Examining the Experiences of Students of Color at Palomar College

CCEAL
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE EQUITY ASSESSMENT LAB

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About the Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL)

Mission

The Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL) is a national research laboratory at San Diego State University. CCEAL supports community colleges with research, assessment, and training activities that support the success of historically underserved students of color. The mission of CCEAL is to develop knowledge and advance promising practices that enhance access, achievement, and success among underserved students of color.

Objectives
- **Research** – to conduct and disseminate empirical research on the experiences of historically underrepresented and underserved students in community colleges;
- **Training** – to provide training that improves practices relevant to students of color in community colleges; and
- **Assessment** – to use assessment and evaluation to facilitate capacity building within community colleges.

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INTRODUCTION

The Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL) at San Diego State University was contracted by Palomar College to engage in a comprehensive assessment of the experiences of students of color (e.g., African American, Latino, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American). The assessment entailed collecting quantitative and qualitative data from students, and qualitative data from faculty. This project is a part of Palomar College's efforts to redress persistent inequities and outcome disparities in student success that disproportionately affect students of color.

The purpose of this report is to share findings that emerged from the qualitative assessment of students of color's experiences at Palomar College. In line with the purpose of this project, the three overarching questions below guided the qualitative inquiry with students:

1. What are salient challenges that students of color experience at Palomar College?
2. What factors (e.g., people, programs, campus services, resources, etc.) situated within the campus context enable students of color to persist at Palomar College despite the challenges they face?
3. What factors (e.g., people, programs, campus services, resources, etc.) external to the campus context enable students of color to persist at Palomar College despite the challenges they face?

METHOD

Data Collection: Data collection for this project occurred during the Spring 2017 semester. Students who identified as "students of color" and were currently enrolled in credit-bearing courses were invited by the Office of

Institutional Research to participate in the project. A total of 59 students (30 men, 29 women) participated in 10 focus groups.

All of the participants agreed to have their conversations audio recorded and were assured that the insights they provided would be treated confidentially by our project team. All of the audio recordings were transcribed for data analysis.

We relied on the audio recordings and completed matrices to construct this report. Prior to the focus groups and interviews, we informed the participants (both verbally and in writing) that their participation was strictly voluntary. Participants were informed that they could opt out of answering questions they did not feel comfortable answering and could discontinue their involvement in the project at any time without consequences. None of the participants who began the project discontinued their participation. Participants were provided sandwiches, snacks, and beverages during the focus groups as an incentive for participating.

Participants: The 30 men of color and 29 women of color who participated in the project represented a wide range of diversity on the basis of race/ethnicity (Table 1), age (Table 2), enrollment status (Table 3), and educational goals (Table 4).

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity Composition

Race/Ethnicity	Men	Women
African American/Black	3	3
Asian (Chinese/Japanese/Korean)	1	1
Central American / South American	1	1
Filipino	1	-
Mexican/Mexican American/Chicana	18	16
Middle Eastern	1	1
Multiracial	3	6
Native American/Alaskan Native	1	-
Southeast Asian (Hmong, Vietnamese)	1	1

Table 2: Participants' Age

Age	Men	Women
18-19	6	10
20-29	14	16
30-39	5	1
40-49	2	1
50+	3	1

Table 3: Enrollment Status

Status	Men	Women
Less than 12 units	16	9
12 units or more	14	19
Declined to state	-	1

Table 4: Educational Goal

Goal	Men	Women
Transfer to a 4-Year	23	20
Associate's Degree	4	8
Certificate	1	1
Update Job Skills	1	-
Declined to State	1	-

Data Analysis: All of the data that were collected for this project were transcribed for data analysis. Each transcript was uploaded into *Dedoose*—a qualitative data analysis software program that enables multiple researchers to work collaboratively on analyzing a dataset. Data were coded deductively in three phases (open, axial, and selective) by at least two researchers. Although we took a deductive approach to analyzing the data, we also sought concepts and insights that could not be adequately coded using our previously established codebook.

Limitations

Despite our efforts to conduct this project in the most methodologically rigorous manner possible, we encountered limitations that are worth noting. First, although the sample was diverse, we would have liked to have more representation of African American, Asian and Southeast Asian (e.g., Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian) students. Moreover, the representation of Latino, Asian, and Southeast Asian

students was limited to participants' panethnic identities, not accounting for diversity in national background, language, and culture.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is the community college socio-ecological outcome model (CC-SEO; Harris III & Wood, 2016). Illustrated in Figure 1, the CC-SEO model is composed of seven constructs that account for key factors that contribute to the success of men of color in community colleges.
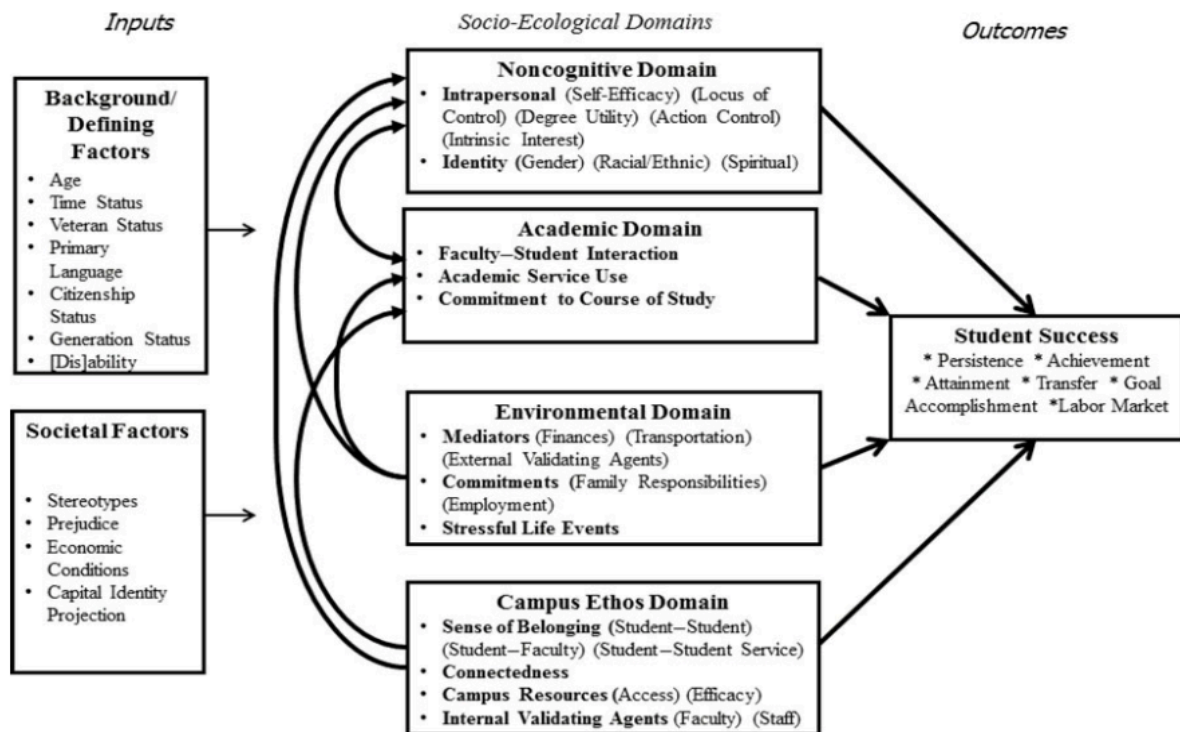

Figure 1. Socio-ecological outcomes (SEO) model.

The first two constructs are described as inputs, consisting of background defining and societal factors that account for the experiences of men of color prior to entering the community college. Background defining and societal factors shape men of color's dispositions and learners and their expectations as they matriculate into community college. Defined as the

socio-ecological domains, the non-cognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos domains illustrate the various factors that contribute to the student success of men of color and shape their salient experiences on campus. Moreover, according to the CC-SEO model, student success among men of color in the community college is broadly described as persistence, achievement, degree attainment, transferring, goal accomplishments, and the preparation for the labor market. The CC-SEO model was used to interpret the findings of this project, and the key components of the model will be further described through the following sections of this report.

FINDINGS

Six overarching thematic categories emerged as salient across the focus groups with men and women of color.

- "Just Stay Positive and Keep Going:" Student Motivation and Resilience

- "I Don't Feel Like I Belong Here:" Lacking A Sense of Belonging at Palomar

- "No Money, More Problems:" Navigating Challenges with Finances and Financial Aid

- "You Did Better Than I Thought You Would:" Experiences with Racial and Gender 'Battle Fatigue'

- "You're Meant to Be Here:" The Role of Faculty Validation and Support

- "I Don't Feel Safe Here at Night:" Campus Safety Concerns Among Women of Color

In this section of the report, we discuss each thematic category and support this discussion with representative quotes and reflections from the participants.

"Just Stay Positive and Keep Going:" Student Motivation and Resilience

The focus groups provided insights into the factors that motivated the students to pursue postsecondary education. Understanding the reasons why students were enrolled at Palomar may be beneficial for faculty and staff who endeavor to support them in overcoming barriers that impede their progression and success in community college. Some of the salient factors that resonated across the focus groups were students wanting to create a college-going legacy in their families, and students viewing a college degree as an important step toward achieving upward social mobility. With regard to the former, one of the men of color in the study noted that no one in his family had attended college before he decided to do so. Thus, his parents constantly reminded him and his younger sister that going to college was "a blessing" and an opportunity they must not take for granted.

In relation to social mobility, participants talked about the prospect of getting well-paying jobs and other opportunities that required a college degree. As one student noted: "I'm personally pursuing my education because I have things working against me that I hope having a degree or certificate or whatever actually helps me build some kind of credibility." Another shared a similar sentiment as he reflected on why he was motivated to enroll in community college:

> I'm Latino, and Chicano. I live in an area where there is poverty and gang violence so there might be police officers in that area. My dad dropped out of middle school, my mom didn't finish high school. My dad was deported when I was 13, so I wasn't instilled with education growing up. I dropped out of high school at 9th grade. So I mean I have a lot of things that I know society looks down upon.

Despite the factors that motivated the participants to pursue postsecondary education, they encountered a host of challenges (some of which will be discussed later in this report) that required grit and resilience to move forward toward completing their goals. This was especially notable amongst the women of color in the sample. These students spoke passionately about the importance of "staying positive" and "not giving up" during times of difficulty. As one of the women noted:

Those daily struggles happen. I tell myself to stay positive. I always try to find the silver lining in things and find appreciation for what I do have. [I] trained myself to just stay positive and just keep going, just keep fighting through. To just keep going.

On a related note, the students felt a sense of responsibility to persist through difficult times because of their identities as women of color. "[B]ecause I am a woman of color, I have the responsibility to push through and succeed," stated one student. Another offered a similar claim:

> Honestly, I feel like I take it for granted on both situations because I mean being [an] African American female and knowing the culture behind being African American female, I know these rights weren't always given. I do get the privilege of getting an education, I feel like I take it for granted. But I just have to stop and remind myself sometimes, "remember where you [came] from. Remember who came before you and who worked for you to get to where you are now."

For these women, the prospect of giving up or not succeeding in school was undesirable because doing so would be seen as disrespecting the legacy of women of color who had come before them and made important sacrifices to make postsecondary education accessible.

"I Don't Feel Like I Belong Here:" Lacking A Sense of Belonging at Palomar

Sense of belonging, or the lack thereof, was a prominent challenge for both men and women of color. Interestingly, students made transparent connections between their own racial/ethnic identities and their feelings of not belonging at Palomar. This phenomenon was especially salient among the men of color in the sample who reported a heightened awareness of the lack of same racial representation within the student body. Students who reported not feeling a sense of belonging often noted that they came to campus for classes and left as soon as their classes had concluded. For example, one student noted:

> "...As soon as I came to this school I automatically noticed the difference in race as far as proportion. You don't see many people

that look like you, and that does play a huge role...you don't think about it, but it definitely makes you cautious. You just want to get out of here...do what you have to do and leave pretty much."

One factor that seemed to play an influential role in students feeling a lack of belonging was the perceptions they held of their peers. Specifically, students who did not feel a sense of belonging assumed their peers held negative stereotypes about them because of their race. Students reported being frustrated by racially prejudiced attitudes expressed by peers during class or in passing in campus social spaces. For example, one of the women of color participants shared the following reflection regarding encounters she has had with peers who expressed stereotypical attitudes about people of color. "You want to teach everybody or tell everybody, 'you [are] stereotyping' or 'what you're saying is wrong.' Then it does make you think, 'well, what are they thinking about me or my family?' So that can be very frustrating."

Students' interactions with faculty and staff also contributed to their feelings of not belonging at Palomar. As was the case with peers, students in the sample attributed these feelings to negative interactions they had with faculty and staff at the campus. For instance, one of the women of color who participated in the focus groups passionately described her interactions with staff as a "real struggle" that adversely affected her efficacy in navigating the campus successfully.

> It has been a real, real struggle and for some of the staff to look at me like okay... I know what I'm going through, but you don't know my struggle...and I just think it is very insensitive and I think it is really a disservice to me as a student to have to feel like I'm all alone on this big old campus. I mean I talk to my professors and everything but it has been a real, real struggle...I'm not feeling like I'm getting the supportive services that I deserve.

Having discussed student's experiences and challenges with feeling a sense of belonging on campus, we now turn to a discussion of another salient challenge that students experienced -- finances and accessing financial aid.

"No Money, More Problems:" Navigating Challenges with Finances and Financial Aid

The men and women of color who participated in the focus groups were often overwhelmed by the difficulties that came with attending school while working to meet their financial obligations (e.g., rent, food, childcare responsibilities). Challenges that were attributed to having to balance employment with school commitments were particularly salient during these discussions. Students also shared instances of not having enough money to purchase textbooks or other course materials. For instance, one of the women of color declared:

> No money for textbooks, I have absolutely no money for textbooks. EOPS was actually really helpful because that is how I got through school, not because I didn't want to work. That is the only way I was able to get money. It was just, eventually there was no money. That was the main stress for me.

Another student shared his experiences with financial urgencies and the challenge of having to wait longer than planned for his monthly stipend from the veteran's office, which adversely affected his ability to pay bills.

> ...the check was supposed to be like $3,000 to survive until next month to take care of all of the bills or whatever I have going on. For someone to not do their job and take a piece of paper and put it in a different folder...puts me back by 30 to 60 days depending on how fast the VA is and sometimes the VA can take a long time.

This participant elaborated further by stating how the impact of not having his paperwork processed in a timely matter had a tremendous influence on his livelihood and jeopardized essential needs, like housing:

> That kind of mistake should not even be excusable because you're talking about someone's livelihood. Imagine if I was living on the street and I needed rent money or something like that, you know what I mean? I'm not married, I'm single. It wasn't $100, $25, $45, that is $3,000 you have to live off. Now I'm over here and I have to

wait and struggle for this money because someone [made a mistake].

Working, mostly full-time, while going to school were competing priorities the students in the sample had to negotiate on a regular basis. This challenge was especially salient among students who did not qualify for financial aid. Thus, for these students, working was the only way they could pay for school while also meeting their other financial needs. One student described her inner struggle of wanting to be financially stable while also having to spend more time in community college than she really wanted.

> For me I believe work is an issue, at least my first year. I have an issue because I felt like I needed to be financially stable first then going to my classes. I almost felt like giving up after a while, so until I cut my hours… This is my third year, they tell you you're going to community college for two years, that is not necessarily true, that is why I'm taking [this] big pressure on me, for my family too… I feel like I have to work and go to school.

Similarly, another student expressed how working a certain amount of hours to afford the expense of college interfered with his study time, which negatively impacted his ability to focus in a way that would enable him to maximize his full potential in school:

> Yeah, I feel like you try to go to work and school at the same time, you have to work a good amount and then the work kind of gets in the way of doing your homework and school and then you feel like you can't leave either one…

Students in the sample who qualified for financial aid also expressed challenges in getting their financial needs met. Some students struggled with navigating the process of applying for aid, while others expressed dissatisfaction with the support they received in the Office of Financial Aid. For example, one of the men of color discussed his experience in applying for financial aid, which he characterized as "confusing":

I think financial aid is definitely confusing. Just trying to figure that out and then if you do figure it all out, then they declined it. So now, I have to work more. There is even less time to do homework and stuff like that. So that definitely makes it harder for me and you know driving here [to campus], that makes it harder for me too…

Regarding the level of support afforded to students who visited the Office of Financial Aid, students characterized their experiences as: "frustrating," "inconsistent," and "not helpful." For instance, one of the women of color in the sample shared a negative encounter she had with staff in the Office of Financial Aid:

Last semester [a staff member] told me to [draft a statement] and it would be approved. I did what they told me to do and it still wasn't approved. This is my livelihood we are talking about here. If I don't get aid I can't live.

The process of accessing financial aid is complicated at most (if not all) community colleges. Students often do not recognize the complexity of this process, which is why it is important for financial aid staff members to communicate with students in a very empathetic and transparent manner to ensure students do not become frustrated and overwhelmed. At times students are often so overwhelmed by financial pressures and financial aid challenges that they consider stopping out or withdrawing from the institution. Thus, the urgency and impact of this issue should not be overlooked.

"You Did Better Than I Thought You Would:" Experiences with Racial and Gender 'Battle Fatigue'

Across all the focus groups, participants shared moments in which they experienced racial and gendered microaggressions, from both institutional agents and their peers. According to Sue et al., (2007) microaggressions are instances in which verbal, behavioral, or environmental acts constitute slights towards people of color, regardless of whether said acts were committed on purpose or not. For instance, two

common microaggressions described by male students of color included (1) ascription of intelligence and (2) assumption of criminality (Sue et al., 2007). More specifically, ascription of intelligence consists of perceiving and assigning the intelligence of a person of color based on their race and assumption of criminality is the presumption that a person is either dangerous or a criminal or both based on their race.

Regarding the first, participants shared instances in which faculty or peers questioned their intellectual abilities.

> I can see them already focusing on certain students, how they just believe they are going to pass, and others you can say are stranded on their own. I have had teachers just say, "You did better than I thought you would." To me, it's like okay, you assumed I would do worse than everybody else?

Some participants described feeling microaggressed due to linguistic differences. In particular, participants whose primary language was Spanish shared instances in which they perceived being treated differently by faculty and peers. One student shared that prior to enrolling in English 100, she had been in the ESL program. During a group project, she perceived peers as being doubtful of her English proficiency. She recalled, "He gave me this look [like he] doesn't want [me] to be in the group project. I'm fine with it. It doesn't hurt my feelings, it is just that he thinks that I don't know anything about English."

The second form of microaggressions experienced by participants, particularly men of color, was an assumption of criminality. Students expressed feelings of being perceived as dangerous or threatening, which they attributed to their identity as men of color. For example, one student shared the following experience:

> It makes you uncomfortable taking classes late at night, I had a chemistry class...it is late at night you're walking to your car, especially females grasp on to their purse...and I understand what is going on at the same time so I keep my distance but at the same time I feel like it is a recurring issue. So it always happens when I have that class and I think, "Well maybe it is just the situation plus me," or "Maybe it is just the situation itself." Are you going to go up and ask, "How come you're clutching your purse?" It is one of those things where I have seen

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actual movements and it is not just White females it is pretty much any female. And I understand what is going on but I have experienced, being viewed as a threat type of thing. I'm just trying to get to my car."

In addition to experiencing an assumption of criminality among students, men of color also shared interactions with campus police that typified this microaggression. For instance, some men noted hostile interactions with campus safety officers. For example, one student shared that they felt targeted by campus police for riding his bike in the evening.

> Yeah it was late I had just got off work and I went to the English lab until 6pm or 7pm. I was biking on the campus, and they stopped me and they were like "Oh, you can't do that." I was like "Why can't I?" He made up this weird story about me getting charged a fine.

Amongst the unique challenges that women of color experienced, microaggressions and stereotypes were highly prevalent, which led to gender battle fatigue. Similar to "racial battle fatigue" (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007), we suggest that gender battle fatigue "addresses the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism" (p. 555). This was expressed by participants through examples of conscious and unconscious stress and anxiety in having to negotiate their identities as women of color. For example, one participant shared:

> As a woman we have to prove ourselves, right? Because people are always judging, "they are just women, they don't have to pass and they just end up somewhere," but we have to work two times harder just to prove ourselves that we can do something [and] achieve something on our own...I feel like it is amazing if we are going to be able to deal with it we are going to teach our kids too, most of the girls to be independent and actually be somebody.

These experiences added an additional layer of stress to their ongoing challenges of pursuing their academic goals at Palomar. In addition to the other challenges mentioned in the report, these racial and gendered experiences also impacted their sense of belonging amongst their peers

and campus. Despite the culmination of aforementioned challenges, students described moments in which faculty played a key role in creating spaces where the students felt supported and validated.

"You're Meant to Be Here:" The Role of Faculty Validation and Support

Despite the challenges that student experienced regarding financial concerns and feeling a sense of belonging on campus, both men and women in the sample discussed the role that faculty validation and support played in their experiences at Palomar. Rendón (1994) defined validation as a process initiated by agents in- and out- of the classroom that can be affirming and supportive. Such validation has been found to foster students' sense of belonging, increase faculty-student engagement, and classroom participation. Participants shared several instances in which they felt connected with faculty, received validating messages from faculty, or sensed that faculty simply "cared" about them. As described by one participant:

> In the [department], professors are there to help me out. I have always had questions for them and they always continued to tell me "You're here, you're meant to be here, you're here to succeed, that is your goal don't forget" kind of thing.

In addition to receiving affirming messages from faculty, students also appreciated faculty who were supportive of their academic progress. Participants would often recall specific professors who went above and beyond what was expected of them to ensure their success. For example, one of the women of color stated:

> There is this other professor….she was my English professor last semester. She was awesome. She was really sweet to me and I would always go to her after every exam. I was like "oh I got it wrong" and she was like "this is what you got wrong." And then she would try to help me and I would go to her like a lot…

As noted in this example, students who perceived faculty as supportive, caring, and available were more likely to seek help and engage with faculty one-on-one. Students also talked about the importance of the informal out-of-class interactions they had with faculty and the role these interactions played in helping them feel validated and supported. Participants noted that professors who were welcoming in the classroom and during office hours also tended to be friendly when they ran into them on campus. One student recalled,

> Recently I remember I was waiting for my next class to start and [professor] just sat down and started talking, and he was like "oh what class are you taking this semester? Are you getting closer to transfer?" This made me feel really good.

Informal and spontaneous interactions between students and faculty, particularly outside of the classroom, were described positively by participants. Such instances made students feel acknowledged, welcomed, validated, cared for, and seen by faculty on campus.

"I Don't Feel Safe Here at Night": Campus Safety Concerns Among Women of Color

A salient challenge that emerged for female students of color was concerns about safety, particularly at night. Participants expressed feeling unsafe leaving campus after night classes. While the women mentioned that campus safety officers were visible during the day, they perceived them as being primarily concerned with parking enforcement. For example, one woman stated,

> You see them [campus police] all over the place all they do is check to see if you have your parking passes in the car. That's why if I ever were to take a class at night, I really do feel like I need a pocket knife with me. Or pepper spray.

Campus safety officers were not visible in the evenings. In addition to the lack of presence from campus safety, another female participant noted the challenge of staying late on campus. For example, the participant

shared that she stays on campus from 8am until 9pm. When she arrives on campus she parks in the only available parking space, which is far from campus because of the morning rush. Thus, leaving her at a farther distance from her last class in the evening when she is done.

> At night time, I would have to walk really far because my car would be so far, so it would be kind of like [a] danger zone, there is no security going around, nothing, [you are] by yourself and it doesn't feel safe.

Similarly, two other participants stated:

> I have to get out at 9pm and I totally jet it to the sprinter… also an instructor at CAL told me to buddy up… they feel we are defenseless you know because we are females, we are probably the easiest target.

> During the day, it is fine but like sometimes I will be here in the night it is scary because it is like...you shouldn't be scared if you're on campus, you should feel protected. Not every time you can actually call them [police] or campus police...you know I feel like you should be a little more secure, they should keep patrolling at certain time of the night, as it gets darker, they should try to be around...if something is going to happen.

For these women, campus safety was an important concern. The women were particularly concerned with not feeling safe at night due to a lack of visibility of campus safety. Having discussed campus safety concerns among women, we now will provide recommendations based on the findings presented in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented in this report, CCEAL recommends the following next steps to advance equity and success for students of color at Palomar.

- Initiate a support group for women of color. The women of color we interviewed expressed the ability to be resilient during times of difficulty. However, identifying healthy and proactive strategies to

cope with stress and anxiety are paramount to their long-term well-being and success. It would also be worthwhile to encourage faculty to put a statement in their syllabi that lets students know about the services that are offered by the Behavioral Health Counseling Services department.

- Offer comprehensive professional development to all faculty (including part time and adjunct faculty) to build their capacities to validate students and create a sense of belonging in the classroom. Faculty should also be mindful that this is especially important for students from underserved backgrounds. Professional development should also address racial and gender microaggressions and provide concrete strategies faculty can employ to counter them. In assessing faculty and staff professional development needs, the campus should consider utilizing CCEAL's Community College Instructional Development Inventory (faculty) and the Community College Staff Development Inventory (staff).

- Develop a comprehensive plan to address acute food, housing, and transportation amongst students. In doing so, the College should partner with the County of San Diego's North Inland Live Well Center.

- Consult with the Office of Financial Aid to address the concerns students raised about the timeliness of their disbursements and to devise strategies to meet students' acute financial needs. While most students who receive financial aid are affected by late disbursements, students who experience disproportionate impact are perhaps most adversely affected. Of particular concern are students who are not able to purchase books and other course materials until they receive their aid, as these students' risk falling behind in course assignments and not passing.

- Implement a book rental or loan system to make course materials temporarily available to students during the early weeks of the semester when financial aid awards are being processed and disbursed. Moreover, encourage faculty to have desk copies of textbooks available to loan to students and to let students know if it would be acceptable to purchase previous editions of textbooks, which are typically more affordable than current editions.

- Dialogue with campus police to address the campus safety concerns raised by the women of color about being more visible on campus during the evening hours. Students reported being aware of the safety escort program but believe it to be unreliable. Thus, assessing the effectiveness of this program may be useful and worthwhile.

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