Two-Year College Students' Perspective on Equity and Inclusion Supports and Barriers

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Improving equity and inclusion in our classrooms, whether in-person or online, is a crucial lens for course design. We surveyed 308 students in our courses and then had listening oriented focus groups with 103 students at our college. Students reported that out-of-class challenges impeded them most, including economic insecurity, time management, and transportation problems. In-class elements that were most challenging included online learning and reading. In-class elements that students reported as supports to learning included active learning, links to resources, and office hours. We recommend providing institutional resources for financial support in course materials, using more online resources in place of textbooks, providing support for how and why to complete readings, and creating transparent expectations for assignments. Finally, we recommend surveying and listening to the students in classes and programs to get a finer grained understanding of the student experience of barriers and supports in specific classes.

Improving equity and inclusion in our classrooms, whether in-person or online, is a crucial lens for course design. Making our pedagogical processes fairer and more inclusive to the wide diversity of students in our courses improves learning across all content areas. The faculty in our English and Communication department wanted to address issues of equity and inclusion but wanted to include our students' knowledge of what is important to them, at *our* school, in *their* lives. As a two-year regional college of a research university, with students who come from many different kinds of experiences before college, we wanted to make tangible changes in our courses that could support our students. The literature on diversity and inclusion gave us student profiles of success and retention statistics, but these profiles and statistics did not directly include the student voice. In order to hear from our students what we could do for them to help make our courses fair and inclusive, we surveyed 308 students in our courses and then had listening oriented focus groups with 103 students at our college. In practical terms, we wanted to know how we could make our courses better by redesigning them with our students' input.

Previous studies indicate that factors outside the classroom often affect students' academic performance. The literature on external factors identified ethnic and minority status and economic status as affecting in-class performance (Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1996; Reardon,

2011; Owens, 2018; VanTassel-Baska, 2018; Wood, 2012; Zwick & Himmelfarb, 2011). Another factor external to the classroom that has been reported to affect in-class success is first-generation status. First-generation students, who comprise 50% of our college's first-year students, face a significant disadvantage across cognitive and psychosocial outcomes compared to students whose parents have at least some postsecondary education (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Zurita, 2004). In all these factors, there is also the effect of intersectionality as our students' identities and experiences are so varied. Our students are ethnically, socioeconomically, and age diverse. In an analysis of DFW rates, we noted that our 1000 level courses and developmental courses had more diverse students than our 2000 level courses. This decrease in diversity concerned us, and we wanted to know what we could do to help more students continue through the composition and communication course sequences.

Following best practices recommended by the research literature in equity and inclusion, our faculty have worked to incorporate student experiences into course work, accommodate multiple perspectives on learning, and help students reflect on their experiences (Harper, 2013; Gay, 2013; Matsuda, 2016; Tinto, 1993). Nevertheless, it appeared that following these best practices benefited the students who could get to class, but academic success and persistence remained a challenge for many of our students with whom we had difficulty maintaining contact and communication. Porter and Umbach (2019) in "What Challenges to Success Do Community College Students Face," suggest that work, finances, and family life were the most significant obstacles to success in school, with instructors and classwork being rated much lower as challenges to learning. With these ideas in mind, through a survey and focus groups, we wanted to ask *our* students what they perceived as both barriers and supports to their learning at *our* regional campus. We wanted to know if ethnic minority status, poverty, or first-generation status groups might be differentially affected by specific challenges presented in our courses.

Method

Participants

The college, an open-access, two-year regional campus at a large public university in the Midwest, has over 4,800 students and is the third largest college at the university. In 2018, incoming first-year students had an average 2.86 high school GPA, and for those students who took the ACT or SAT, they scored on average 19.23 and 1,027 respectively. The gender of participants in this study is similar to the student body, but the age and ethnicity of participants varies from the overall student body. Participants primarily identify themselves as female and male from the multiple options provided in the survey, similar to the college data in which only a binary choice is offered. In this group, 58.9% identify as female and another 41% identify as male. The majority of participants, 88.96%, indicated that they were 18-22 years old, and the remaining 11.04% was divided among other age groups. The larger proportion of traditional college age students reflects the preparatory and introductory nature of the courses.

Survey. Survey participants were recruited from sections taught by members of the research team. A total of 308 students enrolled in preparatory and first-year composition, reading, and communication courses responded to our survey. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants by each of the seven courses involved in the study.

Table 1

Distribution of participants by course enrollment

Course	Percentage	n
Introduction to Academic Literacies	11.43%	36
Preparatory Composition	11.75%	37
English Composition	35.87%	113
Introduction to Communication Studies	5.71%	18
Introduction to Effective Speaking	11.11%	35
Business Communication	12.38%	39
College Reading	11.75%	37

As illustrated in Table 2, the race and ethnicity of participants was similar to incoming freshmen. Although white students accounted for 58.9% of incoming first-year students, only 53.44% of participants identified as white. In the overall student body, however, the overall percentage of white students climbs to 62.3%, and the percentage of Hispanic or Latino and African American or Black students decrease. This drop reflects the trends we have noticed in our own classrooms that precipitated this study. Marginalized students appear to have a lower rate of persistence relative to their less marginalized peers.

Table 2

Comparison of Ethnicity of Participants, Incoming First-Year Students, and the Overall Student

Body

Ethnicity	Participants	Incoming First-Year Students	Overall Student Body
White	53.44%	58.9%	62.3%
Black or African American	25.94%	25.3%	20.5%
Hispanic or Latino	5.00%	6.0%	4.8%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.88%	0.1%	0.2%
Asian	6.25%	4.0%	4.2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.63%	0.0%	0.0%
Two or more races	5.00%	5.2%	4.8%
Other	1.88%	1.6%	1.3%

Focus Groups. In order to further better understand students' survey responses, the study team facilitated eight focus groups. Four focus groups were writing classes, ranging from the lowest level (0097) to the highest level (2089) in the composition sequence. A reading class and a communication class were also used as focus groups. There were two focus groups comprising students who were participating in student groups at the college: The English Conversation Group facilitated by the Writing and Study Skills Center, and the Men of Color

Collaborative, Sister Circle, Latinos en Acción, and [LGBTQ+] Alliance, facilitated by the Multicultural Affairs office (see Table 3).

Table 3

Focus Groups Participants

Name of Focus Group	Type of Group	Number of Students
English Conversation Group	Student Group	10
Men of Color Collaborative, Sister Circle, Latinos en Acción, and [LGBTQ+] Alliance	Student Group	15
English 0097	Writing class	18
English 0099 W	Writing class	9
English 1001	Writing class	11
English 2089	Writing class	15
English 0099 R	Reading class	10
Communication 1010	Communication class	15
Total		**103**

Materials and Procedures

Survey. The research team recruited survey participants from English and Communication course sections. Participants were given a link to voluntarily complete an online survey. The survey was created in Qualtrics and included questions that addressed demographics, current teaching practices, and barriers identified by the literature on student success. The questions

included demographic questions, and perceptions of supports and barriers that were measured on a scale from 1 to 5, as well as open response questions (see Appendix A). A total of 308 students completed the online survey.

Focus Groups. Different procedures were used to recruit the eight focus groups. Six of the focus groups were volunteers from individual classes participating in this research project. Students from the five student groups were recruited for the two remaining focus groups. All participants were compensated with a $10 Amazon gift card that came from a research grant sponsored by the institution's Academy for Fellows of Teaching and Learning.

In conducting the focus groups, the Group-Level Assessment (GLA) model outlined by Vaughn and Lohmueller (2014) was used. Participants took part in the seven GLA steps, responding to prompts that focused on five questions:
1. To improve student success, [the college] should…
2. To remove barriers to student success, [the college] should…
3. Technology at [the college]…
4. [The college] is awesome because…
5. The toughest problems to address are…

Facilitators began by writing prompts on large flip chart paper posted around the room, each question on a separate paper. Students individually responded to each question on the charts. Next, students were encouraged to interact and discuss responses as well as add to other people's responses if they liked. Students were divided into groups to look for themes across the responses. The groups then came together and verbally presented their most commonly occurring themes. Facilitators transcribed these responses for everyone to see. Throughout the session, facilitators did not participate in discussions; their role was to facilitate the groups' progress in the GLA steps.

Results

Survey

In the survey of student perceptions of barriers and supports, students reported that attending office hours, having links to resources, and having in-class activities were most helpful. "In-class activities" was the highest rated support. Under 10% of respondents rated online lectures, online portfolios, online homework, and reading assignments as "not helpful at all", and over 50% of the respondents rated them as "very helpful". Table 1 outlines the responses for all categories.

Table 4

Percentage of student perceptions of how helpful the following activities have been to them in their courses, "very helpful" to "not helpful at all," N=302.

Question	Very Helpful	Moderately Helpful	Slightly Helpful	Not Helpful at All	Not Applicable	Mean (Standard Deviation)
In-class Activities	**62.71**	27.72	6.93	2.31	0.033	1.46 (0.71)
Links to Resources	**53.14**	25.74	14.52	4.62	1.98	1.71 (.93)
Office Hours	**51.16**	28.38	17.16	2.97	0.33	1.69 (0.83)
Reading Assignment	42.9	30.03	18.15	**6.93**	1.98	1.91 (.098)
In-class Lecture	38.61	35.31	16.83	5.28	3.96	1.97 (1.03)
Text Book	38.28	28.05	21.12	5.94	6.6	2.11 (1.17)
Class Presentation	35.31	27.06	17.16	3.96	16.5	2.37 (1.42)
Online Tutorials	27.06	26.73	19.8	4.29	22.11	2.67 (1.49)
Online Homework	33.66	32.67	17.49	**6.93**	9.24	2.24 (1.25)
Online Portfolios	36.3	29.04	17.49	**7.26**	9.9	2.22 (1.27)
Online Lecture	12.21	17.49	21.78	**9.57**	38.94	3.45 (1.47)

The survey also asked students to rate external influences outside the classroom as either a barrier or a support to their learning. They strongly rated technology, listening skills, speaking

skills, writing skills, reading skills, and college skills (e.g. understanding the expectations of college participation) as supports to their learning. The greatest barrier students denoted was having a job, closely followed by time management difficulties. Time to study and time to socialize as well as finding transportation to get to college were also indicated as barriers to learning. Table 5 outlines the percentages of responses in all categories.

Table 5

Percentage of Student Perceptions of Supports and Barriers to their Learning, N=302

Personal Issues	A support	Equal Support and Barrier	A Barrier
Listening Skills	**82.83**	12.54	4.62
Technology	**82.5**	12.87	4.62
College Skills	**79.53**	14.85	5.61
Speaking Skills	**78.54**	16.17	5.28
Writing Skills	**77.55**	16.17	6.27
Reading Skills	**76.89**	14.85	8.25
Social Relationships	**71.61**	21.45	6.93
Academic Work	68.97	20.79	10.23
College Life	63.03	23.43	13.53
Transportation to School	66.66	19.14	14.19
Time to Socialize	57.75	26.73	15.51

Time to Study	57.09	27.39	15.51
Study Skills	64.68	19.14	16.17
Time Management	60.06	17.82	**22.11**
Finances	43.23	34.65	**22.11**
Having a Job	42.24	27.39	**30.36**

Our students are hardworking and often have challenging financial situations. Even though 76.25% of our students report work full-time, part-time or are self employed, only 23.07% of students perceive their financial situation as "comfortable" or that "they don't have to think about money." In addition, 54.85% of the participants are first generation college students.

Statistical Significance. In an ANOVA test, there was no statistically significant difference in responses in the categories of ethnicity and gender in relation to the identification of barriers. There was only statistical significance in the categories of economic security and age. An ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of economic security and age on perception of barriers. For the ANOVA of economic security vs. barriers, there was a significant effect of feelings of economic security on perceptions of barriers at the $p<.05$ level for this condition [$F(6)= 2.73$, $p=.014$]. For the ANOVA of age vs. barriers, there was a significant effect of age on the perception of barriers at the $p<.05$ level for this condition [$F(2)= 3.14$, $p=.034$]. Students who reported feeling economically insecure were more likely to report academic skills as being a barrier to their learning than participants in other economic categories. Students who are 18-22 years old reported perceiving online lectures as being significantly less helpful to their learning than students 23-30 years old.

Focus Groups Results

Focus group facilitators collected participants' responses to the prompts. These responses were coded by two research team members using an open coding system. One researcher read through the raw data, developed codes, and matched responses to the codes. The second researcher went through the data to match responses to the codes developed by the first researcher. Both researchers then met to refine the codes and to compare their matched responses to the codes. Five codes that students identified as having a negative effect on their success at the college emerged from this data analysis: college environment, classroom activities, professor behavior, student issues, and student involvement.

Student participants identified several positive attributes of the college that supported their success. Diversity was seen as a strength of the college. They noted that the faculty and staff are caring, with one group stating the college has "a lot of people to help you." They identified the small class sizes as effective for helping faculty get to know students, and the small college size leads to the development of a "close knit community." They recognized the support services as useful resources for their success. Finally, many noted that "tuition is super affordable" for university education.

At the college level, students pointed out several areas that could be improved. In the area of diversity, students wanted more protection for LGBTQ+ students. They wanted more diverse staff and faculty. They noted that the "clash of cultures'' requires a proactive approach to understanding cultural differences. Some students noted that they had difficulty "fitting in" at the college. Students also wanted the college to provide better mentoring and advising to choose and prepare for careers. They noted that the selective admissions programs, such as nursing, seem to be overly strict.

Although students noted that the faculty were caring and "cool teachers," they had suggestions to improve faculty interactions. They wanted faculty to "be approachable" and offer help to those who need it, preferably individually. They felt faculty should consider their "different walks of life." One student described the student experience this way, "students going home to mom and dad versus being mom and dad." They believed some faculty "expect you to already know how to learn." Because students see these variations in their experiences, they want faculty to adopt different teaching styles to address the different learning needs. They suggested faculty need to assign manageable workloads for homework, update their grades on the learning management system, and have more flexible attendance policies. One student illustrated the negative perception of strict attendance policies when she wrote, "Don't tell students that if they don't attend college then they are stupid." They also wanted faculty to choose textbooks carefully. Students resent required textbooks that aren't used in the course.

When creating classroom activities, students want them to be interactive and exciting in order to motivate their learning. Students want support and time to acclimate to college. They want more time and faculty to slow the pace of the courses. They believe more flexible attendance policies will help them adjust. Breaking down lectures and giving better explanations were identified as being helpful. Students want less homework worth more points and fewer online classes.

Students examined their own roles in their success and pointed out behavioral and economic barriers to their success. Among economic concerns, a student said, "half of us are poor." Another major issue students noted was mental health concerns. They reported that they are stressed because of their economic situation and family obligations. One student noted, "You have to work on your family problems first before you can do anything else." Another barrier to their learning is time management. Students suggest that they are not good at planning their time to work on school assignments and activities. Some students identified not taking

responsibility for their learning was problematic. When students do not take responsibility for their learning and have poor time management, they are not able to use the resources available to help them when needed. Many students reported that they wanted to be involved in the college. Students stated they could be more involved with better communication about what is available, scheduling events at convenient times, and offering events relevant to their interests. Students wanted to be involved in the college but logistics were a barrier.

Discussion

Instructors play a crucial role in designing a learning environment that meets the needs of all students. In both the surveys and focus groups, students indicated several actions within faculty control that helped them achieve their learning goals. First, students noted that caring instructors helped them succeed in their studies. Caring instructors create interactive learning opportunities that develop communities of learners. Students feel empowered to seek out instructor consultation through office hours when they have developed a relationship through the in-class activities. Caring instructors provide links to resources to help students better understand course content. Caring instructors have course policies that are responsive to students' lived experiences, such as flexible attendance policies.

On the other hand, students identified instructor behaviors that interfere with attaining their educational goals. Instructors with negative perceptions of students create less supportive classrooms. Students noted that some instructors expected them to "know how to learn." This perspective assumes that students can learn in the same way the instructor did, but often students' life experiences do not match the life experiences of the instructors. Instructors who have these negative perceptions may require expensive textbooks that are never used, rush through course content without providing opportunities for students to check their understanding or require unmanageable workloads.

Students' perceptions of our courses led us to examine our own beliefs and assumptions about students. We reflected on how we embodied caring instructors who set students up for success in our classes. We realized that the active learning taking place in our classrooms is a point of strength we should continue, but that we could do more to scaffold assignments for students. Some of us have explored using Transparent Assignment Design (TAD) to help students understand the purpose of the assignment, the tasks required to complete the assignment, and how they will be assessed (Winkelmes et al, 2016). In a study on student perceptions of TAD at our institution, students reported that when an assignment included the purpose, tasks, and assessment criteria, they felt more confident and successful in completing the assignment (Peplow et al., 2021). Addressing issues of flexible due dates and attendance policies can become very complicated in assuring that students have sufficient interaction with the course activities and with each other in the course. Explaining the rationale for certain due dates, such as exams or peer reviews, while having clear late policies for low stakes due dates might be a reasonable compromise. Attendance is a similarly problematic issue, particularly in courses that have a great deal of group work and/or active learning exercises. It is important to have a clear attendance

policy with an explanation for why attendance is important, a robust online course presence even in a face-to-face course so students can keep up, and strong communication with students who are having difficulty attending/logging in to a course.

As noted earlier, there are several factors outside an instructor's control that influence student academic experiences. Students in our survey and focus groups noted that the affordable tuition was helpful in achieving their educational goals. They also pointed out the extensive support for academic, social, psychological, and economic concerns available at our college. This external support helps mitigate some of the external barriers students described.

The main barrier students mentioned was economic security. Many students work full-time while trying to maintain a full course load, which leads to time management issues. Several students noted mental health concerns as a major barrier to their learning that often causes issues with procrastination. These mental health concerns have only grown since the pandemic of COVID-19. Another barrier students described was a "clash of cultures." Students need faculty and staff who have a proactive approach to understanding cultural differences. Students specifically pointed out that our college needs more LGBTQ+ support.

This opportunity to listen to students' perceptions of our courses illustrated the importance of better understanding our students' needs. They have very different life experiences than those of us who teach them. The college engaged in listening sessions with students that helped inform our course design during remote instruction required during COVID-19. These listening sessions mirrored the commentary of our participants in the focus groups, such as flexibility and compassion for external challenges. We should continue to listen to students' perceptions through frequent check-ins on how a course is working for them. We also need to seek out professional development opportunities to better understand and implement culturally responsive teaching and Universal Design for Learning that demonstrates our commitment to seeing students as whole people. Finally, we can better communicate with students the many resources available to them to help them navigate the difficult economic and mental health barriers they face.

Conclusion

When we began this study, we thought we might find significant differences in the responses from groups of students based on ethnic identification and gender, but that was not the case. The most significant barrier to college success in both the survey and the focus group was financial security. As one student wrote during one of the focus groups, "You have to know, we're poor!" Financial insecurity affects preparation for college work, confidence in joining the academic community, access to textbooks and technology, the ability to get to class, and the access to the personal time required to study. In the classroom, the instructor cannot do much about helping students have more money, which is addressed at an institutional level, but instructors can address some of the implications. Making sure the class has clear attendance and due date policies, and building in flexibility and personal communication, can support students

who may be struggling with time management. Using the Transparent Assignment Design of specifying purpose, task, and assessment criteria can help students from differing levels of preparation for college expectations understand why and how the assignments work.

We can demonstrate our commitment to equity and inclusion in our courses in these very practical ways of being clearer about our expectations and then being flexible and compassionate with our students as they learn to meet those expectations. In our department, it made a big difference in helping bring this realization to our faculty by asking students how our courses worked for them and then taking that information seriously by making practical and immediate changes to our courses.

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