



**Communities
for Our Colleges**

THE ROAD TO EQUITY: WASHINGTON'S COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGES



JANUARY 2023



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OUR EVALUATION APPROACH

The purpose of this evaluation is to better understand the state of equity policy and planning within Washington Community and Technical Colleges (CTCs) and identify gaps and opportunities to improve colleges' equity approaches. Using longform interviews and questionnaires, we surveyed students, faculty, and administrators at four Washington CTCs; Highline College, Shoreline Community College, South Puget Sound Community College, and Yakima Valley College. These interviews were conducted by CTC students from low income and BIPOC communities, who are best equipped to understand the needs of their peers.

CTCS IN WASHINGTON STATE

Community and Technical Colleges (CTCs) are crucial drivers of equity in higher education in Washington state, with 45% of CTC students drawn from BIPOC communities. The average cost of tuition and fees at a Washington CTC is about 40% of that at University of Washington, making CTCs a key pathway to four-year degrees and career preparation or progression for both young people and adults in transition — particularly for low-income people and people of color. But CTCs face a fiscal crisis, serving almost 60% of Washington higher education students while receiving less than 40% of the state higher educational funding.

In 2021, the Washington State Legislature passed SB 5194, appropriating \$33 million and mandating the creation of equity plans at all CTCs, providing funding to CTCs for outreach to BIPOC communities, making improvements to academic and career counseling programs, creating standards for mental health counseling programs, and several additional measures to promote equity policy and planning at CTCs.

CTCS AND EQUITY

Best practices in equity policy promote academic success for economically precarious and marginalized students. These practices include:

- **Affinity groups and physical spaces where students can find support and community**
- **Counseling services**, including academic and career counseling
- **Measures to address affordability**, such as emergency funds and scholarship assistance
- **Flexible administration**, like rolling admissions and flexible administrative deadlines
- **Immigration sensitive practices**, like helping undocumented students locate aid sources
- **Outreach**, to inform current students of existing programs and to prospective students
- **Peer support**, like peer counseling, tutoring, and study groups
- **Wraparound services**, including aid for childcare, transportation, healthcare, and more

BEST PRACTICES AT PARTICIPATING CTCS

While significant gaps in equity practices remain at most CTCs, each college included in this evaluation has established meaningful equity programs. Best practices within these colleges include:

- **Highline College's Center for Cultural and Inclusive Excellence and Intercultural Center** provides a physical community space, food and transportation support, diversity events, and counseling services.
- **Shoreline Community College's Benefits Hub** provides a central clearinghouse for support and wraparound services, including emergency funds, financial aid application support, and support in accessing public benefits programs.
- **South Puget Sound Community College's IGNITE and Black Scholars programs** provide skill development workshops, peer counseling, regular meetings with academic advisors, emergency funding, laptops, internet access, textbooks, and more.
- **Yakima Valley College's Connection Bridge Club** is a student-run organization that provides information about financial aid, English as a second language, writing classes, student services, college operations, career counseling, and language assistance.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

While all CTCs studied have begun to create equitable policies, large gaps remain. BIPOC students often feel marginalized or excluded within their institutions, particularly when - as is often the case - equity planning processes fail to meaningfully engage the students that they are intended to serve. Even when students are able to meet tuition costs with aid, significant challenges to affording transportation, housing, technology, and childcare remain. Efforts must begin now to lay the groundwork for the next legislatively mandated equity planning cycle in 2024.

EQUITY PLANNING PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Measurable equity goals** with clear time frames
- **Substantively consultative processes** that ensure all students can provide input
- **A common core of measured metrics** across colleges to allow for comparisons
- **Detailed data tracking** to ensure CTCs can measure success and iterate as needed

HIGH PRIORITY EQUITY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Access to wraparound services** that enable students to thrive, particularly childcare
- **Expanded aid** to address affordability that goes beyond tuition cost
- **Well developed outreach networks**, both to enrolled and prospective students
- **Increased investment in academic, career, and mental health counseling**



CTCs AND THEIR PIVOTAL ROLE IN EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Washington's 34 community and technical colleges (CTCs) are pillars of local communities around the state. These schools are key to racial and social equity, educating students of color at higher rates than other institutions. Each year, more than 360,000 students¹ attend one of these colleges, pursuing a range of degrees that will allow them to go on to four-year universities, complete certificate programs, or start their careers. Many high school students also rely on CTCs to complete high school credits or get a head start on college. Given widespread racial disparities in higher education, it is notable that 45% of CTC students are people of color.²

Despite the importance of CTCs, for years state lawmakers have denied these colleges the funding needed to fully meet their mission and serve the students and communities they were created to serve. While serving almost 60% of the state's higher education students, as of fiscal year 2019 Washington's CTCs received less than 40% of state higher education funding.³

Community and technical colleges are a keystone of Washington's education system. Across the state, people — both young and mature — turn to CTCs for professional and personal development and to obtain the training they need for higher-wage jobs. Parents count on CTCs to educate their children and prepare young people for leadership in their communities. In all, 58% of students attending a public institution of higher education in Washington attend a community or technical college.⁴

1. <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/about/facts-pubs/community-and-technical-colleges-at-a-glance.pdf>

2. <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/about/facts-pubs/community-and-technical-colleges-at-a-glance.pdf>

3. <https://wsac.wa.gov/roadmap/funding>

4. <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/about/facts-pubs/community-and-technical-colleges-at-a-glance.pdf>

Because CTCs provide higher education more affordably in the places where students live, they are often the best or only option for higher education. (As of 2016-2017, estimated tuition and fees at a CTC were \$3,852, compared to \$10,081 at the University of Washington.⁵) CTCs thus represent a crucial pathway to four-year degrees and career preparation or progression for both young people and adults in transition — particularly for low-income people and people of color. With stark, growing income⁶ and wealth gaps in Washington, the importance of community and technical colleges will only continue to grow. This is exacerbated by Covid linked decline in enrollment; while enrollment at four-year colleges continues to rebound, CTCs, which are heavily reliant on tuition to finance their operations, continue to suffer. Because CTCs disproportionately serve BIPOC communities, this has significant equity implications.

“Walking around campus is intimidating and many students feel as though they are on uncertain footing... [It’s] why many students aren’t graduating.”

— MJ Mencias, Highline College Student

5. <https://www.wsac.wa.gov/tuition-and-college-costs>

6. <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-new-gilded-age-income-inequality-in-the-u-s-by-state-metropolitan-area-and-county/>



OUR EVALUATION APPROACH

The individuals best equipped to speak to the successes and challenges of equity efforts at our CTCs are current and recent CTC students, particularly those from low-income and BIPOC communities. For that reason, we worked with students belonging to these groups to conduct primary research through in-depth interviews with current CTC students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

These students conducted more than 60 interviews across four Washington CTCs to develop a detailed portrait of both equity policy, as seen by college faculty and staff, and of the lived experience of low-income and BIPOC students. The findings in this report are drawn from those longform qualitative interviews, in addition to publicly available data shared by the colleges.

Interviews were conducted at Highline College, Shoreline Community College, South Puget Sound Community College, and Yakima Valley College.

- **Highline College** serves 13,196 students in Kent, Washington, with a student body that is 20% Black, 19% Asian, and 16% Latinx.
- **Shoreline Community College** serves about 9,000 students in Shoreline, Washington, with a student body that is 16% Asian, 10% Latinx, and 8% Black.
- **South Puget Sound Community College** serves about 5,300 students in Washington, with a student body that is 18% multi-racial, 7% Asian, and 4% Black.
- **Yakima Valley College** serves 7,045 students in Yakima, Washington, with a student body that is 60% Latinx, 84% first-generation college students, and 70% low-income.

Research questions on CTC equity plans and policies were sent by registered mail to the Presidents of these colleges, with follow-ups by email and direct contact by students. At Yakima Valley College, for example, former Student Xochilt López held four meetings with college administrators and sent regular emails over the course of six months, but was unable to obtain meaningful engagement or formal responses to the research questions. Only Highline College and South Puget Sound Community College responded to the research questions.



WASHINGTON'S LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY IN CTCs

Prior to 2020, Washington state had begun to take some steps toward creating more equitable CTCs. Notably, in 2019, legislation was passed to create a dedicated account for the state need grant program, now the Washington College Grant, expanding eligibility. Students from families making up to 55% of the state's median income will qualify for full grants covering all tuition costs, with those making up to median income eligible for partial grants.⁷ In addition, the legislation provides additional funding for Guided Pathways, Career Connected Learning, salary increases to nursing and high-demand faculty, limited crisis funding for housing and food emergencies, and limited childcare subsidies for CTC students.

The steps, however, only address a small portion of the existing need. As this need was magnified by the impact of Covid-19, the need for additional legislative efforts became clear. To this end, the Washington State Legislature passed SB 5194 in 2021, appropriating \$33 million to support its implementation. SB 5194:

- **Created a requirement** that each CTC conduct an equity assessment and develop an equity plan
- **Provided resources** to each CTC for outreach to BIPOC communities
- **Made improvements** to the Guided Pathways counseling and student assistance program
- **Established minimum standards** for counseling to accompany a mental health counseling program
- **Removed** the prohibition preventing undocumented students from qualifying for in-state tuition for three years
- **Mandated** the conversion of 200 part-time faculty to full-time faculty

7. <https://crosscut.com/2019/05/free-college-coming-wa-families-making-under-50k>

Additional legislation and appropriations in 2021 provided for:

- **A temporary pilot “bridge grant” program** to provide increased resources for wraparound services and expanded financial aid eligibility
- **Funding for CTCs** to develop systems to assist students with financial aid applications
- **Resources for systematic outreach** to BIPOC communities by CTCs
- **Direction to the WSAC** to undertake a review of residency requirements that impede access to educational opportunities for undocumented students

“I am the son of migrants and I feel a responsibility to be able to help my family; being in college would help me get a good job and be able to help my parents [and] reduce the time they work in the fields.”

— Noe Salazar, Former Yakima Valley College Student



CTCs AND EQUITY

CTCs can be a primary driver of equity in higher education. But low completion rates, high student debt loads, and high student-to-adviser ratios – with racial disparities throughout – are all signs that our CTCs are not doing everything needed to make their campuses equitable for future, current, and former students.

Broadly speaking, by providing a path to higher education for low-income students, CTCs promote class-based equity. But because BIPOC students are overrepresented among households facing economic and social precarity, CTCs play a significant role in promoting racial equity within our communities.

But while CTCs represent an important driver of equity in higher education, much work needs to be done to ensure that best practices in equity are observed within the CTCs themselves. Students experiencing economic precarity face the greatest barriers to access in higher education. CTCs, therefore, must create enabling institutional structures and policies to ensure that all students - and particularly BIPOC students - are able to benefit from the opportunities CTCs present.

The enabling institutional structures and policies include:

AFFINITY GROUPS & PHYSICAL SPACES

High degrees of residential segregation mean that many BIPOC CTC students may find themselves a racial minority within their academic institution for the first time. This can lead to social isolation that negatively impacts academic success and completion. Affinity groups and physical spaces for BIPOC students to congregate help create a sense of community and allow them to exchange strategies to navigate their shared experience.

COUNSELING SERVICES

Due to inequities in primary education, low-income and BIPOC students are disproportionately likely to require academic support to flourish within CTCs. Counseling services, broadly envisioned to encompass faculty and staff counselors, peer counselors and study groups, leadership training, and tutoring, help address existing academic experience gaps. Particularly successful approaches often involve identifying students most likely to require academic support for enrollment in programs that include regular mandatory academic counseling sessions. Counseling that incorporates support to help students navigate unfamiliar registration requirements and administrative deadlines are most effective in ensuring equitable academic success.

To translate academic achievement into downstream career benefits, CTCs must also channel students into career counseling programs. Students facing the greatest precarity often require additional support to build job search, resume, and interviewing skills.

AFFORDABILITY

Those students who are most likely to require financial support to attend a CTC are often least equipped to navigate the complex application processes required for financial aid and scholarships. To ensure equitable access to higher education, successful approaches target support to students who qualify for financial aid and scholarships to ensure they know what financial aid they qualify for and are equipped to apply. Most importantly, CTCs can ensure affordability by increasing the threshold for full financial aid to include students from households earning 75% of median family income.

FLEXIBLE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES

Students juggling job obligations, childcare needs, and financial challenges are less likely to be aware of administrative deadlines or able to meet them. Rolling admissions and flexible administrative deadlines, when practicable, promote equity by ensuring that students facing economic precarity aren't excluded from the benefits of higher education for administrative reasons.

IMMIGRATION STATUS SENSITIVE SERVICES

Many undocumented students rely on CTCs for access to higher education. These students are barred from accessing many of the services that enable other students facing economic precarity to complete their education. This includes financial aid through FAFSA and most public benefits programs such as SNAP. To promote equitable access to higher education, CTCs can support undocumented students by identifying eligible aid sources and providing emergency funds available for all students.

OUTREACH

The first step to equity within CTCs is to ensure that underserved prospective students are aware of CTCs and understand that enrollment is a feasible option. To ensure that they are able to channel these students to their programs, enrollment outreach, both online, through social networks, and offline, through community-based institutions, is necessary. This outreach needs to meet students where they are, targeting BIPOC students and offering multilingual materials.

Furthermore, after enrollment, the equity approaches envisioned here can only benefit those students who are aware of the support available to them. Public dissemination, through prominent placement on CTC websites, on-campus flyers, and orientation services are an important first step in reaching all students. But the most effective approaches to equitable outreach identify students most likely to require support and conduct outreach to direct those students towards available services.

PEER SUPPORT

Effective equity approaches combine support provided by CTC faculty and staff with a network of peer support. Peer-to-peer services promote equity by reducing barriers to students accessing services. Because peers who share similar backgrounds and experiences are most likely to be seen as trusted messengers, formalized peer support services amplify institutional equity policies by drawing hard-to-serve students into the system. Peer-to-peer support services can include peer counseling, tutoring and study groups, and help navigate both the physical campus and administrative requirements.

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Economic precarity and insecurity can significantly impact students' learning and ability to navigate institutional structures; students who lack housing and healthcare will likely struggle with academic performance. Promoting equity in academic achievement often means providing the financial support students need, freeing them up to fully engage in their academic experience. Wraparound services take many forms; health care assistance, childcare, housing support, cost-free internet and computer access, transportation funds, emergency expenditure funds, and more. Because BIPOC students are disproportionately likely to require these services, well-funded wraparound services are crucial to reducing racial disparities in higher education achievement.

Childcare is particularly important at this moment. Many childcare programs were shut down as Covid cases mounted and have yet to be reinstated or to reach their pre-pandemic capacity.⁸ The shortage of childcare availability is acutely felt by undocumented students, who are often excluded from those childcare facilities that are operating.

8. Lee, E. K., & Parolin, Z. (2021). The Care Burden during COVID-19: A National Database of Child Care Closures in the United States. *Socius*, 7.



BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED AT PARTICIPATING CTCs

While colleges considered in this study demonstrate gaps in meeting the equity goals identified, each has also made strides to establish some best practices in equity within their institution. This section examines the most prominent best practices in equity at the CTCs under consideration.

HIGHLINE COLLEGE

Highline College demonstrates best practices in creating space, both physical and in the form of social groups, via its Center for Cultural and Inclusive Excellence (CCIE) and the campus Intercultural Center (IC). The CCIE espouses a mission to educate through a diversity and social justice lens and works to create an inclusive and welcoming campus, increase social consciousness, and empower students to act as social change agents. CCIE programming includes LGBTQIA week, Disability Justice Week, and MLK week. The CCIE holds in-person and virtual office hours five days a week. CCIE representatives have membership on the Equity Taskforce that provides input to design faculty diversity training and DEI policy guidance.

Through the campus Intercultural Center (IC), students are provided with a physical space, which creates a sense of belonging, where peer facilitators lead culturally competent programming and one-on-one mentorship and coaching.⁹ “There are so many resources offered through CCIE and IC,” says Mya Leonhard, former Highline Student Body President. “A food pantry, help with transportation, whatever students need, [the CCIE and IC] can connect them directly to those wraparound services. It’s a core part of connecting students with equity processes at the college.”

9. <https://ccie.highline.edu/programs/peer-mentorship-program/>

SHORELINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Shoreline Community College demonstrates best practices in CTC equity through its Benefits Hub program. The Benefits Hub, launched in 2021 through a United Way King County partnership, acts as a central clearing house for financial support and access to wraparound services. 73% of students served by the hub identify as BIPOC, 62% are the first in their family to attend college, and 41% are parents. Sunshine Cheng, former SCC Student Body President, describes the Benefits Hub as “a really fantastic program” The Hub, she says, “has lots of wraparound support for students. Things like financial coaching, WAFSA and FAFSA support, and [access to] lots of scholarships. They’re also one of the sole sources of emergency funding that I’ve seen at our college.”

The Benefits Hub serves to connect students to public benefits, including SNAP, WIC, transportation benefits, Medicaid, and the ACA health exchange. The Hub also provides emergency housing funds to students who are behind in rent or in need of move-in assistance. Urgent resources, such as food, health products, and transportation funding, as well as access to short-term emergency loans are available to students through the college Multicultural Center.¹⁰

The hub also serves to connect students to the Career Education Options program,¹¹ which funds all books, tuition, fees, and book costs for students 16-20 who have not completed a high school diploma or GED.

SOUTH PUGET SOUND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

South Puget Sound Community College, while facing many of the same challenges as other CTCs across Washington, goes beyond the creation of individual programs that represent best practices in the field. Rather, it demonstrates a holistic approach to creating an equitable environment, including the collection and consultation of data required to effectively evaluate equity progress.

SPSCC begins with an active outreach program designed to effectively reach students from marginalized backgrounds. This includes the engagement of an outreach specialist dedicated to ensuring that eligible students are aware of the support services available at the college. It also includes engagement with groups traditionally excluded from educational opportunities, including local tribes and the Hispanic Roundtable.

Through their IGNITE¹² and Black Scholars¹³ programs, SPSCC creates enabling pathways to bolster the completion rate of students from traditionally marginalized communities.

10. <https://www.shoreline.edu/multicultural/short-term-emergency-loan.aspx>

11. <https://www.shoreline.edu/high-school-programs/ceo/default.aspx>

12. <https://spsc.edu/student-life/ignite>

13. <https://spsc.edu/student-life/black-scholars>

This support includes monthly fora for information dissemination and skill development workshops, a peer mentoring program to reduce social barriers to support, regular mandated advisor check-ins, early registration access, free laptop checkout and internet access, provision of textbooks, facilitated internship access, and \$800 available each quarter for students facing financial shocks. SPSCC also provides limited subsidized on-site childcare for students, but lacks the capacity to serve all those who are in need. These services have led to a 10% higher completion rate for students enrolled in IGNITE compared to eligible students who have not enrolled.

These programs are reinforced by a commitment to stakeholder consultation that feeds into policy development and a data-driven approach to change. This means tracking indicators such as completion rates and fall-to-fall retention rates to measure how policy changes impact student success and regularly creating formalized venues for student feedback to guide equity policy. “Building a culture of data review and analysis has been crucial for us,” says Parfait Bassalé, Executive Diversity officer at SPSCC. “We can be in denial all we want, but when the data is put in your face and the same group of people aren’t doing well ... it makes the conversation more nuanced. I leverage that data to highlight ... strategies rooted in research in inclusive pedagogy and belonging.”

YAKIMA VALLEY COLLEGE

While Yakima Valley College has much to work to do to create effective and transparent equity policies, it provides an important lesson in serving students even in the context of limited and under-resourced programs. The student-run Connection Bridge Club provides information on school facilities including the writing center, math center, and tutoring center. The club, which counts ten student and community volunteers, also provides a source of community intended to help make students feel welcome and desired on campus. “We are the first step that students need,” says Xochilt López, former YVC student and Connection Bridge volunteer. “We support them to continue their education. Our principle is that all students feel like they belong at the college.”

The club channels students toward placement tests, new student orientation, and educates students on registration and other administrative requirements. The Connection Bridge club helps students navigate and connects students with the College and Career Readiness department. This includes information about financial aid, English as a Second Language, writing classes, information about student services, college operations, and career counseling. The Club also provides language assistance to students, as the registration and admission departments’ staff do not speak Spanish, posing an early challenge for many students as they seek to navigate a new and challenging bureaucracy.



EQUITY PLANNING PROGRESS

Although the CTCs considered are investing in specific equity programs, under SB 5194, Washington CTCs are required to produce overall assessments and plans to address gaps in practice, including strategic equity plans with concrete and measurable success metrics. Our reading of the legislative intent is that publication of these plans was mandated by July 2022. However, some CTCs point to ambiguity in the legislative language as grounds for producing equity documents that fail to fully address the intent of the legislation, compromising the pace at which they are likely to meet equity goals.

HIGHLINE COLLEGE

Highline College successfully disseminated an equity report, which includes clear qualitative end goals for creating a more equitable campus. These goals include culturally appropriate student outreach programs, peer mentoring strategies, and a faculty diversity program.

The goals identified by Highline are both important and in line with equity activities envisioned under SB 5194. However, presenting a vision of what the campus should look like is a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving the equity goals envisioned. A strategic equity plan that creates the conditions for success would also include concrete benchmarks to allow the college to effectively evaluate its equity journey and make course corrections to ensure intended outcomes are achieved.

SHORELINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Rather than releasing an equity plan, Shoreline Community College published an “equity progress report” that focuses more on existing equity activities within the college than on a forward-looking roadmap to improve equity outcomes. Given that the college has been funded to engage in increased equity activities since the passage of SB 5194, one might expect to see progress reflected in this report.

Instead, the SCC progress report lacks evidence of progress towards equity goals, a basic assessment of gaps and challenges in the college's existing equity programs, necessary benchmarks to evaluate success, or the investments needed to achieve that success. This suggests that while resources were allocated to the college for these activities, those resources may have failed to flow down to the individuals actually engaged in equity work. This impression is bolstered by former Shoreline student and student body president Sunshine Cheng, who was an active participant in the college's equity planning process: "[When] we were brought together to these committees, we would just do what felt like busy work. We wouldn't do anything that would actually help us meet the outcomes we want to see."

Further contributing to the shortcomings of the "progress report" is the compressed timeline in which it was produced. SCC contracted with an outside firm to produce the report in May 2022, and released a student survey the same month, in the midst of final examinations, closing the survey in June 2022. This timeline effectively eliminated the possibility of meaningful student consultation, as required under SB 5149.

While Shoreline Community College is eager to tout its commitment to equity, the college has much progress to make in creating the conditions for success among a diverse student body.

YAKIMA VALLEY COLLEGE

Yakima Valley College considers its DEI strategic plan to be embedded in the college's overall strategic plan. Notably, SB 5194 requires that strategic equity plans be created based on needs identified in internal equity assessments. Because no such assessment was conducted, the plan, which was published in 2020, cannot address the requirements of the legislation.

The plan should be lauded for setting goals for a more equitable campus including the creation of an equity framework for the college, a focus on centering equity in professional development, the establishment of equitable hiring practices, and the creation of an anti-racist tool for evaluating college policies and practices. However, these worthy goals are constrained by a lack of measurable success metrics to evaluate progress and redirect efforts.

10. <https://www.shoreline.edu/multicultural/short-term-emergency-loan.aspx>

11. <https://www.shoreline.edu/high-school-programs/ceo/default.aspx>

12. <https://spscc.edu/student-life/ignite>

13. <https://spscc.edu/student-life/black-scholars>

SOUTH PUGET SOUND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SPSCC's equity planning process represents a benchmark in what equity planning should look like in Washington's CTCs. In spite of challenges in receiving final data from their equity assessment in time to complete their equity plan, the college drew on detailed preliminary data to create an equity plan that includes not only clear goals for what an equitable campus looks like, but measurable benchmarks to allow the college to evaluate their progress towards that vision.

The SPSCC equity plan includes concrete goals relating to workforce diversity, implicit bias training for staff and faculty, equitable career development processes, employee resource groups to support all faculty and staff, and the development of anti-racist curricula. Importantly, the plan also lays out diversity data standards to ensure the college is able to effectively measure and report on progress, opportunities for leadership review of this data, and feedback mechanisms to capture student and staff progress feedback. The plan, brief and direct in setting out goals and mechanisms to ensure successful progress towards those goals, demonstrates that clear benchmarks, succinctly stated — instead of lengthy and florid claims of the import of equity — enable meaningful progress towards those goals.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The CTCs considered for this study represent a diverse spectrum of capacity with regard to equity practices. While no two colleges are in precisely the same place in their equity journey, certain commonly observed gaps inform our recommendations.

These recommendations fall into two categories. The first includes crucial back-end processes of equity planning that are essential to delivering policies that create the conditions necessary for all students to thrive. With the exception of SPSCC, the CTCs studied demonstrated significant gaps in the creation of meaningfully consultative processes driven by significant student input, a prerequisite to effectively identifying and addressing student needs. While this is the first year of the equity planning process envisioned under SB 5194, now is the time to begin preparing for the next round of equity planning coming in 2024. We hope these recommendations equip colleges to more effectively develop future equity plans.

The second category of recommendation includes high-priority equity policies that address gaps identified through our interactions with students, faculty, and administrators. While the specifics of these policies will need to be fine-tuned at each institution based on a consultative equity planning process, the broad outline of many existing gaps are clear.

EQUITY PLANNING PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Effective equity assessment** and planning processes are transparent and provide clear points of contact. This means significant digital and on-campus outreach to students to ensure that they are aware of ongoing equity planning processes and given sufficient time and information to take part.
- **Measurable goals** with clear time frames for successful completion ensures accountability in equity planning and equips institutions to evaluate progress and iterate accordingly.
- While student surveys can be an excellent first step in beginning equity planning processes, they must be circulated with sufficient time and publicity to capture meaningful student input. **Additional consultative measures** to build engagement, such as open planning and assessment meetings with faculty, administration, and students effectively build a shared understanding of challenges and proposed solutions.
- **Uniform data collective with a common core of questions** will allow for meaningful comparison across colleges when evaluating equity progress.
- **The alignment of legislative and academic calendars** will better equip CTCs to conduct meaningful equity planning. SB 5194 compliance presented some challenges for CTCs as legislated deadlines did not always match with internal CTC planning calendars.
- **Detailed data tracking** – of student demographics, demographics of faculty and administration, participation in equity programs, completion rates, and the interactions between these metrics – is essential to ensuring effective equity planning. Without robust data, success cannot be effectively evaluated and necessary course corrections cannot be identified.

EQUITY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- CTCs should endeavor to **provide wraparound services** to students who face economic barriers to educational success. While these services take many forms (notably health care assistance, housing support, cost-free internet and computer access, transportation funds, and emergency expenditure funds), the most pressing need repeatedly identified by students was a need for childcare support.
- CTCs must **expand their financial aid offerings** to effectively address affordability gaps for economically precarious students. Even when students are offered tuition-free education, additional uncovered costs, including books and fees, contribute to an ongoing affordability crisis in higher education.
- Well-developed outreach networks are crucial to ensure CTCs are able to **deliver support and services where they are most needed**. This includes outreach within the college, to channel students toward programs that will enable them to thrive. Importantly, it also includes enrollment outreach to prospective students that highlights the college's supportive policies and programs to ensure all students who may benefit from them have the opportunity to enroll.
- To support students in successful educational completion, CTCs should **increase their investment in counseling services** for students. This includes academic counseling to ensure students are equipped to navigate both the classroom and college institutional structures and career counseling to help channel students toward internships and job placement.

“[Without community college] I would still be in a job that I don’t like and I wouldn’t feel good because I wasn’t improving.”

— *Silvia Ochoa, Yakima Valley College Student*

PRIMARY AUTHOR: KERRY HARWIN

Kerry Harwin is a Seattle-based writer. His career in government, media, and civil society has spanned four continents and two decades, with a focus on projects that bring visibility to marginalized populations.

Special Thanks: William Daley, Libero Della Piana

STUDENT RESEARCHERS:

Sunshine Cheng – Shoreline Community College

Sunshine is a student at the University of Washington majoring in Law, Societies, and Justice. Prior to that, she studied at and served two terms as Student Body President at Shoreline Community College. A first-generation student, Sunshine is concerned with access and equity in higher education and became involved with the Communities for Our Colleges Coalition in October 2020. Sunshine is passionate about grassroots organizing and hopes to go on to study education policy. During the day, she works as a Public Policy Fellow with Disability Rights Washington and a campaign manager for a state election. In her free time, you can likely find her bundled up with a good book somewhere or taking on the next adventure with her four-legged best friend.

Nancy Cruz – Yakima Valley College

Nancy is a student at Yakima Valley College. She is studying to be a teacher and is the first in her family to go to college. Nancy is a single mother with a beautiful boy. She is a volunteer at the Connection Bridge Club and she likes the purpose that the club provides. The club was a great help to her in better navigating the college system and getting the help she needed. Now, by being a part of the Connection Bridge Club, she is able to help other students navigate the school system and get the resources and information they need.

Kate Harvey – Highline College

Kate was born and raised in Walla Walla, Washington. She took courses through Running Start at Walla Walla Community College while in high school. Kate is now studying American Studies at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and is interested in pursuing a career in public policy. Throughout her time at WWCC, Kate saw firsthand the power of a CTC education, but also the barriers in place that make it hard for students to succeed at CTCs or to even begin studying at them in the first place. Because of this, Kate got involved with the coalition and has been organizing with C4C since August 2021.

Mya Leonhard – Highline College

Mya is a former Highline College student, where, as Student Body President, she helped to push for better state funding in wrap-around services at CTCs. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Psychology degree at University of Washington, after which she intends to pursue a medical career in psychiatry. Mya is passionate about alleviating mental health stigmas and is currently interning with Sound Health as a Clinical Case Manager to provide services to youth with intellectual & developmental disabilities. She has seen how human connections save lives and keep people going and is committed to furthering those connections within her community.

Xochilt López – Yakima Valley College

Xochilt is the mother of three children. She is a Yakima resident and attended Yakima Valley Community College. While studying there, she saw the need for students to learn to navigate the college's educational system. Because of this, she co-founded the Connection Bridge Club, a student club that helps students navigate the system, creates support among students, and connects them with college resources, enabling them to obtain a certificate that will open the doors for an even better future. Xochilt saw community college as a way to build a better future for herself, her family, and her community. The community college not only allowed study but also taught her to know her passion and how she could achieve her dreams.

ABOUT COMMUNITIES FOR OUR COLLEGES

Communities for Our Colleges (C4C) is a multiracial student-centered coalition in Washington State that works to improve the state's community colleges by engaging students, faculty, staff, and the community to advocate for improved funding, access, and racial equity. Washington's thirty-four community and technical colleges are engines of local economies, individual advancement, and racial justice. Community colleges are essential to successful four-year colleges. They serve communities of color and low-income communities, prepare tomorrow's workers, and offer opportunities to the underserved. Our community colleges benefit all Washingtonians. Full funding for our colleges is an investment in a prosperous and equitable future for the state. C4C is a project of the nonprofit Alliance for Just Society.

ABOUT ALLIANCE FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Alliance for a Just Society (AJS) is a national center for innovative organizing and strategy based in Seattle, Washington. We build powerful organizations and communities. We fight for racial, social, and economic justice.

Executive Director: LeeAnn Hall

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ADDENDUM:

COVID LINKED CHALLENGES TO CTC EQUITY POLICY

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have presented a challenge to Washington CTCs' progress toward equity goals. From impediments to student life to administrative constraints, these challenges cut across best practices in diversity, equity, and inclusion:

CAMPUS LIFE

Student clubs, peer support services, counseling centers, and other fora for peer interaction are crucial drivers of success for students who face intersecting race, class, and gender barriers to education. As CTCs continue to build formal channels to funnel target communities towards support services, peer support - whether through formalized clubs or informal interactions - is key to ensuring that students are aware of and able to access those services. As remote learning largely shuttered on-campus life, these important connections diminished, constraining student access to support services, from financial aid support to academic counseling.

ON-CAMPUS SERVICES

To the extent that CTCs offer wrap-around services, many are provided on campus. Notably, some CTCs provide limited on-campus childcare services and most offer food pantries. Access to food and childcare are key drivers of academic success, but became difficult or impossible to access during the pandemic. The equity implications of these constraints are severe; students who are not on campus are much less likely to access the campus food pantry and many parenting students were left struggling to address the challenges of undergoing remote learning while supporting children also engaged in remote learning.

TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

Many CTC students rely on on-campus technology as a necessary tool to complete the requirements of their coursework. Remote learning shut off student access to on-campus computer labs, constraining their ability to succeed. Fortunately, many CTCs offer laptops that can be checked out free of charge by students, remediating this challenge to some extent. However, broadband access constraints continue to impact many students and the pandemic slowdown of peer and faculty support services likely negatively affects their ability to access subsidized internet programs. This challenge is mitigated by the provision of hotspots to some students.

INCONSISTENT COVID POLICIES

Inconsistent classroom policies surrounding Covid infections by students or their family members was the pandemic-linked challenge most commonly cited by CTC students. As CTCs largely left policies related to Covid illness to the discretion of individual professors, students faced an array of policies ranging from deadline extensions and support to being forced to retake a course due to deadlines missed because of illness. Insecurity of this nature compounds the precarity-linked challenges faced by many CTC students.

DATA COLLECTION

While much work remains, Washington CTCs are undergoing tremendous strides to begin collecting the data that is crucial to better targeting equity-linked services. Not only has the pandemic impacted data collection, but pandemic-linked disruption to educational outcomes will present challenges in the meaningful year-on-year analysis of the impacted period.



STORIES FROM CTC STUDENTS

The impacts of these challenges to equity are best illustrated through personal stories exploring the lived experience of BIPOC CTC students who often struggle to receive sufficient support. In some cases, the student's name has been changed to protect their privacy.

MJ Mencias, *Highline College Student*

MJ lives with her five daughters. When an injury prevented her from continuing her work in restaurant kitchens, she decided to enroll at Highline College, where she's now a member of the college's equity taskforce. She's proud that her degree will demonstrate to her daughters that they "can change the world and do anything they put their minds to."

While MJ appreciates her Highline education, she describes the process of working towards her degree as "a painful experience". "Walking around campus," she says, "is intimidating and many students feel as though they are on uncertain footing." She points to this climate as among "the root issues of why many students aren't graduating."

"There are many wonderful and supportive people," MJ notes, but highlights turnover in support service staff as "deeply felt by students" who rely on those personal relationships to help them navigate a college environment that can often feel unwelcoming.

For MJ, this lack of support was most keenly felt when she and her daughters became infected with Covid. Despite the fact that MJ was managing her own symptoms while caring for her sick daughters, Highline didn't provide the accommodation MJ needed, significantly impacting her GPA. But when MJ tried to lobby for reforms to Highline's Covid policies, she was "frustrated to see pushback from the school."

"Nobody," MJ says, "should have to go through what I went through."

Latieya Thomas, Highline College Student

Latieya lives in Federal Way with her three children. She's an active member of the college student body, where she serves as Speaker of the Caucus in the Highline student government. She says that community college "has helped [her] see the world differently" and views higher education as her path to "get where I want to go in life."

Latieya says that "the community at Highline is willing to help and there are resources available on campus," but points to significant work that needs to be done to create an equitably accessible campus. Even where resources exist, Latieya experiences gaps in outreach that can make help hard to find. Speaking about the challenge of affording college, she highlights the importance of timely and targeted outreach; "There are resources to help, but it is very important to share information about grants and scholarships early on so community college can be affordable."

In particular, Latieya has struggled with accommodating Covid challenges, childcare access, and access to mental health services. "Because of Covid," she says, "my youngest son's daycare will often call letting me know that they need to shut down, or that they won't be open the next day. ... Juggling all of these responsibilities has been a challenge, and has led to some mental health issues."

Silvia Ochoa, Yakima Valley College Student

Silvia lives near Yakima with her husband and four daughters. She sees her experience at Yakima Valley College "imperative," because it allowed her to demonstrate to her daughters "that it does not matter how old you are. If you feel like it, you can study and achieve something." Without the opportunity to study at a CTC, Silvia says, "I would still be in a job that I don't like and I wouldn't feel good because I wasn't improving."

But despite Silvia's appreciation of the opportunities that a CTC education afforded her, the college's nascent institutional commitment to equity presented numerous roadblocks to flourishing.

Every morning, Silvia studies English on her own, relying on books, internet resources, and accent coaching from her daughters. But when Silvia attempted to enroll in ESL courses, she was told that she was unable to, as they were not part of her early childhood care program. For Silvia, this is a significant impediment to further academic achievement; without better English skills, she feels unequipped to continue her education.

Even when support was available to Silvia, insufficient outreach meant that she sometimes struggled to access it. In need of academic and career counseling, it was only through support from a community-based organization that she was able to connect to Yakima Valley College's academic counseling services, which helped her with course selection and enrollment procedures.

To improve the college for future students, Silvia points to a need for more online classes to accommodate working and parenting students. She also hopes for childcare support, which she wasn't able to access as a Yakima Valley student, calling it an "essential resource" that helps "people like me who ... don't have anyone to take care of their children."

Noe Salazar, *Former Yakima Valley College Student*

"I am the son of migrants," Noe says, "and I feel a responsibility to be able to help my family; being in college would help me get a good job and ... be able to help my parents ... reduce the time they work in the fields."

Noe, who moved to Yakima three years ago, lives with his mother and father, who are agricultural workers. Noe enjoys spending his free time reading and working out. When Noe went to Yakima Valley College to help his sister register, college administrators convinced him to enroll in the college as well.

While Noe sees a college education as crucial to supporting his goals for himself and his family, he didn't find a campus equipped with equity policies and institutes that enabled him to thrive. In the face of challenges to accessing college services, Noe ultimately decided to leave the college.

Noe praises his access to the financial aid that made Yakima Valley affordable for his family, but highlights the significant economic barriers that remain, specifically pointing to the need for wrap-around services to support the cost of books, school supplies, transportation, and internet access. And while Yakima Valley does provide a food bank for students, Noe points to a need for access to ready-to-eat food for students like him, who spend much of their day on campus, in the library.

Noe highlights the need for greater academic counseling, specifically citing a lack of support in setting academic goals as "one of the reasons why I dropped out of college." He also identifies the need for counseling support to navigate the physical campus, use the local transportation system, and discover and access existing support services. Noe says the lack of academic counseling left him feeling unprepared, augmenting mental health struggles he faced, but he was unable to access mental health services. "I don't know if there is any help for my problem," Noe says, but "it would be nice if there were that help."