to a word cloud.

- **Interpreting Quotes:** Pass around quotes with significant statements to subject matter being discussed. Pair students up and ask them to discuss the quote and its significance/meaning. Put each quote on a PowerPoint slide and ask students assigned each quote to share what they discussed in their pair. *Quotes could also be assigned individually if teaching remotely and pairing is difficult.

Online

- **Playlist:** Create a discussion forum area each week that engages students in sharing something non-course related but that will be interesting to students. For example, you might ask them to build a collective class playlist by sharing a favorite song. You could then start virtual meetings by having the song play as students log-in/get settled. The same could be done with lists of favorite movies, books, YouTube videos, memes, favorite celebrities, quotes, hobbies, photos of pets, jokes, favorite recipes, etc. The goal is for students to share something personal about themselves that helps classmates and the instructor get to know them.

- Create a one word story as a class.

- Celebrate the day with a little known fact or by naming an obscure holiday. This source provides a list of daily holidays that are unknown or downright weird.

- Start the class with a trivia game that's a review of class material from previous classes.

- Have students take a personality quiz and share their results.

- Host an internet scavenger hunt where students go out on the web to research something class-related, and then report back.

- Share a TED Talk or presentation and then discuss.

Seated and Online

- Encourage students to set up study groups so they can connect with peers, collaborate on assignments, and build community.

- Assign group projects such as presentations, papers, and take home exams.

Equitable Classroom Practices Observation Checklist

The following list is a selection from the "Equitable Classroom Practices Observation Checklist," adapted from *A Resource for Equitable Classroom Practice.* These guiding ideas are intended to guide teachers in developing culturally responsive teaching practices. Additional ideas and further information are provided in the link above.

1. Arrange classroom to accommodate discussion.

2. Use a variety of visual aids and props to support student learning.

3. Use probing and clarifying techniques to assist students to answer.

4. Use students' real life experiences to connect school learning to students lives.

5. Identify students' current knowledge before instruction.

6. Provide students with criteria and standards for successful task completion.

7. Give students effective and specific feedback that guides improvement.

8. Provide opportunities for students to revise with feedback and resubmit.

9. Use proximity to all students equitably.

10. Seek multiple perspectives.

Resources for Further Reading

Books

Chun, E., & Feagin, J. (2020). *Rethinking diversity frameworks in higher education.* Routledge.

Friere, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed (50th anniversary edition).* Bloomsbury Academic.

Long, A. (Ed.) (2016). *Overcoming educational racism in the community college.* Stylus.

Strayhorn, T. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students.* Routledge.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.).* University of Chicago Press.

Articles

Bensimon, E. M. (2007). The underestimated significance of practitioner knowledge in the scholarship on student success. *The Review of Higher Education, 30*(4), 441-469. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2007.0032

Grace-Odeleye, B. (2019). Factors related to persistence and success of first year college students: A paradigm shift. *International Journal of Education and Social Science, 5*(5), 45-59.

Gulley, N. Y. (2016, August 5). The myth of the nontraditional student. *Inside Higher Ed.*

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/08/05/defining-students-nontraditional-

inaccurate-and-damaging-essay

Karp, M., & Bork, R. (2014). *"They never told me what to expect, so I didn't know what to do":*

Defining and clarifying the role of a community college student (CCRC Working Paper

No. 47). Teachers College, Columbia University

Pendakur, S. L. (2016). Empowerment agents: Developing staff and faculty to support students

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https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/13/oakton-community-college-builds-

faculty-student-relationships-increase-persistence

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Theory & Practice, 19(3), 254-269. http://doi:10.1177/1521025115621917