



CradletoCareer

Anchored at United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

Post-Secondary Pathways: Learnings from the Community



United Way of Tucson
and Southern Arizona



Cradle to Career Partnership
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As a part of a partnership between Cradle to Career Pima and Pima Community College through the Post-Secondary Change Network, six community voice listening sessions were conducted to strengthen pathways to community college for the new majority of learners. In these sessions, insights were gained regarding perceptions of community college, expectations of support, financing pathway knowledge, and awareness of Pima Community College and their offerings.

Primary feedback came from local opportunity youth, AVID high school seniors, and mixed youth and adults who have thought about entering a post-secondary pathway.

Purpose

Cradle to Career is increasingly prioritizing community engagement as part of their efforts to shift practices and policies that ensure that youth and family participate and lead decision-making processes that leverage our community’s strengths. Cradle to Career (C2C) began this work within the efforts of its Post-secondary Education Change Networks and conducted listening sessions with Opportunity Youth and parents to identify and understand barriers faced by young people on post-secondary pathways, which helped the Change Network develop strategies to address these needs.

Pima Community College (PCC) worked with C2C to conduct similar listening sessions with targeted groups to identify the community’s needs for post-secondary success. The sessions were conducted with college and career guidance professionals, opportunity youth, high school students, parents rethinking career paths, and individuals connected to other United Way initiatives. Insights and considerations will be shared with PCC to include community voice as part of their strategic planning.

Methods

The Cradle to Career backbone staff prioritized the voices of community members who were not currently in a high school graduation pathway to post-secondary education or career attainment. After conducting four listening sessions with youth and adults who are new-majority learners (learners from racially/ethnically diverse, low socioeconomic, and/or non-traditional backgrounds pathways), the backbone staff conducted one listening session of high school students from a senior AVID program class.

Backbone staff developed an interest form to be distributed through existing community connections of United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona and Cradle to Career partners. Incentives of \$25 gift cards were provided to all listening session participants except for the high school student sessions, where snacks were provided in place of monetary incentives.

Participants

College and career guidance professionals were sought to gain insight regarding processes, challenges, and bright spots of the existing secondary to post-secondary education pathways.

For the purposes of this report, **Opportunity Youth** are youth aged 16-24 that are disconnected from an education and economically stabilizing career pathway. The opportunity youth that participated in two listening sessions were enrolled at the Goodwill Youth Reengagement Center’s (REC) academic and career pathway program.

The **mixed groups** described themselves as tribal members, high school students, parents, and low-income earners. Through the listening sessions, it was discovered that many of the participants were new to the region and were not yet familiar with Pima Community College and may have been English learners.

AVID senior high school students were recruited for the purposes of understanding similarities and differences between the new-majority learners that participated and high school students that have been active in college preparatory activities.

Implementation and Analysis

Listening sessions were held with at least two backbone staff present who held roles as primary facilitator and co-facilitator. In one Opportunity Youth session, a REC staff member acted as a co-facilitator. Immediately after each session, present backbone staff would convene to determine broad themes that emerged during the session as well as any unique findings, mental models, or perceptions. At a later date, backbone staff compiled notes and recordings for additional insights that may have been overlooked during debrief sessions and to pull quotes that represented codes in support of themes. Finally, backbone staff convened to condense findings into established insights and considerations.

Group	Number of Attendees	Outreach Method	Date
College and Career Professionals	3	Existing C2C Partners	4/1/2022
Opportunity Youth (1)	10	Existing C2C Partners	4/7/2022
Opportunity Youth (2)	10	Existing C2C Partners	4/7/2022
Mixed college and/or career-seeking youth and adults (1)	6	Interest Form	4/14/2022
Mixed college and/or career-seeking youth and adults (2)	7	Interest Form	4/14/2022
AVID senior high school students	9	Existing C2C Partners	4/25/2022

Insights and Considerations

Per the purpose of this report, insights refer to the learnings the backbone team gained from listening to the lived experiences of community members; while considerations are actions PCC could take to bridge opportunity gaps.

Pathway Education and Support

A case management or navigator role would be imperative for opportunity youth persistence and success, but additionally could provide high school pathway students with the occasional support needed for self-efficacy. Additionally, intentional mechanisms for peer support would provide new majority learners with motivation, community, and shared learning.

Pathway Support and Education	
Insight	Consideration
Majority Learners have varying levels of support needs.	Creating a mechanism to determine levels of support based on the needs of the student.
	Opportunity youth may benefit the most from a case-management approach to navigating life as a college student.
	Immigrant, refugee, parent learners, and learners coming from low-resourced high schools also may benefit from some case-management resources.
	Awareness and expectations of the role of a college advisor would be beneficial for international students and opportunity youth.
Majority Learners feel peer communities and support are vital for post-secondary persistence and completion.	Creating a formal peer-support program that matches 2nd-year students with newly enrolled students could increase persistence and success in their PCC experience.
	Fostering opportunities for peer connection may increase student motivation and success.
	Student housing for opportunity youth would be welcomed and provide a community of support and success.

In the mixed community sessions, many described traits like openness, warmth, and non-judgement when asked what they would hope for in an advisor. Some hoped that an advisor would guide them in “everyday life,” while others expected only advising for college-related inquiries, such as the application process and study concerns.

“I also want stability and structure from my advisor... [and be able to ask,] what should I do in this moment?”

Opportunity youth at the REC were unsure of the role a college advisor played. In one of these sessions, many youth had not heard of an advisor and were not aware of that as an existing resource for their college experience. The question was posed, “do you think there is anyone at community colleges that would offer support and walk you through things?” Expectations were mixed between hoping someone would guide them through the college experience and anticipation of being on their own to navigate college life and systems. [This conversation brought up unique concerns for support for many opportunity youth,] such as childcare, system navigation, stability and structure. Largely, we found that many youth had goals, hopes, and dreams of careers and post-secondary education, however there was a gap in lived experience and knowledge on how to reach those goals.

“I think about what I want to be and what I don’t want to be; and think of people I know or people living out on the streets, and I know that I don’t want to be like that...”

Although the high school students were more aware of the traditional role of a college advisor, confidence in navigating life after high school still brought up feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. When asked if they felt ready for their next chapter, there were audible sighs and head shaking. Many stated college culture was not discussed at home, even for youth that had family who had attended college. One student spoke up, “I am pretty sure I want to go to college, but I still have my doubts.”

Through previous listening sessions with parents, the backbone team learned that although parents aspire for their children to pursue post-secondary education, they seem uncertain about how to support them through this process. Navigating and exploring college pathways poses a unique challenge for them due to having no college education themselves or experiencing it in their home countries. Parents heavily rely on the expertise of college and career counselors. When asked about the post-secondary education resources their students were aware of and able to access/explore, the majority mentioned being aware of dual enrollment courses and AP classes. Nonetheless, parents feel disconnected from anything College and Career-related because they don’t know how to get started.

“I feel like my child’s success depends on mine and his ability to find a lot of information that neither of us has expertise in. It is hard to do it myself when I don’t know what I don’t know.”

Collectively, parents shared that they feel excluded from the college-going conversations, and they wish for more authentic and ongoing parent engagement opportunities.

“...Provide us with comprehensive information. In a way “train” us to support your role. We can be of help to other parents if we are given the right information.”

Learnings from National Partners

Insight	Consideration
Place community-based organizations at the center and provide coaching to enhance their expertise.	The Goodwill Reengagement Centers have become a hub for opportunity youth to connect to resources and provide quality care to returning to an education and career pathway.
Find the sweet spot of a guiding model that's not too loose, not too tight.	Guiding frameworks and learnings from the Aspen Institute and StriveTogether provides the needed flexibility and guidance through Youth on the Rise and the Opportunity Youth Change Network.
Deliver quality programming through skilled, caring staff and strong partnerships with education providers and training providers that prioritize young adults.	PCC has a valuable opportunity to tap into the opportunity youth space and build off the successes that Goodwill Reengagement Centers have accomplished while increasing persistence and completion of PCC pathways.
Plan from day one to sustain and scale the work.	Leverage existing community collaboratives and partnerships working with these populations and identify opportunities for broader systems change.

Peer Community and Support

The salience of a peer community was seen in both the opportunity youth sessions as well as with current high school students. Opportunity youth spoke frequently about having peers with similar goals and direction was necessary for them to persevere through challenges, stay motivated, and provide a much-needed sense of community. High school students spoke about built-in peer groups as an important aspect of the college experience and social well-being.

Drawing on national research and local successes from the Thrive Center, First Cats, and Fostering Success at the University of Arizona, the creation of a peer mentoring program would likely be welcomed by new-majority learners and increase persistence and completion at PCC.

In one opportunity youth session, a conversation about student housing was spurred by one youth asking if community colleges had housing. The youth were activated by this possibility and began discussing the benefits of living on campus for themselves that largely aligns with research on student housing increasing success, such as a built-in peer community, sense of belonging, and easier access to campus classes and resources.

Additionally, during a conversation with college and career guidance professionals it was mentioned that students seem to struggle navigating online platforms regardless of how tech savvy they may be and they feel “more interested in being with a college grad while reviewing information on website.”

Modality Exploration

Among youth, flexibility in modalities was appreciated, however many were aware of the need for self-discipline when attending classes online and feared they would be subject to fall behind when not motivated by a strict class structure and peer support. Those who preferred a physical class environment also brought up a preference to work close to or on campus and would prefer not to split campuses. Still, others saw the benefits of online learning when considering working schedules. Adult learners and parenting learners tended to prefer online learning opportunities.



Financial Education and Expectations

Insight	Consideration
The perception of post-secondary cost and attainability is unknown.	Education on types of financing options and return on investment based on the learner's circumstances would be beneficial for all majority learners and high school pathway students from low-resourced schools.
Majority Learners and high school students may be more loan-adverse in the coming years than in past years.	
Many Majority Learners feel the need to work while attaining a PS credential or degree but are aware of the disadvantage this may create.	Majority learners may benefit from mentoring around navigating work-school-life balance.
	Opportunities to partner with businesses close to Pima campuses may increase majority learner success.

Perceptions of post-secondary affordability varied, although most participants agreed that community college was more attainable and inexpensive than a four-year institution. However, many participants were uncertain of the actual costs or how they would financially obtain any type of post-secondary education or accreditation. Only a handful of participants from the high school pathway had researched how they would finance their post-secondary education. The high school pathway students were also more informed about ways to finance their education and brought up scholarships, grants, and work programs, such as McDonald’s or Starbucks scholarships.

Opportunity youth were more likely to say they would finance their education out-of-pocket if they were unable to secure scholarships. Some participants had unique financing circumstances, such as sponsorships for international students and grants for current or former foster youth, but often still were unsure how they would begin to tap into those financing options. Overall, knowledge and confidence about financing a post-secondary education was very low.

One insight the backbone team found surprising was a trend of loan-adversity, with youth (age 16-21) being the most hesitant to consider loans to finance their education. When asked the hypothetical, “If your first year was covered through scholarships or grants, but your second year was not covered, what would you do,” many opportunity youth stated they would not continue with school until they saved enough through working to cover the costs over taking out a loan. A similar loan-adverse sentiment was echoed by high school pathway participants, with some additional considerations. One high school student elaborated that they would only consider a loan if they were certain that the program would align with their long-term passion and goals. Although the likelihood of taking out a loan at a two-year institution in Arizona is smaller (11.9%) than at a four-year institution (49.4%), it may be an emerging need to educate prospective students on types of loans, levels of risk, and the benefits of loans in program completion.

Backbone Staff: Would you consider taking out a loan?
Opportunity Youth: No, I would drop out until I could afford to go back.

“Why would I take out a loan and pay it off forever? I rather work and the money be mine.”

Investing in Public Higher Education Pays Off

With many participants expressing a willingness or need to work while obtaining their post-secondary credentials, but worrying about time and transportation, there is potential for partnering with businesses nearby Pima campuses as an enabler for student success.



Considerations from College and Career Guidance Professionals

Among college and career guidance professionals, the perception of PCC is positive, and they have established/varying levels of partnerships with their institution. The most positive aspects of PCC and its appeal in their opinion is the easy access to various locations throughout the city as well as the different modalities (online/remote) and affordability compared to other institutions. Additionally they shared that through PCC’s Dual Enrollment program some students gain early exposure to college pathways. However, for many young people the lack of awareness is a barrier to access.

“Students see PCC as a way to get generals done and do not realize all the other options available for them to take advantage of. No room for exploration at the college level major/program of study.”

Insight	Consideration
Increase Visibility	PCC campuses can be a place where high schools can host their college and career fairs. Prospective students and families can learn about programs offered at each campus, what resources are available and tour the campus at the same time.
Strengthening Partnerships	The community needs timely and ongoing opportunities to increase its awareness of the innovative programs that PCC has to offer. PCC could leverage their partnerships with school districts beyond their Dual Enrollment program and start outreaching to students as early as middle school. Additionally, every educator and administrator could become an advocate for PCC if they had a directory with contact information to a point person for each of their programs.
Creating PSE aspiration and exploration opportunities for new majority learners and high school pathway students alike to see themselves as community college students allows them to conceptualize this in a tangible and memorable way.	

Perceptions of Community College and PCC

Except for a few community members that were new to the area, most everyone has heard of and/or explored PCC as a post-secondary education option. While adult learners shared an overall positive perception of PCC, among the youth the perception of community college may be viewed as secondary to a four-year institution or university. When asked about their first thoughts regarding PCC specifically some youth said that it was a possible option, but it was considered as their back up plan or steppingstone. Some youth knew that PCC was their best option for beginning their post-secondary pathway, but expressed a desire for that pathway to be viewed as valid among their peers, with one student saying, “I think it’s a good idea...I wish more people didn’t think you [expletive] if you go to Pima.”

An emphasis on PCC’s innovative approaches and programs during targeted outreach could be beneficial in addressing these types of perceptions. For example, highlighting their centers of excellence, fast-track credentials and bringing greater awareness to Access & Disability Resources at each campus, as well as their revamped advising services could be included in the recruitment strategy.



Targeted Community Engagement

Conversation became activated when youth were exposed to PSE possibilities. They shared their aspirations for the future, but most were unsure of what steps to take to get to their goals. This was especially true for opportunity youth who were unclear of what an advisor is and the role they play during the onboarding/enrollment process. For that reason, targeted recruitment efforts in the community would likely be beneficial for all students, especially the new majority learners.

An example of the importance of targeted outreach could be seen in the AVID seniors’ session. Two out of three high school students that applied to a post-secondary institution had decided based on representatives from those schools speaking to their class.

When ending each session, the option was given to ask questions of the facilitators. In all but one mixed community session, participants asked the facilitators about their own experiences in post-secondary education. There seems to be a thirst to understand and discuss the college experience from others who have successfully navigated the process. Although this strategy is applicable to a mentorship role, including this in outreach efforts could be highly effective.

Therefore, the considerations below emphasize the need for greater outreach and engagement with opportunity youth, parents, schools, and the community at large to increase awareness about PCC’s programs and other opportunities.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Community Based Organization	Engagement Activity
Goodwill Reengagement Centers	Monthly PCC FAQ sessions based on topic areas such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enrollment• Financial Aid• Program and degree options• Campus Life and Peer Questions• Advising and class selection• Sports, Arts, and Extra Curriculars
Resettlement Agencies	
Youth on Their Own	
Joel Valenzuela Youth Center	
Las Artes, Arts & Education	
Local high schools	
<i>These collaborations would serve dual purposes to both offer guidance to under-resourced populations and to bring greater visibility and awareness of PCC's status as a staple institution within the community.</i>	

Conclusion: Post-Secondary Institutions Need to be Student-Ready

Acting on these considerations could likely facilitate all student success but has the potential to be especially impactful for the new majority learners population. This not only communicates the commitment that PCC has to the students they serve, but it is also a step toward systems transformation for more equitable outcomes.

Key Insights	OY	HS	Mixed
Beyond advising, institutional support and navigation is imperative to success	X	X	X
Peer support and community	X	X	
Financing pathway options and feasibility	X		X
Loan benefit education	X	X	X
Perceptions of Affordability	X	X	X
Perception as secondary to a university	X	X	
Would benefit from targeted outreach	X	X	X



Community Voice Table

Theme	Quote
Perception of Community College	OY: "It is an easier way to pay for college and is a lot smaller."
	OY: "Plan B"
Self-Efficacy	OY: " What if I am not smart enough"
	OY: "I think about what I want to be and what I don't want to be and think of people I know or people living out on the streets, and I know that I don't want to be like that, and I am motivated."
	HS: "What keeps me motivated at the end of the day is money. Because honestly at the end of the day you need money. You can be happy without it but makes life harder."
	OY: "Helping other students has inspired me to keep pushing because it is overwhelming"
Need for Social Support	OY: "I want to talk about what makes most sense for me and my goals"
	OY: "Keep the people you are around that encourage you"
	HS: It just helps, it's what you do. You find people like you, you get challenged by people, you grow.
Affordability	Mixed: "I'll love to be guided in everyday life."
	HS: "[Community college] is an easier way to pay for college"
Loan Adverse	OY: "Financial cost could be a barrier."
	OY: "I would consider grants because a loan you have to pay it back and some people be out of college and be 40 years old and still haven't paid it back."
	HS: I would only do it if I was certain that is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.
	Mixed: "I would subscribe to a scholarship rather than a loan. A loan is repayable the financial thought would be overbearing."