



PATHWAYS AND POSSIBILITIES: STUDENT EXPERIENCES ABOUT TRANSITIONING INTO POST- SECONDARY EDUCATION



Preliminary Report



PROJECT OVERVIEW



CCER and UW Community Engagement and Leadership Education Center wanted to learn from college students and early professionals who graduated from the Road Map Region (Kent, Auburn, Seattle, Renton, Tukwila, Highline and Federal Way Public Schools) about their experience to share with current high school students who will typically be the first generation in their families in postsecondary education and students of color. Another purpose of the conversations is to analyze and capture emerging recommendations for school partners to continue improving the ways we support students for postsecondary life. By centering their voices, this report highlights lessons and recommendations that schools, districts, and community partners can use to better support students navigating post-secondary education.

Common Themes:

There were five common themes that were highlighted through student interviews about how students experienced the transition from high school to college.

Lack of College Readiness Preparedness

- Mixed experiences: Some students felt somewhat ready for college, while others reported being underprepared.
- Gaps in College Readiness prep: Coursework (AP, AVID, motivated peers) provided academic confidence in specific subjects, but students lacked preparation for navigating financial aid, applications, and college culture.

College Aspirations and “Aha” Moments

- College as an expectation: For many, college wasn’t an “aha moment” it was assumed due to family, culture, or school environment.

Things Students Wish They Knew

- Financial realities: Students wished for clearer guidance on financial aid, scholarships, and real costs of college.
- Resources matter: Many wished they had known about available support earlier (advising, campus resources, peer groups).
- Importance of networks: Building support systems was key to navigating challenges.

Learning About Opportunities

- Access through networks: Most students learned of opportunities from mentors, or peers.
- Uneven access: Some had little or late awareness of opportunities, reflecting inequitable information-sharing

Overarching Themes:

- Students are navigating systemic inequities: lack of transparent financial guidance, uneven access to opportunities, and cultural mismatch in school systems.
- Mentors and supportive programs played a crucial role in bridging gaps.

METHODOLOGY



To truly understand student perspectives, we went straight to the source by conducting short conversational style interviews. CCER researchers conducted 11 interviews with college students across the Region. Participants represented diverse backgrounds, and the majority identified as first-generation college students.

Each interview lasted between 5-11 minutes and was guided by a consistent set of five core questions, which explored:

1. **How prepared students felt coming out of high school**
2. **Key “aha” moments that influenced their college aspirations,**
3. **What they wished they had known before starting college,**
4. **How they learned about work-study or internship opportunities, and**
5. **The most valuable takeaways from their college or internship experiences.**



LESSONS FROM STUDENTS



Most of our interviewees were first-generation students or students of color from across the Road Map Region, yet they shared strikingly similar reflections about their high school preparation. Students who felt somewhat prepared commonly credited their study habits and academic rigor especially through AP courses as key strengths. One student shared, ***"I think that in terms of learning how to study and how to be a student, Richland High School prepared me really well."*** Those who felt the most prepared often pointed to early college exposure programs such as AVID, AP, Running Start, and the Robinson Program. A student reflected, ***"I think HS prepared me somewhat, but I think a lot of it came from my initiative. AP classes definitely helped me, especially for the college curriculum."*** Another student from Foster High School highlighted the role of AVID in building college readiness: ***"I got really lucky... our AVID program helped me out with college readiness, how to be an adult early on, time efficiency, time management, etc."*** He also acknowledged that not all students had access to these supports or shared his mindset, adding, ***"I had friends who were not as fortunate as me who didn't have AVID and these resources... had we had more support from our schools and teachers, we would have probably done so much better."***

Many students described feeling “somewhat prepared” because they were unready for the independence, initiative, and self-management required in college particularly around scheduling and navigating the less structured environment. One student described this transition **“When I arrived at college, I realized that I had to do a lot of things on my own... I think high school was very structured... didn’t really provide an outlet for me to navigate and choose classes I wanted to do.”**

When asked to share an “aha moment” that motivated them to pursue college, most students regardless of family background shared that college was an expectation **“instilled in them from a young age.”** For many, higher education symbolized both stability and a way to explore their passions more deeply. One student reflected that his decision was rooted in honoring his parents’ sacrifices and serving as a role model for his siblings: **“I had a moment to think about my dad and my mom because they sacrificed a lot to get to the U.S. so that me and my three other siblings would have a better opportunity than they ever had. Seeing them work their butts off just to give me the chance to even go to school... it kind of flipped a switch for me.”**

The theme of exploration also surfaced when students were asked, “What’s one thing you wish you knew before starting college?” Many expressed that trying new things and stepping outside their comfort zones led to meaningful self-discovery and clarity about their futures. One student shared, **“The purpose of being in college is to try and explore.”** She explained that she initially saw college as a linear path start, graduate, get a job but later realized the importance of “finding yourself in the process.” She added one practical piece of advice she wished she’d known sooner: **“Check emails because those newsletters actually have things like internships, opportunities, scholarships, fellowships... Read the emails. Read the newsletters.”**

Many students described their CELE internships as pivotal learning experiences that provided tangible, real-world insights into community work and public service. These experiences either affirmed their career goals or revealed new directions. As one student reflected, **“I would say my job at the Commons—one of the most valuable takeaways is that I learned that I really like working in community and being in community.”** She also noted her personal growth and self-awareness **“I think to a certain extent I learned that maybe I don’t like working with youth in certain ways because I just don’t have the capacity or the patience.”**

While students gained valuable skills through coursework, the CELE internship experiences uniquely bridged classroom learning with community application. One UW Informatics major who helped digitize data for a women’s shelter explained, **“This experience really helped me learn how the skills I’ve learned in my major and the projects I do can help the community helping people make more informed, data-driven decisions in an organization or community setting.”**

CONCLUSION



The experiences shared by students give us an authentic perspective into what it feels like to transition from high school into college. Although college readiness courses such as AP classes and AVID are created with the intention to prepare students, we learn that it is not enough. Students share that they needed clearer guidance to navigate applications and enrollment processes of college like financial aid applications, better access to resources, and stronger networks of support in school. These experiences shed light on how often information and college readiness support is unevenly shared, leaving some students to figure out the hardest parts of college transitions on their own. By being intentional in taking the time to listen and learn from our students, schools and community partners can leverage their recommendations to do more to make college readiness support equitable, culturally responsive, and grounded in lived experiences. As one student mentioned ""I don't think my high school did the best on helping students, especially students of color, like be prepared to even apply to college because I even had my own counselors blatantly tell me like "this is not the school for you".. demoralizing for most people but I took that as motivation...I'm going to apply I'm going to get in and I'm here now." What stands out most is the resilience and determination students bring with them. This student's resilience and determination show us that when students are met with the right support, their potential is not just to enter college but also feel a true sense of belonging once they enroll.





Thank You

In partnership with the University of Washington Community Engagement and Leadership Education (CELE) Center.

We extend our gratitude to the students who generously shared their experiences, as well as to the educators, community partners, and colleagues whose ongoing collaboration made this report possible.

PREPARED BY:

Kanza Hamidani
Research & Evaluation
Manager

Paree Raval
Youth Research Intern

