

Listening to Our Low-Income Students: Seniors Reflect on Their College Experience

A Report from the Yes We Must Coalition
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While there is a growing effort to better understand how to best support low-income students in higher education, too often listening to the students themselves has not been part of the inquiry. When we do listen to students, it tends to be during exit interviews with those who are withdrawing from our institutions. The Yes We Must Coalition Student Feedback Project was an initiative to explore the experiences of low-income students who have been successful in their college journeys and are on the verge of graduation. We sought to understand how these students viewed their paths to success, particularly what they saw as the biggest challenges along the way and what institutional practices and policies they found to be most helpful in meeting these challenges. We also wanted to solicit their advice on ways in which our institutions could improve in providing support.

A pilot effort in 2017 involved focus groups conducted at eight Yes We Must Coalition (YWMC) institutions with 55 graduating Pell-eligible students. The results made it clear that students had important insights to offer. Based on these results, the 2018 project was undertaken to develop a larger sample of students drawn from more institutions in order to increase our understanding of commonly experienced challenges and what might be done to make the journeys of low-income students quicker, less costly, and/or less at-risk for interruption and non-completion. We hope the individual and cumulative data from the focus groups will be useful in informing institutional assumptions and policies, including the nature, accessibility and timing of interventions and resources.

Project Overview

The YWMC Student Feedback Project 2018 was launched in the spring of 2017 with a call for volunteer institutions and the identification of focus group facilitators from each of the participating schools. Virtual workshops to review best practices for focus group facilitators were conducted by YWMC staff and enriched by the participation of three experienced facilitators from the pilot program. Recruitment of Pell-eligible seniors began in early 2018 with a goal of developing samples that were representative of the student body at each institution. Focus groups were conducted between February and April, with sessions lasting 60–90 minutes. Participating students received a \$25 stipend, generally in the form of credit at the campus bookstore or a gift card for use at a local retail store. Consent forms and student demographic profiles were collected at each session, with each student assigned an identifying number. Sessions were audio-taped, but students identified themselves only by number when speaking so as to retain anonymity. Institutions used commercial services (either Trint.com or Rev.com) to transcribe the tapes, copies of which were sent to Nia Chester, YWMC Program Manager, whose content analysis provides the basis for the results described in this report.

College Characteristics

Sixteen YWMC members conducted focus groups, with 3 schools running 2 groups, for a total of 19 groups and 143 participating seniors. The average size of a focus group was 11 students with a range of 4–13.

The undergraduate enrollment of the 16 schools totals 19,295 students, with an average undergraduate enrollment of 1206 and an average rate of student Pell-eligibility of 62%. The schools are located in 13 states; 9 are in small towns or rural areas; 7 are in urban areas or in suburban areas outside of large cities. Eleven of the schools have some religious affiliation. One is designated as an HBCU, and two as Minority Serving Institutions.

Student Characteristics

A total of 143 seniors participated in the project, all of whom were Pell-eligible. The sample was highly diverse and reflective of the overall student population of YWMC members. Prior to the focus group

conversation, students completed a demographic profile, from which the following descriptive statistics were drawn. Seventy-five percent identified as female; 56% as first-generation and 47% as students of color. Twenty-nine percent of the sample were 18–21, 49% were 22–24, and 22% were 25 or older. A third had transferred into the institution from which they were about to graduate. Of the 14 colleges that were residential, 44% of the students were commuters. Three quarters of the sample were employed, with 54% working 20 hours or more a week. Twenty-two percent had children at home. All were on track to graduate in the spring. Thirty-one percent of the students reported GPAs between 2.0 and 2.9; 37% between 3.0 and 3.4, and 33% had GPAs of 3.5 or higher. Two thirds had specific plans to work part- or full-time upon graduation (the rest were not sure, or vague in their response). A fifth (22%) of the participants had applied to graduate school at the time of the focus group, and 72% of those had been accepted.

Focus Group Themes

Focus groups have the advantage of giving the researcher a better sense of the meaning behind a response than can be obtained from surveys in which the student chooses from pre-defined response options. Through open-ended questions, participants can build on each other's ideas, which can lead to deeper explanations and examples of a particular theme. However, given this tendency to “piggy-back” on each other's statements, individual student responses cannot be considered discrete pieces of data, independent of the statements of other students. For the purposes of summarizing the most common cross-institutional themes, we have identified those that emerged in at least 25% of the participating colleges and were expressed or endorsed by more than one student in any individual institution's group. What follows is a summary of the common themes that met these criteria (except where noted) and is the result of agreement from independent coding by two readers. Although the themes are presented as separate topics, it will be obvious that there is much overlap and intersection among them.

Financial Support

Concern regarding finances and issues related to financial support was among the most commonly recurring themes, described as an ongoing challenge by students at three quarters of the colleges. Students were appreciative of the opportunity afforded them by the financial aid they received from their colleges—for many it was the principal reason they gave for both coming to their school in the first place and persisting to graduation. However, they wished there could have been more predictability to their financial aid over the course of their college career so that every year they didn't have to find ways to address unanticipated increases in tuition, fees, or other college related expenses.

Students at a majority of the schools wished their financial aid offices were more “student friendly and accessible.” Students at more than a third of the schools shared a number of specific examples of what they perceived to be errors made by financial aid and bursar offices, which were particularly stressful when they occurred at the beginning of a semester, sometimes holding up the student's ability to continue his/her coursework. Correcting the errors, which almost always were resolved in favor of the student, still cost the student time and money; some first-generation students described the embarrassment of having to involve their parents, who wanted to advocate for their child but were unfamiliar with how to do that. In the words of one student: *Being first generation is scary—like it's great that you're going to college and your family loves and supports you but they can't actually relate to what is happening . . . like every time I have an issue I call my mom about it and she's like, honey, we love you but like we didn't go through those things . . . all they could say was like we're sorry, we're here if you need anything but it's also like what can you offer me it's like you haven't been through this experience.*

Another first-generation student commented: *Our parents didn't go to college, so they didn't know how to prepare financial aid . . . a lot of people are on their own income to get bills paid . . . Coming in I was told that I had owed \$7,000 to start the semester when I was already on campus and class started in two days—when I actually had a negative balance of \$2,000. And so for that to be that huge of a difference, it causes a huge panic or stress.*

Overall, students felt that financial aid advisors should receive better training in order to be more knowledgeable, more student-oriented, and more professional. They also mentioned a number of other institutional policies that they felt unnecessarily contributed to their expenses beyond tuition. Some mentioned being surprised that additional fees were required for certain courses and labs, or even some activities, leading students to avoid participation because of the additional cost. Some complained about differences in the cost of living in particular dorms, especially when there was no choice in housing assignments; others felt that they could live more cheaply off campus but that their institutions had overly strict regulations about when and which students were allowed to do so. Another common theme was issues with inflexible food plans. Some felt that campus food plans lacked an option that was both affordable and provided a sufficient number of meals. Others felt they shouldn't be required to purchase a meal plan if they were living in college housing that included kitchens. Some felt more flexible options were needed for students with job or athletic commitments that conflicted with the hours that college cafeterias were open.

In spite of the issues mentioned above, students were mindful that the financial aid made available to them by their institutions was often key to their being able to continue in college. At a third of the colleges, students described their financial aid offices as having been particularly helpful, especially when changes in a student's personal situation resulted in changes in his/her financial circumstances. Students at three institutions were grateful for programs at their institutions that provided emergency funds at critical times which they said had made all the difference in their being able to stay enrolled.

Students also acknowledged that part of the problem was their own lack of financial literacy, which they identified as particularly an issue for first-generation students. They suggested that financial literacy education be introduced in Orientation sessions and continue in first-year seminars and even through the senior year, when students are grappling with the realities of the student loans that need to be addressed when they graduate. One student suggested a senior life skills course: *We need to understand taxes and finances a little bit better, especially with student loans. Because we're all going to be at that time when we graduate, and those bad boys are really going to kick in, and that's a very scary thing. Because you're in debt a lot and none of us really knows how to start paying off that debt.*

Reliable and Coherent Curricular Pathways and Advising

A theme mentioned as frequently as financial concern and often tied in with negative financial consequences for the student was the need for clear and reliable curricular pathways to graduation. Students talked about the difficulty of following an academic plan, or even creating one, given the frustration of last-minute cancellations of courses, courses not offered according to the schedule published in the catalog, or offered in a sequence that required students to attend additional semesters or pay for summer classes in order to fit the courses into their schedules. Students said that changes in upper-level courses in the major were particularly problematic, since so many students were living and working off campus in their junior and senior years and had structured their work hours around their academic schedules.

Students who had transferred into their institutions were particularly likely to mention problems encountered if they started in a year that didn't fit with the scheduled rotation of a set of required courses: *I transferred in on an even year and two courses that I needed were only offered in odd years, so I had to stay an extra semester.* They also described problems that arose when decisions regarding their transfer credits were not done in a timely way or were sometimes reversed, resulting in taking courses unnecessarily or needing to take courses they hadn't counted on, again costing them time and money. *Because I'm a transfer, one student said, I have to get pretty much every class approved by the instructor, by the dean, and then by the registrar because it doesn't directly transfer. So I'm kind of stuck until they approve it. And there's been times where both my instructor and the program coordinator and the dean have all been like, "It's fine." And then it goes to the registrar and they're like, "No. We're not going to take this."*

Related to this theme was the importance to all students of accurate and on-going advising. Students felt they needed strong advising as soon as they arrived on campus, as well as throughout their four years, and gave numerous examples of problems they felt arose from poor advising. *This hasn't really been a problem for me personally*, said one senior. *I actually had experience from my previous academic program in taking college courses in high school so I knew how to handle advising on my own, thankfully. But I really think there needs to be some instruction given to advisors because I've seen as we've gotten to my senior year, a lot of my peers have struggled with meeting all of their requirements and they've just found out the last minute that they don't have enough credits or they're missing one or two classes. I think it's sad they worked all four years thinking that they're going to finish on time and then having to go back and end up paying for an extra semester for an extra couple of classes when that could have been remedied by them just adding another class during a semester that they were already here.*

On the other hand, some students said that good advising can make all the difference, *can turn around a situation that seems hopeless*. Indeed, many students said their ability to persist to graduation was in large part due to the advice and support they got from their advisors. One student said of her advisor: *She alone is the reason I'm graduating. . . . Had I not had her to remind me who I was and why I was here and what I was doing and my purpose here and my importance here, I probably wouldn't have graduated.*

Students acknowledged that when they first got to college they were *clueless about what it was going to take* to be successful. They endorsed the usefulness of strong Orientation sessions and First-Year Experiences that included understanding major requirements, creating a four-year plan, understanding how credits work and what happens if you put off courses that should be taken early on. One student gave this prescription: *more emphasis on advising, getting your schedule set, what you need to know about what classes to take when so you don't get stuck with extra courses later*. Many suggested advising sessions on a regular basis throughout the four years, with required sessions in the first two years. As one senior observed, *new students don't realize how important it is to talk with an advisor who can help them make the right decisions about what courses to take.*

Student Involvement in Institutional Decision-Making

Students in almost all of the focus groups expressed appreciation for the opportunity to voice their opinions in their sessions, although some wondered if what they had to say would make any difference to their institutions: *Are we going to be heard is the real question. Is something actually going to happen is the real question*. At two thirds of the schools, students advocated for the establishment of better and more direct lines of communication between students and the administration and more transparency regarding institutional-level decisions. Students would like to be more involved with decision-making, or at least consulted or informed before the fact, particularly in matters that directly impact them. Examples they gave include the canceling of majors, decisions to build an athletic field instead of a dorm or an updated lab and the cutting of athletic teams. Even in cases where students said there was some effort in community meetings or student council meetings to inform them about upcoming changes, they felt that their opinions weren't taken seriously, that the decisions had already been made and sometimes seemed to prioritize institutional growth in terms of future enrollment or profits ahead of what students felt to be the needs of the current student body.

Students who had been given the opportunity to participate at an institutional level found it to be a positive experience. *I was able to serve on one of the selection committees for the Provost Search Committee*, said one student, *and that was probably one of the most rewarding things for me to do here . . . and to really be a part of that big change for the institution as a whole*. Another said: *I was on the committee to find the new Theater professor this year, and it was really cool because I and a couple of other students all got to meet her and all the other candidates, and it really made me feel involved, and like they valued the students' opinions. I don't think we would have had that opportunity if we were just another number at a huge school with 45,000 undergrads.*

A relatively new President at another institution was complimented for holding an open forum session with the students: *Our new president has been doing an amazing job with that* (opening lines of

communication with students). *That was really awesome and he was very open and accepting of whatever the students were throwing at him. I thought that was a really good thing . . . communication is important in all aspects of life, in relationships, in work and jobs and everything. I think that communication should be a number one priority for the college to make sure the students are being heard and that the higher-up people are listening to them.*

Improved Mental Health Facilities/Resources

Students at over a third of the schools advocated for better mental health facilities. They would prefer having a place to go to on campus rather than to an area hospital. The need for well-trained and professional staff was cited, with several examples involving situations in which students felt their concerns/problems were not taken seriously or adequately dealt with. As one participant observed, *not everything is just about homesickness*. Several others said they had no one with whom they felt comfortable to talk to about issues related to harassment or sexual assault. Still others felt that while the college offered mental health services, their availability wasn't sufficiently publicized to the students.

Support for Commuters

Commuting students had a number of suggestions for how they could be better supported. They advocated for more services that addressed their needs, especially having more resources available at night including tutoring, advising, open library hours, open labs, financial aid services and career-related events. Some felt their needs were less of an institutional priority—they had to park in lots farther away from campus, were not offered meal options, and sometimes had no place to hang out between classes or in the evenings. It was pointed out that lack of a place to hang out was particularly a problem in winter and in schools that restricted access to dorms. Commuters also wished there was better communication with them. Said one, *I was a commuter for the first two and half years—and I just felt like I didn't ever really know what was going on, or when I did, it would be at the last minute and I'd be at home or had to work*. Commuting and residential students alike generally acknowledged it wasn't clear what the best medium was to get students' attention, although they felt texting or Instagram was much more likely to be effective than email.

Limited Resources

Students perceive that lack of or limited resources impact them negatively, particularly in STEM areas. Students in half the colleges mentioned the lack of faculty to teach in the sciences and IT-related disciplines, leading to a narrowing of courses offered in these fields. They also referenced outdated labs, equipment and computer facilities and out-of-date software and data platforms, which in their minds led to their being less able to successfully compete for jobs compared with STEM graduates from other schools. Students in other majors were concerned about high rates of faculty turnover and what they perceived to be an over-reliance on adjuncts. They also noted that, in some cases, the lack of sufficient numbers of faculty resulted in some having to teach *out of their field of specialization*, or having to teach most of the courses in a major: *so you have the same professor for everything and if you don't like how they teach, then you're kind of stuck*.

Support for Athletes

Over a third of the students participating in the focus groups were or had been members of athletic teams and mentioned how important the comradery of being on a team had been to them. However, at four schools they were concerned about the lack of support for their teams and themselves as individuals, indicated by poor facilities, limited staff, issues with particular coaches, and lack of understanding of the difficulties of meeting the team requirements for practices and games and academic requirements. They wished that there could be better communication among faculty, coaches, and administrators about potential conflicts and how to resolve them. Athletes who were also commuters spoke of the difficulty of being dropped off at the campus by the team bus late in the evening after an away game, with no food options available to them at that hour and no option to stay

overnight on campus, even though they were expected to show up the next morning for an early pre-class practice.

On the other hand, non-student athletes at five institutions mentioned what they felt to be preferential treatment given to athletes, feeling that too much focus and funding were directed toward the recruitment and support of athletes. Several believed there to be too many on-going scholarships for athletes that were unrelated to academic performance, and that there should be more for “student scholars” who maintained high GPAs while also working, parenting and assuming other responsibilities.

Other Factors that Help Students Persist and Succeed

The need for financial support and predictability and a clear coherent curricular path, as well as the other factors noted so far, would seem to be necessary but perhaps not sufficient for success for low-income students. This section reviews other factors frequently mentioned as contributing to their persistence.

Supportive Faculty and Staff

At various points in every focus group, someone would refer to how important the support of caring and dedicated faculty and staff had been to their success at the college. In their own words, *our professors, our advisors . . . really do care when you come here. You're more than just a number, and that's really great for our personal and professional development.*

A student at a different school said that supportive faculty at his institution were instrumental in students' being able to succeed: *The professors, definitely, because it didn't matter how frustrated I was getting. And even if it was a class that had nothing to do with them, I could sit in their office and talk to them about it. So they double as my professor. They help with financial aid. They help with my advisors down there. They will be your therapist, if you need it. If you're hungry, they feed you. If you're frustrated, they say, hey, go home and take a nap. You'll be okay. They honestly care about the students, and they take care of you. They do everything, short of taking the classes for you, to make sure that you succeed.*

Said another student, *It's not just the fact that you have small classrooms and you can speak up and ask your questions. I mean, I've been invited to so many professors' houses for dinner and they ask about what's going on in your life and they attend your sports team's games and everything so it goes much more beyond the classroom. When you feel like you're a part of the community and you feel like you're valued, I think that motivates you a lot more than just them telling you that you're not making the grades that you need to be.*

Field Experiences, Leadership and Career Related Activities

When asked to name the single factor that kept them returning to the college year after year, students at two thirds of colleges cited leadership opportunities, undergraduate research projects and conferences, and career-education-related activities as central to their persistence. One student described feeling lost when she first arrived on campus and wondering if she should stay. But she said, taking advantage of all the leadership opportunities made a difference: *Even in classes you have to give a lot of presentations and be in groups where you might have to lead if no one else is leading, and know when to follow. And being such a small school, I've found a lot of leadership opportunities within clubs that I don't know that I would have been able to do at a larger school. I just think I've grown a lot in terms of public speaking and being outgoing.* It should be noted, however, that students at two schools lamented the closing down of leadership development programs on their campuses, and another observed that although there were many opportunities for leadership positions at her campus, students would benefit from some kind of leadership training that would help them be effective in those positions.

Internships and field experience prior to the senior year were seen as particularly important. One student in education said, *I've done an internship every year and at other schools you have to wait until*

your senior year, so I feel like I really have an edge. Students also mentioned the importance of being able to meet professionals from various fields who came to their campuses to speak: *I'm on new paths that I never thought I would be,* said one student. *I'm talking with different people, CFO's, CEO's, of different companies. And it's like me, this average kid, talking to these people.* Students were also enthusiastic about sessions during the first year connecting majors and particular career areas, as well as upper-level classes taught by professionals in the relevant field: *They're professionals that are working, that have worked, and they have years of experience. That's what keeps me coming back – the classes pertaining to what I want to do.* At the same time, students at a third of the colleges wished that there were more opportunities for internships, career networking, and job fairs. One student talked about how important hands-on projects had been not just in her science classes, but also in her political science class, and how she felt there should be a *broader consensus on the importance of incorporating aspects of experiential learning into the classwork.*

Sense of Belonging to a Community

At over half of the colleges, students said their decision to return year after year was strongly influenced by the relationships they had developed and the feeling of community on their campuses. They often referenced clubs, majors, sports teams and Greek Life organizations as the source of their relationships and in this context expressed regret about institutional decisions to eliminate a major, a team, a favorite campus “hang-out” or Greek Life chapters. These cuts were seen as undermining important social relationships that provided support. One student described a personal issue that might have led to her leaving the college if it weren't for the support of her campus community: *My freshman year . . . my parents were going through a divorce and this was something that really, I didn't want to stay on campus because I wanted to be home and there for my family during that time, but [this college] really helped me through that. Just, it wasn't even something that I really had to do, it was just the close-knit family that we are. Like my coaches were there for me, my teammates, my roommates, my close friends, so them just being there and being able to talk to them during that time, it was very helpful.*

Academic Learning Centers and Tutoring

Students at seven institutions credited their strong tutoring programs and academic learning centers as being instrumental in their persistence. Said one: *My freshman year was terrible. But they didn't say, you're failing, leave the college. They kept trying to get me to go to the Academic Learning Center or talk to my professors to work stuff out to get tutoring. Eventually I sort of matured up. . . . They do a very good job of getting students to do their work, pay attention, to make people that don't care care. It's not a big area, but it's a big help to students who need a little bit of a push.* Another student who was now himself a tutor said: *During my very first semester coming into this college, it was just a culture shock and the classes were a lot different and I did struggle with a few of them. So I went to the tutoring center and they were very helpful.*

Strong Orientation and First-Year Experience Programming

Orientation and First-Year Experience programs were identified by students at half the schools as key intervention points, with many advocating for a First-Year Experience that focused less on academics and more on information about how to succeed in college, including time management and study skills, as well as what resources are available to students and how to access them. They felt this information, as well as academic planning, should be reinforced throughout the first few semesters, even integrated into first-year courses rather than offered in a one-off type session at the beginning of the semester. Students also suggested including more programming about community resources—they wished they had been as aware in their first few years of all the opportunities for activities and engagement in local community events that they now knew about as seniors. One student, who was currently employed by the city in which his school was located, suggested an on-going Friday night program for first-years, where upper-level students would take them to area restaurants and then an activity. *Now that I work for the city, he said, I've gotten to see a lot of the stuff there is to do around here that I never knew about. . . . If we can have our students go out and support local businesses and stuff, it would help the*

businesses, help the town, and everyone would grow. Other suggestions included providing each new student with a peer mentor and sessions run by returning students on particular topics. One student talked about a session he was organizing with several other seniors for all first-year students, but particularly for first-gens and others who are responsible for their own finances but may not know what that entails with regard to such matters as loans, federal grants and academic progress requirements, as well as how to manage other expenses while at college.

Conclusion

As should be apparent, the students participating in these conversations were quite willing to share their experiences as students, what they felt worked, and what could be improved. What has not yet been mentioned is something that characterized every student in every conversation—their willingness to be open and frank, but also to be highly respectful of each other, the facilitator, and their institutions. They were proud of their accomplishments and happy to be almost graduating. They were also proud of their institutions and took seriously the task of drawing on their own experiences to help strengthen their alma maters and improve the experiences of students coming after them. We hope that the cross-institutional themes presented here, as well as the insights students provided in their individual focus groups, will receive consideration. Not every theme was mentioned by every participating school, but all the themes can prompt examination by leadership teams at any school to see where improvements can be implemented.