

**The Role of Institutions in Supporting Underrepresented Students'
Upward Transfer from Community College**

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Abstract

Community colleges serve more historically marginalized and underrepresented students than any other sector of U.S. higher education (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Despite the majority of community college students reporting their intent to earn at least a bachelor's degree, only a small fraction of them end up transferring to a four-year institution (Shapiro et al., 2020). This qualitative case study investigates how students' educational trajectories are shaped by experiences embedded in the context of their educational institution and interactions with institutional agents. Interviews of students and faculty (n=15) at a community college in Washington State provide insight into how community colleges can support underrepresented students' upward educational trajectories. Utilizing Rendón's (1994) validation theory, it is recognized how underrepresented students enter learning settings already possessing a breadth of strengths, and responsibility is placed on institutions of higher education to create environments where students have the capacity to succeed in their education. The findings of this study indicate externally and internally validating experiences while in community college enhanced students' academic and interpersonal development, sense of belonging, positive self-concept, as well as motivation for persisting in higher education. These experiences included positive and affirming interactions with faculty and staff, situations where students' voices were empowered, and opportunities for developing connection and community in college.

Introduction

Students in community colleges represent 44 percent of all undergraduates in the United States (Jenkins & Fink, 2020) and community colleges serve more historically underrepresented groups in higher education than any other sector of U.S. higher education (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Ison, 2020). The American Association of Community Colleges reported 56 percent of Native American undergraduates, 55 percent of Hispanic undergraduates, 45 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander undergraduates, 44 percent of Black or African American undergraduates, and 41 percent of White undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges in the United States (Jenkins & Fink, 2020). While over 80 percent of community college students in the 2013 cohort shared their intent to earn at least a bachelor's degree, only about 31 percent ended up transferring to a four-year college within six years (Shapiro et al., 2020). Among the entire cohort of students who entered community college in 2013, 14 percent completed a bachelor's degree within six years (Shapiro et al., 2020). Despite nearly identical degree expectations for student populations, studies using nationally representative data indicate there are significant racial, ethnic, and socio-economic upward transfer gaps; with Black or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, and low-income community college students having a lower likelihood of successfully transferring to four-year colleges (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2017, Shapiro et al., 2020).

Upward transfer gaps are a matter of inequality in educational access, opportunity, and attainment with potentially detrimental impacts on student's long-term life outcomes. Studies indicate how those with a college degree have greater lifetime earnings compared to those with only a high school diploma (Mitchell et al., 2019), and such credentials are increasingly important as the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce predicts 70

percent of all jobs will require a postsecondary education by 2027 (Blumenstyk, 2020). Jenkins and Fink (2015) wrote how vertical transfer from community college to four-year college “offers a critical avenue for upward mobility for many underserved students, including low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority students, all of whom are disproportionately represented at community colleges” (p. 1). Yet, significant gaps in educational attainment, including transfer rates from community to four-year college, exist when comparing low-income, first-generation, and students of color to more highly represented student populations (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014).

Researchers have investigated what factors help explain the variance in community college students’ rates of successful transfer to four-year colleges, examining the potential impacts of student or institutional characteristics and behaviors (LaSota & Zumeta, 2015). Much of the existing empirical research seeks to identify predictive factors for student persistence, attainment, and upward transfers. However, these researchers’ strategies for studying inequality in higher educational access offer limited explanations of *why* and *how* such factors shape underrepresented students’ educational trajectories. While there are qualitative studies which provide more depth to understanding students’ upward transfers and inequality in college access, most focus on community college transfer student success while in four-year college settings. These frames of inquiry often de-emphasize the role of community colleges in shaping students’ educational trajectories and leave out students who did not successfully transfer. This prevalent selection bias in qualitative research concerning upward transfers indicates how few studies offer a full picture of the experiences and conditions in community college which facilitate or hinder underrepresented students’ ability to pursue upward transfer. This study aims to fill this gap in

the literature by grounding the case study in student experiences embedded within a community college setting and their interactions with community college faculty and staff.

Purpose of the Study

Focusing on the case of Whatcom Community College, this qualitative study seeks to develop an understanding of the role of institutions, and institutional representatives, in supporting underrepresented students' upward transfer from community college. This study takes on an asset-based view of students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, recognizing how these students bring valuable perspectives, experiences, and knowledge into college settings which should be recognized by higher educational institutions. Utilizing Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which asserts how validating students increases their sense of belonging, self-concept, self-efficacy, and educational outcomes, responsibility is placed on the institution and its representatives to actively affirm underrepresented students and assist their upward educational trajectories. This case study draws on the perspectives of students and faculty at a community college to examine how community colleges can enhance underrepresented students' ability to transfer from community college to four-year college.

This study contributes to understandings of how community colleges can shape students' upward educational trajectories. This case study delves into student experiences while in community college and various strategies for supporting community college students. The results of this case study have the potential to inform the practices and policies of higher educational policymakers, leadership, faculty, and staff as it shares the perspectives and experiences of those navigating community college today. Listening to the voices of students and faculty at a community college in Bellingham, Washington, stakeholders are able to obtain an understanding of the conditions in community colleges which contribute to students' ability to succeed.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework Overview

This study is grounded in Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which captures how student's educational trajectories are shaped by experiences embedded in the context of their educational institution and interactions with institutional agents. Rendón defined validation as "the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment" (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12). Validation theory offers a compelling social justice framework for research on college access, as it was conceptualized from diverse student voices and based on an asset-based perspective of underrepresented students in higher education which places responsibility onto institutions for addressing inequities in the education system rather than blaming historically marginalized populations for the barriers they face. Validation theory supplies important questions about how community colleges support underrepresented students' upward educational journeys to be investigated in this exploratory case study.

Validation Theory

Rendón's (1994) validation theory aims to provide a framework for understanding the experiences of students who are underrepresented in higher education. Rendón introduced validation theory after engaging in qualitative research focused on assessing student experiences which influenced learning and retention for the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment. During her work for the U.S. Department of Education, Rendón observed how historically underrepresented student populations experienced college transitions

in vastly different ways in comparison to their more privileged peers. Although their original study design was grounded in themes related to the importance of college involvement (Astin, 1985), Rendón found how underrepresented students were much more likely to cite validating or affirming experiences as being meaningful to their success in college (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). Emerging literature using validation theory indicates how validating experiences improve the likelihood for persistence for underrepresented student populations, such as low-income, first-generation, and students of color, while in community college (Rendón, 1994; Jehangir, 2009; Rendón, 2002; Nora et al., 2011; Zhang & Ozuna, 2015). This study will focus on how underrepresented community college students strive to transfer to four-year college, investigating how validating or invalidating experiences while in a community college shape their capacity to make this transition.

Based on her previous research, Rendón identified six core elements of her validation theory. The first element stresses how institutions of higher education and institutional agents are responsible for initiating contact with students and actively reaching out to offer support. The second element posits how validation instills self-confidence in students' abilities to be successful college students. The third element emphasizes how validation is a "prerequisite to student development," thus students are more likely to become involved in a higher educational setting after experiencing academic and interpersonal validation on a consistent basis. The fourth element outlines how validation can occur both within and outside the classroom with multiple agents, such as faculty, advisors, classmates, and family members, through active affirmation, support, or activities which recognize students as "whole human beings." This study will primarily focus on how validation and invalidation occurs within the community college structure and with community college representatives, though social support outside of the

college will be included as well. The fifth element is “validation should not be viewed as an end, but rather as a developmental process which begins early and can continue over time” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 18). Finally, the sixth element asserts how validating experiences and positive interactions are particularly beneficial for underrepresented student groups early in their college experience (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). This last element is important when students start their higher educational careers in community college and intend to continue their education in a four-year institution, such as in the case of this study’s sample of students. The elements of validation theory work well within this study’s frame of research on how to support underrepresented students transferring from community college to four-year college, as it values student experiences while placing responsibility on institutions for actively supporting their educational trajectories to improve student success.

An Asset-Based Approach to Higher Education

A concerning weakness in existing literature examining issues of inequality in college access is the prevalent reliance on a deficit-based model which frames marginalized populations as being the problem, rather than the institutional structures which have historically excluded and oppressed them. Underrepresented students are frequently portrayed for being underprepared for college and called “non-traditional” student populations, with studies focusing on how their educational, cultural, and family backgrounds hinder their capacity or probability for success in higher education. In order to achieve a more complete understanding of inequality in college access, it is important to recognize not only how student’s positionality and backgrounds affect their experiences navigating educational institutions, but also the role higher educational institutions play in determining what student qualities, experiences, skills, or capital are valued in

these settings through their policies and practices. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) highlighted how validation theory is an asset-based model. The authors wrote,

A key assumption is that students, regardless of background, bring a reservoir of funds of knowledge and experiences that render these students open to learning with validating instructors and classroom climates. When validating agents work with students as possessing a reservoir of assets, the dominant view that poor students only have deficits is shattered and decentered. (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 25)

Rendón and Muñoz focused on low-income students, but the asset-based approach remains relevant for all historically underrepresented student populations. The asset-based approach within validation theory is imperative for this study because it anchors the research in student voices to supply asset-based policy solutions, where the experiences and knowledge of underrepresented students are valued, and institutions actively support and empower their identities within the college setting¹.

Benefits of Academic and Interpersonal Validation

Existing quantitative literature indicates how academic and interpersonal validation from institutions and institutional agents influence students' sense of belonging, academic self-concept, and educational outcomes [See Appendix I]. The most significant impacts of validating or invalidating experiences are felt among underrepresented students, with most studies

¹ In 2011, Rendón and Muñoz revisited validation theory and reviewed how “theoretical perspectives posed by numerous scholars share remarkable consonance with some key elements of validation theory.” The theoretical perspectives which are complementary to validation theory and exemplify an asset-based view of underrepresented students include the *community cultural wealth model* (Yosso, 2005), *ethic of care* (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999), *ABC model of creating inclusive environments* (Tatum, 2007), and *liberatory pedagogy* (Freire, 1971; hooks, 1994). Rendón has placed particular emphasis on how validation theory is connected to liberatory pedagogy. Both frameworks approach education in a way that “honors diverse ways of knowing, invites all to participate in knowledge production, allows both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge, promotes an ethic of care, helps students find voice and self-worth, and works with a curriculum that is democratic, inclusive, and reflective of student backgrounds” (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011).

highlighting how these experiences are especially impactful within community colleges (Andrade, 2019; Barnett, 2011; Hernandez & Lopez, 2005; Hurtado et al., 2011). These studies provide empirical evidence supporting Rendón's theory of interpersonal and academic validation influencing underrepresented student's persistence and success in college settings. Although this quantitative data certainly gives credence to validation theory, the importance of using qualitative methods to examine how validation shapes students' educational trajectories must be emphasized. As previous studies on the effects of validation on underrepresented students' college access have indicated, validation can take on many different forms and students have complex reactions which are difficult to quantify.

Quantitative Trends in Upward Transfer

Researchers frequently use quantitative methods when seeking to understand upward transfer access issues. Much of the existing literature on the transfer from community college to four-year college attempt to identify causal or associative relationships between student and institutional characteristics or behaviors and students' ability to successfully transfer, often using institutional or national survey data (Adelman, 2006; Horn, 2009; Doyle, 2009; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Gross & Goldhaber, 2009; Bowen et al., 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2009; LaSota & Zumeta, 2015; Roksa & Calcagano, 2010; Offenstein & Shulock, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2013; Zachry & Schneider, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). Investigating the individual behaviors and characteristics associated with upward transfers from community college, researchers found how first-generation students, low-income students, older students, Black or African American students, and Hispanic or Latinx students had a lower probability of upward transfer, but institutional and state factors had the potential to mitigate the effects (Dougherty and Kienzl 2006; Gross and Goldhaber 2009; Bowen et al. 2009). Gross and Goldhaber (2009)

examined some of these institutional characteristics, finding how there was an association between the percentage of tenured faculty and the probability of students' upward transfer, a negative association of higher student-to-faculty ratios with upward transfer, and increased spending on student services had a positive impact on upward transfers. In another strand of research, researchers have found evidence that formal and informal advising affected students' likelihood to persist and their ability to vertically transfer (Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). However, relying upon quantitative methods to explain how students transfer from community college to four-year college either ignores, or barely scrapes the surface, of how student experiences in the context of community college shape their educational trajectories. The data may indicate how the existence of certain interactions, experiences, or characteristics within a community college increase or decrease the likelihood for students to transfer, but they do not get at why or how these relationships may exist.

Qualitative Insights About Upward Transfer

Townsend's (1995) qualitative research about students who transferred from community college to four-year college inspired many of the later frames of inquiry on the subject.

Townsend (1995) used a case study design to investigate how community college students who made the transition into a four-year college perceived the transfer process and academic environment of their institution. Townsend found how students reported feeling as though they needed to self-navigate the upward transfer process, though many received varying amounts of assistance during the transfer process by four-year college representatives who they met through their community colleges, in addition to help from their friends and family. Townsend included students who transferred from community college to a private, religiously affiliated, and moderately selective university in her study's sample, which was an interesting choice as nearly

three-fourths of all community college student transfers enroll in public four-year institutions (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Townsend's work helped inform later studies about the upward transfer process. Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf and Laanan's (2013) drew upon Townsend's research to construct their qualitative study design about upward transfer students. Similar to Townsend, the researchers interviewed a group of transfer students who had successfully transferred to a four-year institution about their transfer student experiences. The researchers found how the students in their sample frequently relied on college advisors, faculty, and counselors, as well as their family and peers, as 'resources' while navigating the transfer process. Gard, Paton, and Gosselin (2012) also cite Townsend's work as being foundational to their study. The researchers interviewed a sample of underrepresented students who had transferred from community college to a four-year university in a focus-group setting and surveyed them individually after the focus groups. One of the key findings was how students emphasized the importance of having easily accessible face-to-face assistance from four-year university and community college representatives while navigating the transfer process. The most significant limitation in these studies resides in how they excluded students who did not successfully transfer from community college to four-year colleges. These students have the potential to offer critical information regarding why they were unable to transfer, yet their voices are often excluded from studies on upward transfers.

There has been extensive research on upward transfers, though many of these studies are framed around the academic issues students experience after transferring from community college to four-year college. One of the few studies which explore the community college context was carried out by Jabbar, McKinnon-Crowley, and Serrata (2019), who executed a compelling longitudinal qualitative study on transfer-intending students at a community college.

The researchers found how students' social capital, academic advisement, and family backgrounds can interact in a way that determines either success or failure in the transfer process. With results especially pertinent to this study, Jabbar and Serrata's study indicated how the background of students were not deterministic, as their community college played an important role in providing information, advising, and supporting students in their academic journeys. In addition, student's social and family connections served as essential sources of community cultural wealth and validation which assisted students in advancing towards their academic goals. These findings offer convincing evidence about how community college can support underrepresented students' upward transfer.

Gaps in Upward Transfer Literature

A variety of research exists on the transfer process from community college to four-year college. Yet, the influence of community colleges and their representatives on underrepresented students' academic trajectories remains an under-explored area of research. Much of the existing literature either seeks to identify predictive factors for successful transfers, which leaves out nuanced student, faculty, and staff perspectives; or the research zeroes in on the process of transitioning into four-year colleges, often de-emphasizing the role of community colleges in shaping students' capacity to navigate the transfer process and excluding students who did not successfully transfer into a four-year college. This case study works toward filling this gap by exploring current community college student and faculty perspectives about the role of community colleges and institutional representatives in supporting students' upward educational trajectories. This study is grounded in the Rendón's (1994) validation theory to explore how student experiences in the context of a community college and interactions with community college representatives can shape their ability to pursue transferring to a four-year college.

Methodology

Design Overview

This study takes on a case study design to obtain a complex, in-depth understanding of how students' experiences within the context of a community college, and interactions with community college representatives, shape their upward educational trajectories. The single case investigated in this study includes community college students who intend to transfer to four-year college and faculty at the institution of focus, Whatcom Community College (WCC) in Bellingham, Washington. Qualitative interview data of student and faculty participants was collected during the Spring of 2021 and followed a retrospective design, in which participants were asked to recall past experiences in the context of the community college. This study uses a phenomenological approach, which Marshall and Rossman (1999) defined as "the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on an assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated" (p. 112). Though there are exploratory elements to this design, this case study primarily seeks to be explanatory as it is grounded in Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which guided questions for semi-structured interviews centered on how students may be academically and interpersonally validated, or invalidated, while enrolled in community college. Interviews of students and faculty at Whatcom Community college serve as the primary source of data.

Data Source

Qualitative interview data was collected during the Spring of 2021 at Whatcom Community College (WCC). WCC enrolls approximately 6,800 credit-seeking students annually. There are 78 full-time faculty and 244 part-time faculty employed at WCC. Of the twenty-two

degrees and certificates offered at WCC, 79 percent of those awarded are academic transfer and 21 percent are professional technical (“About Whatcom,” 2021).

In order to obtain a sample of WCC students considering transferring to four-year college, instructors teaching English 101 during Spring Quarter 2021 were contacted through email. The PI invited the instructors to be interviewed and requested them to forward an invitation for students to participate in a single interview for the study. English 101 is the highest enrolled course at Whatcom Community College, as well as across all of the 34 two-year community and technical colleges in Washington State. The course is a requirement for all degrees and certificates at WCC, therefore it enrolls a high number of credit-seeking students from all disciplines.

Faculty and staff at WCC were also recruited through purposive sampling. Student interviewees were asked at the end of each interview to recommend WCC faculty and staff for the PI to contact who they perceived as having especially supported their upward educational trajectories. Faculty and staff identified as helping students with their upward educational trajectories were contacted through email and asked to participate in an interview about their strategies for validating and supporting students. The approach of asking students to identify community college representatives to be included in the study’s sample ensures those interviewed had implemented validating practices and strategies which students perceive as being effective methods for supporting their academic journeys. The ultimate aim in this study to learn what strategies, policies, and practices students perceive as best supporting their pursuit to continue their postsecondary education, thus it is crucial to first ground this investigation in student perspectives and experiences. Moreover, this methodology accounts for, and

incorporates, the way in which students may respond to the practices of community college faculty and staff in unexpected ways.

There were fifteen participants in total. Eight participants were students and seven were faculty members. The students who participated in an interview for this study all shared the experience of previously being enrolled in an English 101 course at Whatcom Community College. Table 3.1 shows the characteristics of the community college students who participated in this study. All of the faculty who participated in an interview taught in the English Department. Four participants were full-time faculty and three were adjunct faculty. Some faculty members who participated in this study took on additional roles on campus as well. The faculty members who participated in an interview are shown on Table 3.2.

Table 3.1

Student Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Latinx / Hispanic	ESL	First-Generation	Low-Income	Returning Adult	4-Yr Degree Intent	4-Yr Degree Area of Study
Veronica	F	Multiracial	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Cybersecurity
Samantha	F	White	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Psychology
Jennifer	F	Multiracial	Y	N	*	Y	Y	Y	Interdisciplinary
Sarah	F	Asian	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Business
Andrew	M	Asian	N	N	N	*	N	Y	Undecided
Elizabeth	F	White	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Education
Daniel	M	White	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Undecided
Edward	M	Multiracial	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Undecided

*Unknown

Table 3.2*Faculty Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Position	Department
Michael	M	Adjunct Faculty	English Composition & Literature
Patricia	F	Full-Time Faculty	English Composition & Literature
Tanya	F	Adjunct Faculty	English Composition & Literature
Howard	M	Full-Time Faculty	English Composition & Literature
Steven	M	Adjunct Faculty	English Composition & Literature
Margaret	F	Full-Time Faculty	English Composition & Literature
George	M	Full-Time Faculty	English Composition & Literature

Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol, with a set of prescribed questions guided by Rendón's (1994) validation theory and follow-up questions based on the participants and their responses. The audio of the interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to be examined for themes. After the interviews, field notes and reflexive memos were carried out by the researcher as supplemental materials. Public institutional documents such as WCC Student Transfer Guides and online resources on the WCC Advising & Career Services webpages, which are available for students at Whatcom Community College who intend to transfer to four-year college, were also drawn upon to gain a better understanding of the context.

Data Analysis

Interview data were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview transcripts were first coded using a deductive approach based on the theoretical components of the framework grounding this study, Rendón's validation theory. The core concepts encompassed within validation theory are defined by three overarching themes: forms of validation, elements of validating experiences, and student responses to validating experiences. Specific subcomponents explored within these high-level themes were defined by Rendón as "core elements," though they will be called themes in this study. *The distinct forms of validation* are academic validation and interpersonal validation. Academic validation are practices which assist students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). Interpersonal validation focuses on affirming students as "persons, not just as students" and fosters "students' personal development and social adjustment" (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 19). *The key elements of validating experiences* encompassed within the theoretical framework include: institutional representatives are responsible for actively reaching out to students, validation occurs both within or outside the classroom, validation acts as a process rather than an 'end,' and underrepresented students experience more benefits from validating experiences when they occur at the start of their college careers. *Student responses to validating experiences* theorized by Rendón consist of students experiencing improved self-confidence, self-concept, and self-efficacy; an enhanced sense of belonging within the college setting; and student development.

Although the themes in this initial coding step are determined through the theoretical framework of validation, attention is given to exploring emergent themes centered on *student experiences in community college* and *strategies for supporting students continuing their*

postsecondary education and pursuing upward transfer. The broad questions explored within the data are as follows. 1: What are some of the specific practices through which students at WCC experience validation? How does this influence their perceptions concerning continuing their postsecondary education and upward transfer? 2: How does the absence of validating experiences, or existence of invalidating experiences, influence students' academic trajectories? 3: What experiences and conditions at WCC facilitate or hinder students' ability to pursue upward transfer?

Limitations

There are limitations to the case study design. The study took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which placed limitations on the strategies used to recruit participants because in-person activities were suspended. Nevertheless, the online learning environment at the time allowed participants to be recruited remotely. For the student sample in particular, every enrolled student was required to have access to the internet to participate in their online classroom, which meant that recruiting them online was the most promising course of action. Additionally, the sampling approach utilized in this study relied upon self-selection, which created the potential for selection bias. The case study design and small sample of participants at Whatcom Community College means the data cannot be generalized to the broader population. Despite this, the case study design is ideal because the study's results, which includes how and why certain interactions or conditions in community college influence student outcomes, will generate a more in-depth understanding of student experiences with the potential for informing future research, practice, and policy about how to better support student transfers from community college to four-year college.

As the interviews are retrospective, they are reliant upon participants' recollection of the past. However, the possibility of error in memory is mitigated by how the amount of time spent in community college tends to be relatively short, as most community college degrees and certificates can be completed in one to two years. For many of the study participants, the experiences they were asked to narrate occurred recently. Finally, students were not tracked over a period of time, so there is a level of uncertainty over the impact of different experiences in community college on the transfer to four-year college. Yet, the information able to be obtained during this single occasion still provides important insights about how students and faculty perceive these experiences in the community college during this moment in time. These current perceptions tell us how participants construct meaning around their lived experiences, shaping their behaviors in the past, present, and future.

Results

Being Heard: Empowering Student Voices

"My Voice is Part of the Conversation"

Students at Whatcom Community College spoke about the profound impact of being in learning environments where they felt their perspectives and the knowledge they brought into the college was valued. Elizabeth talked about her first meeting with her advisor after not having been in school for seven years, where she was told how her experiences would be an asset as a student in college. She said,

"She really was able to take the life experience that I had as a parent and translate that into skills that I already had that would be relevant to my academic career. And it wasn't something that I really considered or thought about. And so I think to initially have someone validate that and validate how my experiences and how my time as a parent

would be influential to my learning experience was huge because I really hadn't viewed it that way, myself. And so I think that that gave me a tremendous amount of confidence entering in, to have someone recognize that and speak to that.”

Elizabeth shared how this interaction with her advisor provided her confidence moving forward in her higher education and entering the college classroom.

Another student, Samantha, spoke about situations when she felt her perspective and identity was especially affirmed at the college. She worked closely with Whatcom Community College faculty and staff who asked her to share what she observed and her insights as a transgender student. Samantha said how she felt like she had “been really relied upon recently.”

Samantha shared:

“But the marginalization, the fear of being trans specifically is really difficult especially for younger individuals still in their household, individuals who are just now coming into adulthood. And I've been allowed the opportunity to really speak on my experiences before teachers, before instructors and advise them on the things I'm seeing... And I feel like I'm being trusted with that kind of information, that I know something and something of worth even if I don't have those degrees in education and stuff, my voice is part of the conversation.”

Students also spoke about the impact of being able to express themselves in the classroom through a variety of learning situations. Veronica talked about her first English class at WCC, where her instructor designed assignments to include “you as a person, as a student, and as part of Whatcom Community College. She integrated all of that into her class and that was really amazing and I was like *OK, I want to continue doing this...* Through her class, we have the freedom to be ourselves and to really use our freedom of speech.” Margaret, the English

instructor Veronica spoke about, shared how she does this in her course. Margaret said, “My whole class has been set up to include everybody with the projects, and to include real engineering engagement to try to find that place somewhere with each person where there's dovetailing of interests between me and them, and them and their classmates. So wherever that might be, that they can step in and say something, participate.”

Daniel spoke about how he had “one of the best experiences he ever had” in an ethics class, where he was asked to debate topics with the class. He stated how the instructor empowered him, “I don't really have much experience public speaking or talking in front of people, but in this class, we were really motivated to get up and share our perspectives, even knowing ahead of time that there are going to be people who are going to disagree with you.”

Andrew explained how during class discussions, “You kind of get credited for speaking your mind both from your peers and from the professors... that informal way of expressing your ideas or opinions is a big way that I feel like I'm being credited with my own creative knowledge.”

Faculty members explained their strategies for encouraging students to share their perspectives. Michael, who taught English courses at Whatcom Community College for about twenty years, described his strategies for facilitating conversations in the classroom:

“Maybe in a classroom conversation, somebody articulates something and then somebody counter argues that. So in a situation like that, it might be useful for me as a facilitator to sort of then slow the movement down and say, ‘Well, let's take a look at these two different perspectives.’ And let's recognize the value in those perspectives and why it is that there might be some differences in how people perceive things.”

There were instances, too, when students felt their voices were excluded in the college setting. Jennifer shared a time when she felt unheard as a multiracial Black woman in a class

discussion about race, and experienced microaggressions in the classroom when she spoke up. She explained how she responded to a comment students made during the class discussion about racism,

“There was a lot of ignorance behind it. And I made my statement of why that's not OK. And it's still hurtful, like there's people, like it may not affect you in that way, but for us it's a very big reality. And apparently the way I said it was not intimidating, but apparently I looked upset. And people are not used to me being upset because I can joke around and play around a lot. But people aren't used to me being upset. My teacher literally stopped all the questions, looked dead at me and was like, ‘Are you mad at me?’ Like, no, I’m not mad at you. I'm not mad at you, I just don't think that certain people making comments right now understand that there are people of color in this class, and we don't feel heard. We don't feel like this is being taken seriously.”

Samantha shared how she felt her perspective was not valued within many of the courses she was enrolled in for her degree program. She explained an example of how her knowledge was invalidated in a class centered around a topic in which she had extensive expertise, from her personal experiences, identity, and work. Samantha said,

“I felt like any time I tried to bring that advanced knowledge into the thing or even just to meet it at my own level, I would be discouraged. In fact, I had one instructor that told me outright, any time I would try to bring it to my level so that I felt like I was growing, the instructor would tell me that I was not working at a fundamental level and that I was even a distraction for other students. So now I don't think I've been honored as a creator of knowledge in my own coursework.”

In addition, she described how it was discouraging to be in courses which did not incorporate any elements of discussion or interaction. Despite her intent to transfer to a four-year college, her motivation atrophied as she felt unable to build upon her own knowledge. Samantha stated, “Just being expected to show up on campus, do assignments, and stop. I want out of it. I want to stop going to college.”

Students spoke about how it was important to feel as though their voices were heard and seen as valuable by institutional representatives. Having opportunities to share their perspectives in college helped students recognize their own abilities and knowledge, as well as improved their confidence in their capacity to navigate the college setting. The situations and mediums in which students were able to express themselves and their identities were varied, with students providing examples of how they felt empowered through one-on-one conversations with faculty and staff, class discussions or debates, and different genres of course assignments which asked them to share their understanding of the world. When there were negative responses to students expressing themselves, many of the students conveyed how it negatively affected their sense of belonging and perceptions about their ability to succeed in college.

Faculty members emphasized how they want students to feel like their voice matters. Michael explained the perspective he tries to communicate with students to encourage them to join conversations in the learning community:

“I know that not everybody is comfortable with that, but really trying to recognize how it is that even when we might feel intimidated in a group, thinking that we don't know as much as other people or that maybe I'm not as prepared as somebody else. The ability to recognize that if we're attentive in a situation and a learning situation, I think that we can always have something to add to the conversation. And that's what I would really like to

have people embrace, is that idea that chances are they have something valuable to contribute to the conversation. Whether that conversation is an oral conversation in a group setting or whether that's in a composition that's created in some medium.”

Michael described how students bring knowledge into the classroom. He indicated, “when they come into a course that I'm facilitating, they're really an integral part of that experience then of what we all might gather from each other. So to me, I really value that idea that it's not a top down thing, education.” Margaret, explained how she had a similar viewpoint in her classroom, “I'm learning too, with each one, with each student each quarter.” Tanya summarized what she wants students to take away from her courses, “I want them to recognize their voice as not just valid within the many conversations that are happening in our world professionally, academically, socially, culturally, but more than just valid, I want them to feel like their voice matters, that it's important, that it's pressing and that we need to hear it.”

Feedback: Conversation, Interaction, and Recognition

All the students brought up how the feedback and responses they received from faculty about their work and various contributions in the learning environment was central to the degree to which they felt validated as students and individuals. Andrew described how the extensive feedback, good or bad, that he received from faculty was unexpectedly beneficial to his college journey,

“I will be honest, I wasn't expecting the professors at a community college to be as *interactive* with their all of their students and that even just hearing back from your professor in a negative or positive way has kind of just validated my work here in general, because a lot of times you feel like... we do things without a purpose and we kind of just do them because we're told to do them. But here, the professors are really

great at communicating with their students. And that makes me feel like my work has really made me feel validated because I just feel like an important part of their class and also the overall learning environment at Whatcom...And so when you can kind of interpret it as the professor putting in a lot of work to grade your assignment and giving you feedback not just you want to hear, but also you need to hear. The stuff that you need to hear to become a better learner, whatever subject you are learning about.”

Edward explained how the responses he received from one of his instructors improved his confidence in his grasp of course content. This was significant, as he had entered WCC with little confidence in his ability to succeed in college and was initially “expecting entirely to fail and drop out, to be honest.” He said,

“And she would reach back out after we would do our assignments and she would give us lengthy responses to our assignments and telling us exactly how she saw what we understood, what we learned. And it was encouraging because when you get the response, instead of someone going through and just checking that you turned in the assignment, she actually read it and went through and told me how well I did. And that made me more confident in what I thought I had understood.”

Jennifer spoke about how it was personally hard for her to accept the positive feedback she received from those at the college. She said, “I look at the things that teachers have written me and things other people have said to me. I still can't connect it with the person that I am because I have such a struggle with my own self-identity some days.” Yet, some of the responses she received from faculty were especially impactful because they affirmed her sense of self, recognized her goal to become a counselor, and confirmed her capacity to excel in that role. Jennifer brought up two examples that stuck with her:

“Just the way that he talks about how I speak to people, how I write with people, how I deal with other students, definitely it was empowering and encouraging me because it's like that's what I want to do. I want to counsel people. I want to encourage people. I want people to know that they're capable. And that's definitely been a help to me. [A faculty member] one day gave me the best compliment I've ever received in my life, and I was able to take it. She's like, 'you have the ability to make other people feel seen.' And that, it stays with me. And that's exactly who I want to be, is a person that makes others feel seen.”

Students also reported instances when they felt discouraged by a lack of response from their instructors, which left them feeling uncertain about their learning. Daniel said,

“I would still be concerned about how well I would do in class... I wouldn't know whether or not I was retaining the right material or whether I was preparing for the right questions. That was the difficult thing for me. I think reaching out would have definitely helped a lot. In the moment, I think he didn't grade a lot of stuff until the very end so I didn't know how well I was doing on assignments or whether there were things I should be working on.”

Another student, Elizabeth explained a time when her instructor's poor communication made her question her ability to succeed in her area of study. She expressed how this situation made her feel,

“And I think the attitude just in general was kind of one of, well, if you fail, you fail. And I didn't feel like this particular instructor was invested in seeing people succeed... the communication was very poor. And I think that definitely for me, that particular quarter was really, really hard to get through. And I did kind of start questioning like, *OK, I*

thought I was doing really well here. And, I'm suddenly like, *this isn't making sense.* This has always been an area I've been strong in. I should be able to do this.”

In addition to difficulties related to a lack of communication from their instructors, students also delved into their perceptions of how “genuine” or “authentic” they found some of the feedback they received. Students talked about how they would get responses to their work from faculty that seemed to “be like a script or something,” which students found meaningless at best and dehumanizing at worst. Sarah said, “Oftentimes you see professors that kind of just say great work for every student. They don't really give in-depth or honest feedback.” Andrew found this especially hard in his online courses, “It just feels so dehumanizing in a way because it feels like we are just robots turning in assignments. And that definitely makes your motivation go down and just your excitement for school go way down.”

Faculty spoke about their strategies in providing feedback as an interaction between two people, in which students’ strengths are recognized and their capacity is built upon. Steven explained how he wanted his students to know, “I'm not just a computer that spits out feedback. I'm a human being. And I care about your success. And I want to work with you.” Howard described how he tries to make the feedback he provides to students a validating experience. He explained his practices when responding to students’ work:

“The main thing is in giving feedback. We all have a negativity bias, if somebody tells you five good things, one bad thing, you're going to remember the bad thing and so I always remember that and I always try to respond, it is not ‘good *but,*’ it is ‘good *and.*’ ‘This meets this criteria, this is good, *and* it can go further in this way, if you would like to take it that way’...Second is I would respond as a reader and not as a judge. And it's an

attempt not just look at writing as a product measured against a single standard, but rather as the interaction between two people.”

George outlined how he has a similar approach to providing students with feedback:

“I like to have a dialogue with students. I see us as developmental partners in their writing and their education, so I want there to be a lot of back and forth, like they write something or produce something, and I give feedback and then they talk back and I give feedback more... I think a lot of students are used to getting deficit-focused feedback, like ‘here’s what you're doing wrong,’ and my feedback tries to be more capacity-focused feedback, like ‘here is what is working and here is how you can make it even stronger.’”

Faculty explained how they have observed many of their students coming into their first college writing courses with low confidence and keep this in mind when giving their feedback. Tanya stated,

“I am very, very determined to make sure that students walk away knowing what they're doing well in their classes and in their writing, because they've for far too long been told what they're not doing well with their writing. So that's really important to me. I tell them what they need to work on, but I really try and make sure they know what they're doing right.”

Margaret described how she sees these interactions with students as helping prepare them for upward transfer to a four-year institution:

“I don't know how to prepare them for if they're going to be treated poorly because they went to a two-year college... So make sure they know from our conversation, make sure they know I know what they have, what they're taking with them. I can't convince them of it, I can't make sure they know. But I can just be sure that the interactions they have

with me are strong and scholarly and personally relevant and respectful. And I think that's a good launching pad for insisting that their future conversations with people are also that. That people see them in the ways they've been seen."

Student Engagement and Leadership

Student engagement and leadership activities were frequently brought up as playing a significant role in students' feelings of empowerment, representation, and community while in college. Even students who were not enrolled or involved in student groups and programs mentioned how they saw the student-led activities on campus as being an important signal that diverse student perspectives were valued at WCC. When asked about her sense of belonging at WCC, Veronica said, "I have seen various activities that look fun and encouraging, and I feel there are many students involved in them, and that's kind of calling."

Sarah, a student from Vietnam, explained how as she got closer to the end of her education at WCC, she realized that becoming more involved in activities such as student groups, clubs, and student government would help prepare her for entering a four-year college. Sarah stated, "I think those skills that you learn from school activities like club activities and other things really help with your skills, like your communication skills and leadership skills that get you ready for things in the future." She explained how she felt recognized in her student leadership, and it gave her the opportunity to interact with more people at the college while representing other students: "When I became a senator, you got people to hear your opinions about school and all of that, and represent the students as well because you also have a list of constituents that you invite people in."

Samantha talked about her own experience joining a club:

“I went into college feeling like I wouldn't be the kind of person that would really engage. That first class I talked about, the one that's about student success, told me to find my call and find my group. I went and I found a club, I found a group of individuals... We had a club for a couple of years that was really kind of helpful for me.”

Her club had to be shut down due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, but her leadership in the campus community persisted as she acted as an advocate for underserved and marginalized groups. Samantha said,

“I kind of had to be the leader on that. I feel like I have had the opportunity to be that person now. And I think that's not invaluable. I always take it upon myself to try and be the change I want to see... I hope that we have a starting point, that I can be referenced as kind of that breaking point for those in charge to seek out more individuals capable of that kind of representation.”

She explained how there was a core group of community college representatives who connected her with leadership and engagement opportunities. She clarified, “They've been real advocates of my success, of the things I can do and all the things I mentioned previously... Those were all really fueled by them kind of encouraging me and pushing me in a direction to seek my own ceiling, as it were.”

Faculty spoke about connecting students with campus activities, student groups, and leadership opportunities. Steven described how student groups are often a space where underrepresented students are able to create community in college spaces. He confirmed, “There's a lot of groups and clubs on campus just to make people feel more comfortable and having spaces, safe spaces to express themselves and be themselves without any fear of reprisal

or negativity coming in their direction.” George explained how he tries to facilitate connections between students and the campus community:

“I do community building in the class because it's so easy otherwise to just sort of isolate, just kind of show up to school and take off afterwards. So I try to do community building in the classroom to get people comfortable in there, and to a large extent I can only control what happens to my classroom, but I do try to help get them connected to the larger college communities. I share announcements of things happening at school... I try to throw a bunch of things out there, share things that are going on.”

George continued,

“To support students as they're in college, I just promote community and connection as much as possible. Some people like being part of huge communities, some people just need a couple of people, but everybody needs some kind of community. So finding ways to promote and create different pockets of community where everybody can find something that fits them.”

This was important to Veronica when she was a new student. She recalled how she felt after completing her first quarter at WCC,

“I actually feel like I want to participate more and be more active at Whatcom Community College, part of the community... I mean, I have seen really nice stuff so far, group for this, group for that, group for people who want to practice English, group for athletes, group for everything. Probably kind of encouraging a little bit more into every student being part of something.”

Tanya explained how she tries to link students with resources to participate in campus activities, to enhance both their personal development and their ability to pursue their academic or career goals. She said,

“I really try to encourage students to build their resume outside of the classroom. And so I'm constantly on the lookout for folks who I think might be great working in the Intercultural Center or might be really great working in Student Life or in the Writing Center or whatever it is on campus, so that they not only pad their resume, which is always good, but also feel more connected to community and then they feel more confident and empowered.”

Michael, who has been an advisor for many student groups and clubs over the course of his twenty years working at WCC, explained how students' engagement in clubs and groups can be beneficial as they navigate college and pursue upward transfer:

“Club activity is another good way to think about people being involved in something that takes them into that realm of becoming part of a larger community... It might just be a few people, who are holding that together, that kind of the cohesive force. But yet I think that you find a great deal of ability in that sort of a scenario to keep something like that going, you know? That sort of camaraderie that happens in club activities is so valuable, then I think for when people transfer to universities and generally they're transferring to universities that have sizable populations and it's easy to get lost in that population. It's easy to become isolated and feeling like I'm not part of something.

Whereas I think that if they become comfortable and find it sort of normal to be engaged in activities outside of their curricular studies, then they really gain so much from what this schooling time is really doing for them.”

Feeling Seen: Understanding Student Needs

Connection and Support

Students and faculty shared experiences at the community college which highlighted the importance of connecting with students and providing support early in their college journey to help prevent them from “falling through the gaps,” as Jennifer put it. Elizabeth, a returning adult student, described how her first instructor reached out to her and encouraged her academic and career goals:

“It was my first quarter at Whatcom and he was just incredibly supportive of me as a student and really took the time to ask me about my plans for college and what I intended to do, where I intended to go, and took the time to recognize my abilities as a student and then speak to that. And to have someone take the time to do that, especially when it's your first kind of introduction into this new world made a huge impact on me as a learner.”

A faculty member shared his perspective on interactions such as this one, and how he hopes it will help their upward educational trajectory. Michael said:

“Especially when I am conferencing with people, a lot of times I'll ask them what degree they plan on pursuing, what school they plan on going to. And I think that I do that on an ongoing basis simply because it's really useful for people who are entering into this realm of a four-year degree program... And they might not be considering that at this point, but really kind of maybe planting that seed a little bit in terms of you can do this. If you're interested in going to school, then recognize that you can take it to the nth degree if you want to.”

Many of the faculty members brought up how they employ the “Four Connections” framework, which is a teaching strategy for forming connections with the aim of improving success rates, including persistence, degree completion, and transfer, for students who have been historically marginalized. George summarized the framework:

“The Four Connections includes learning students’ names right away and using them all the time, checking in with students all the time both formally and informally, conversing with students one-on-one, and then practicing paradox, which involves all kinds of things, but it basically can be boiled down to high expectations, high support, and reasonable flexibility. So, understanding that life happens and being accommodating, but also having clear and transparent expectations and communication.”

Edward described a time when the support he received from his instructors was critical for his continued enrollment in college. He shared the situation:

“I had to leave the country for a month and a half. I was in Central America where my family is from, on an emergency family trip, and I was gone... And all of the teachers I had were phenomenal. Being able to reach out and say, ‘Hey, I’m going to be gone for these days, I have to go take care of my grandparents. This is an emergency. I may not have service.’ And everyone was like, ‘You’re good, no worries.’ and they gave me extended deadlines... So, I guess the instructors and their recognizing my individual needs was the best thing.”

Edward shared the significance of the understanding he received from his instructors at the time, “Because if I didn’t have that flexibility or that engagement, I probably would have gotten far worse before I’d even been able to be getting better. Because I was already in a bad spot and if it got worse, I probably would have just been like *OK, I wash my hands of it.*”

Faculty talked about how they try to make students feel more comfortable getting help from those at the community college by assisting in the formation of relationships both inside and outside the classroom. Steven explained how he hopes his practices encourages students to get the assistance they need:

“If you find ways for that quiet student to speak up through writing or to have more one-on-one conversations or to have more small group conversations, just enough to get them comfortable to say, ‘Maybe I’ll go into their office and ask them for advice about whatever problem I’m encountering.’ That’s at least the first step. And from there, maybe you don’t have all the tools you need to help every single student, but at least you made them feel like they were a part of this community and comfortable enough to come forward and say, ‘Hey, I’m having this problem, could you help me out? Could you point me in the right direction?’ And I think particularly at Whatcom I’ve experienced that, if I don’t have the tools, someone on campus has the tools. I can reach someone very quickly that has the tools to help my student.”

Jennifer expressed how she was able to be connected with WCC staff who mentored her and advocated for her success. These relationships were facilitated through the WCC Intercultural Center and AIM program, which provides ongoing personalized advising and mentoring for BIPOC, first-generation, low-income, and disabled students. She talked about the impact of these connections:

“They understand the struggles for me, they actually took time to listen and to want to help and to see how they could help and if they could find someone that could. And that’s definitely a model I take with me because they step in and they do the best that they can. And it’s not just because ‘Oh I’m being paid to be here’, because they genuinely care and

want to advocate for me, like that is amazing to me. They truly have the heart to advocate for other people.”

As she looked towards her transfer to a four-year college, she talked about how she will continue to utilize the connections she made with faculty and staff at WCC. Jennifer exclaimed, “They message me to let me know that I can't get rid of them! Those are the kind of things I need in my life.”

However, there were also instances in which a lack of support from instructors made students question whether they wanted to continue attending college. Jennifer shared a time when she felt especially discouraged at WCC. She was taking a course required for her degree which she found especially difficult and was dismissed when she reached out to her instructor for assistance. She shared, “It was hard because I tried to reach out for help and he kind of sidelined me. Ignored I needed help... The teacher was not being forthcoming and then he relied on the other students to step in where I was asking him for help specifically.” When she sought help from another instructor of the same subject, she was confronted again with a lack of support: “and then my teacher would ignore questions or refer me back to the rubric when I asked for an explanation a little bit further, he would just be like ‘I don't have time.’” Jennifer revealed how she often had trouble asking for help, so receiving a negative response when she felt vulnerable not only impeded her ability to learn, but it was also detrimental to her sense of comfort in the college setting.

Veronica expressed how it was difficult to think of experiences where she felt supported at WCC because, other than her English 101 instructor and an advisor who helped her enroll in courses, she felt like meaningful interactions with representatives at the college were few and far between. Veronica was from Colombia and had taken college courses at a Colombian institution

before moving to the United States. She entered WCC with existing skills but needed help with applying them in this new context, as there were differences in language and methodology for problem-solving in mathematics. She frequently tried to reach out to her instructors with questions, but she perceived many of them as being inaccessible. She often ended up relying on a family member for help. Talking about the remote online courses she took in the last year, Veronica said how for most of her instructors, “I never saw how they look, like I never had a real conversation.”

A faculty member, Patricia, talked about how she tries to initiate positive interactions with students, “I do a lot of inviting students to talk to me and this is easier face-to-face, but trying to get a personal connection going with each student... Certainly a lot of students don't really want that much interaction, but definitely reaching out, asking them questions. And just getting that personal contact going.” Many of the faculty members emphasized how it was important to form these connections with students early. Margaret said,

“That intimidation factor of talking to your professor is always a big hurdle. But if we could get over the top of that, then what I hope they see is a real person kind of grappling with things, thinking about things, really wanting to improve my class and my teaching, and really able to use whatever they tell me about to do that, so that there's a win-win situation going on when we have conversations.”

Looking Towards Transfer

Success in an Academic Environment

A student nearing the end of her time at WCC summarized the impact of having validating experiences in community college. Elizabeth said,

“I think just looking back at the person that I was when I first entered school and looking at where I'm at now, I just feel like it's night and day. It's just been hugely impactful for me. And that's kind of what I try to walk away with is regardless of what I end up doing, I'm going to be transferring, but I think just the confidence I gained being here and feeling successful as a student and having tangible success has been really remarkable, and has definitely altered the way that I view myself and my ability to function in an academic environment and participate in an academic environment in a meaningful way. So, for me it's just been hugely confidence building because it's one thing to feel that you've been successful on your own, but when other people recognize that and take the time to recognize that, it's ten times more meaningful and it's something you walk away with that life experiences can't take away from you.”

Tanya shared her perspective as an instructor. She described how she tries to empower students as they strive to continue their higher education and pursue upward transfer:

“Trying to help students tap into their own wealth of knowledge and their own brilliance and wisdom, I think inevitably leads many of them to the belief and the self-assuredness that they can, in fact, tackle that challenge. Because I'm thinking about the demographic we serve with community college. A lot of our students are first-generation. A lot of them are from really challenging socioeconomic backgrounds. There are a lot of hurdles in place and a lot of firsts and therefore a lot of fear. So I think just trying to instill that sense of self in students so they could move forward into that confidence.”

Jennifer spoke about the effects of her experiences as a student at the community college. She said,

“I came from, like, nothing. No belief in myself. I just wanted to work to make sure my kids have what they need. To a whole new understanding of what I'm capable of and the fact that I don't even know all my potential yet... I think I've built an identity since I've been here. I'm still trying to find a healthy balance between succeeding and overachieving. Sometimes we think success is grade point averages and things like that, but I think it's actually the motivation and the confidence we build in doing the things that are very difficult or new for us. So right now, I feel stronger in my academic career.”

Anxiety and Advising

Students who found themselves at the end of their education at the community college and going through the application process for four-year institutions shared how this was the stage when they were confronted with a need for more tangible support. Many of the students conveyed in varying ways what Jennifer said, “Me actually going, once I finish this dang application, I'm fine... I think it's just the process of transferring that's really intimidating to me.”

Jennifer was going through the application process for transferring to a four-year institution and described how she saw it as an enormous hurdle to overcome, both due to her uncertainty about how to navigate the process by herself and the general fear she was experiencing. Jennifer expressed what she was going through:

“It's scary as hell. I'm intimidated. I don't understand what this is... There's no one there telling you what button to push. There's nobody explaining to you, like if you push the wrong button what that means, making sure that you have the right information on your application, making sure that the GPA and everything is correct and transcripts and all of that stuff. So right now, it's just trying to figure those things out. And it seems relatively simple. I think it can be very intimidating. And I think that block there, the expectation

there, the excitement and fear drive a big wedge into something that should seem simple, but it's not. Like it looks pretty straight forward, but your brain starts taking control with the fear. So, it's like trying to keep trying to overcome that, in essence.”

Elizabeth explained how hard it was to get assistance during the process of transferring from the community college to a four-year institution. A particular concern was how her credits would transfer and whether she fulfilled the needed prerequisites. Elizabeth said, “I know the resources are there, I think right now it's just a little bit more difficult than it would have been to access them... It just requires a lot of that kind of mental labor, I guess, of going and accessing advisers and setting appointments and finding the time to be in a quiet space during that time.” She continued,

“You would have to find the time to meet with advisers from multiple schools and get specific information. And sometimes by the time you're able to do that, you've already missed important deadlines or it's too late, like, *oh well I kind of needed to take that course like a year ago*. So, I think that would be huge, is just more support for transfer students in understanding course equivalency grades and really coming up with a plan before it's too late because there are certain things that you really can't skip out on or that you have to take by certain points in order for it to be eligible for transfer credits. I would say those have been areas that I have definitely found challenging.”

Issues regarding prerequisites and credit transfer ended up becoming a significant obstacle for Samantha, who recently completed the process of applying to a four-year college. She went to apply for her intended four-year degree program and was expecting a smooth transition, entering as a Junior with only two years left to finish her four-year degree. However, she discovered how she did not fulfill the required prerequisites. She said how she was, “kind of

finding myself in a panic of *I don't have these classes. I don't have these prerequisites.* UW caused me to have a bit of a panic attack as I didn't have to take any language requirements here at Whatcom to receive my AAS. And I believe WWU requires two language credits to apply for any bachelor's level. And that was really difficult for me.” She decided to put off applying to a four-year college entirely, until months later when her partner found a private university she could apply to which had less barriers for entry.

Students had different perceptions around whether they could get support with the transfer process at WCC. As an international student, Sarah was assigned an advisor from the start of her time at WCC and was required to attend meetings with her advisor each quarter. She developed a close relationship with her advisor, who provided her with resources and guidance to help work towards her short-term and long-term academic goals. This advisor assisted Sarah with choosing courses at WCC and provided information about how course credits would transfer, as well as offered advice about how to search and apply for four-year institutions. As a result of these experiences with her advisor, Sarah was unconcerned with the actual process of transferring to the four-year college because, “I think especially from Whatcom, the advisor will help me to do all the paperwork when I transfer.” Daniel was less confident about the transfer process and revealed how he was uncertain about what the process involved. There were times when he utilized services to register for his courses, but he never received or sought out advising for transferring. When asked if he could rely on help from anyone at the college when he tries to transfer in the future, he said, “I’m not sure... I'm not sure about the whole transferring school process.” He said how he had a connection with a few faculty members, but when it came to asking for help with transferring, “I'm not sure if that would be like overstepping.” Because of

this, Daniel said he would probably seek help with the transfer process from his family, after taking about a year off from school.

Regardless of their level of confidence in their academic abilities upon their entrance into community college, most students admitted to feeling intimidated by this “new world” of higher education and fearful of unknowingly failing to meet the norms, rules, and expectations in this new environment. Students shared how instances in which community college representatives initiated authentic, positive, and affirming interactions were instrumental in helping them feel like there were people at the college who supported them, which in turn, helped improve their self-efficacy and sense of comfort in college as they moved forward in their education.

At the end of their community college experience, students were confronted again by a fear of the unknown. During their time at WCC, many students had connections and communities which offered meaningful social and emotional support, but there remained gaps in support which took the form of resources and information for navigating the process of transferring from community college to a four-year institution. During this critical period when students needed the most tangible support, many students were uncertain about what resources or services were available to them, or how they could access them.

Conclusions

The voices of students and faculty in this study shed light on the impacts of different experiences, interactions, and conditions in the context of a community college as underrepresented students strive to continue their postsecondary education and pursue upward transfer. This study utilized Rendón’s (1994) validation model, recognizing how historically marginalized and underrepresented students come into learning settings already possessing a breadth of strengths, and it is up to institutions of higher education to create an environment

where they have the capacity succeed in their education. Validation theory emphasizes how it is the responsibility of the institutional representatives to actively reach out to students to provide support. Students shared how the existence of support, or a lack of support, from community college representatives shaped their ability to persist and pursue transferring to a four-year college. Although the validation of students will not remove all the barriers underrepresented students may experience as they try to navigate higher education, the results of this study indicates validating practices can create more inclusive spaces for learning, where underrepresented students are able form meaningful connections, build community, and feel welcome to participate in the knowledge production that takes place in higher education.

Students shared how their validating experiences while enrolled in community college included authentic, positive, and affirming interactions with faculty and staff, situations where they were empowered to share their perspectives, and opportunities for developing community and connection. Rendón (1994) defined validation as “the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents,” which was exemplified in many of the validating experiences students shared as having a significant positive impact on their educational trajectories. Though, it should be noted how not all of students’ validating experiences were the result of intentional actions by external agents to positively affirm students. For example, there were instances when students felt internally validated and saw it as the result of their own efforts. For some students, they felt the most validated when they overcame challenges, helped others, as well as witnessed their own accomplishments and self-growth while in community college. Students spoke about how externally and internally validating experiences while in community college enhanced their academic and interpersonal development, positive self-concept, sense of belonging, and motivation for persisting in higher education.

The results of this study suggest there are some common practices students found validating which may be useful for practitioners in higher education who want to support students' upward educational trajectories. First, students found it especially beneficial when institutional representatives fostered positive interactions and connections. This involves creating inclusive, safe environments where students are able to feel comfortable building community and forming relationships. Students appreciated when institutional representatives reached out to students to have one-on-one conversations, faculty encouraged collaboration and discussion in the classroom, and the college provided settings for students to connect with each other, such as through student groups and programs. Fostering these connections helped students develop networks of support for navigating higher education. Second, it was crucial for students to be provided with a variety of opportunities to communicate their perspectives. Students shared how they felt more agency in their learning when they were given spaces to express themselves and be engaged. This could take on a variety of forms, but the most common ones shared by students in this sample included instances when instructors explicitly asked students' opinions, strategies, knowledge, and experiences related to their topics of learning; institutional representatives asked students about their lives, values, and goals; and the college facilitated campus activities centered on student engagement and leadership. It can be equally, if not more, important for institutional representatives to be intentional and respectful when responding to situations when students communicate their perspectives, because it portrays to students whether their knowledge is seen as valuable in the learning setting.

Existing qualitative research on upward transfers, which focused on experiences of students who successfully transitioned into four-year college, emphasized how four-year college representatives were essential resources for these students as they pursued upward transfer

(Townsend, 1995; Chrystal et al., 2013; Gard et al., 2012). Yet, the community college students interviewed in this study who were part of historically marginalized and underserved populations were apprehensive about reaching out to four-year college representatives for assistance with the upward transfer process. At the same time, the results of this study indicate how connections, positive interactions, and personalized support are all crucial for underrepresented students' continued success while in college. With these findings in mind, a possible strategy for addressing upward transfer gaps may involve the establishment of institutional partnerships between community colleges and four-year colleges to provide underrepresented students with proactive outreach.

Institutional partnerships have the potential to demystify the upward transfer process and facilitate the formation of connections between students and representatives across institutions with a cross-campus advisement, community-building, and mentorship programs. Community colleges can become a setting where underrepresented students are able to form meaningful relationships and experience positive interactions with four-year college representatives, as well as gain access to resources for transferring to four-year institutions through institutional outreach. Underrepresented student enrolled in community college would have opportunities to see transferring to four-year college as a viable option through four-year college advising services and mentorship. Fostering connections between community colleges and four-year colleges could help remove upward transfer barriers by creating of cross-campus networks of support, which are able to provide not only social and emotional support, but also tangible resources and assistance as students strive to continue their postsecondary education. It might be worthwhile to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of existing two-year and four-year college partnership programs in the United States, and perhaps even draw upon elements of this study's

research design to investigate whether underrepresented students participating in such programs receive supportive, validating experiences which improve their capacity to continue their postsecondary education.

The ability to generate policy recommendations based on this study is limited by its exploratory, qualitative case study design and small non-representative sample, though the findings help point towards potential areas for new policy considerations and further research centered on supporting underrepresented community college students' pursuit of upward transfer. The amount of outreach and support students received from institutional representatives while enrolled in community college varied widely, with some students feeling as though they needed to self-navigate higher educational processes and uncertain about their ability to successfully transfer due to a lack of resources. Future research is necessary to evaluate how institutional and governmental policies shape the capacity of community college representatives to support underrepresented students as outlined in this study. What existing institutional structures and policies constrain the ability of faculty and staff to meet the needs of historically underrepresented students? How can organizational communication and coordination be improved within community colleges to more intentionally provide outreach and upward transfer resources to underrepresented students? Is there adequate state and federal funding allocated to community colleges to provide institutional representatives with the capacity to support historically underrepresented students? Future mixed-methods studies should be initiated to investigate these research questions, with further research drawing upon the perspectives of a representative sample of faculty, staff, administration, and students in community college to obtain more information about the structures influencing students' educational trajectories while in community college.

The perspectives of faculty and staff at WCC shared in this study offered new insights into how institutions can support underrepresented students as they strive to transfer from community college to four-year college. Existing literature on the transfer from community college to four-year college rarely included nuanced perspectives of those within the community college setting, often excluding students who did not end up successfully transferring into a four-year institution and understating the role of community colleges in shaping underrepresented students' educational trajectories. Interviewing students and faculty at Whatcom Community College offered a better understanding of experiences, interactions, and conditions within a community college affecting underrepresented students' capacities to pursue upward transfer. The results of the study highlighted how it is critical for students to be recognized and empowered as valuable, integral members of the learning community during their time in higher education. There appeared to be great variation in how much support and assistance students received as they tried to navigate community college and pursue upward transfer, in addition to gaps in understanding about what resources or services were available to them for helping them through these processes. An important area for further research would involve examining how higher educational institutions can more intentionally provide historically marginalized students with outreach and resources for transferring from community college to four-year college through particular programs, policies, or structures.

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Appendix I: The Development of Validation Theory in Empirical Literature

Many research studies have explored the importance of validation for students by either focusing on a particular element of the Rendón's (1994) validation theory or examining "proxies for validation," which are distinct concepts able to fall within the umbrella of validation (Nora et al., 2011). For example, studies have explored concepts and connected variables encompassed within the validation construct such as university comfort, social support, and self-beliefs (Gloria et al., 2005), students' general sense of belonging, feeling of competence, and autonomy (Schuetz, 2008; Suarez, 2003), sense of belonging as it connects to student experiences with discrimination and bias in the institution (Andrade, 2019), perceptions of social support and college comfort as it relates to cultural identities (Gloria et al., 2005), affirmation for the development of positive student self-concept (Hernandez & Lopez, 2005), navigation of the overall campus culture (Museus & Quaye, 2009), and validation through curriculum centered on critical pedagogy, identity, community, and agency in the classroom (Jehangir, 2009). Each of these models are distinct but can be unified to inform the theme of validation and used to provide a fuller perspective in this study of validating or invalidating experiences shaping students' ability to transfer from community college.

Several studies have sought to quantify the concept of validation with the intention to measure its impact and improve the generalizability of the theory for its application among diverse college student populations (Andrade, 2019; Barnett, 2011; Hernandez & Lopez, 2005; Hurtado et al., 2011). Barnett (2011), the first scholar to use correlation methods utilizing Rendón's validation theory in a study, investigated whether validation acted as a precondition for student academic integration and predicted student persistence using Tinto's (1993) theories on academic integration. Tinto's (1993) student integration model "posits that, other things being

equal, the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure.” Barnett designed the study to elaborate on elements of Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure and incorporated Rendón's (1994) validation construct as a framing mechanism to measure the extent to which faculty or staff interactions predicted students’ sense of academic integration, which Barnett operationalized as being a psychological rather than a behavioral measure, and the effect on their reported intent to persist in college. Using survey data from a diverse community college, Barnett found how students who experienced higher levels of validation in their interactions with college faculty had a higher likelihood of feeling a sense of integration and were more likely to report their intent to persist in college. A notable limit to Barnett’s study was its focus on faculty validation in a single community college, which constrained the generalizability of the results for the wider student population. This issue was remedied with a newer study by Hurtado, Cuellar, and Guillermo-Wann (2011) which has implications for the use of validation theory in studies of college access in different settings (Andrade, 2019).

Hurtado, Cuellar, and Guillermo-Wann (2011) assessed Rendón's (1994) validation concept at a larger scale with a nationally available survey instrument in order to address the limits of existing empirical literature on the effects of validation on student educational outcomes. Using the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey of higher educational institutions across the United States, the authors used different measures to capture a variety of elements of academic and interpersonal validation for students of color and white students. The authors found a difference in validating experiences between white students and students of color, with an especially dramatic contrast in feelings of academic validation in the classroom between groups. Students of color reported lower levels of both academic and interpersonal

validation. The results indicated a strong relationship between validating classroom experiences and students feeling empowered by faculty in their institution among students of color, which was not observed among white students (Hurtado et al., 2011).