

***Clackamas Middle College
Student Focus Group Study Report***

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Victoria Lukich, Ed.D.

Center for Student Success
Graduate School of Education
Portland State University



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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2015, the North Clackamas School District commissioned the Center for Student Success (CSS) to conduct a study to assess the effectiveness of the school improvement efforts of Clackamas Middle College (CMC). Given that CMC has recently invested time and other resources to expand and enhance the programs the school offers to prepare students for postsecondary success, the following research question was identified to guide the study:

- ❖ To what extent have CMC’s investments in postsecondary transition programs impacted CMC students?

After a review of the data collected through surveys and observations during the most recent AdvancEd Performance Accreditation, the CMC principal and the CSS researcher determined that a student focus group would be the most appropriate methodology for this study. They worked collaboratively to design the focus group protocol which addressed five key areas:

- Opportunities for students to engage in conversation with other students about college
- Opportunities for students to learn about college during regular meetings with counselors and other staff
- Opportunities for students to learn about and experience specific colleges
- College admission and placement
- Preparing for success in college

The purpose of this report is to summarize the findings of the focus group session so CMC leadership and staff are aware of the areas in which they have made progress in improving their postsecondary transition programs, as well as areas that warrant additional attention. Highlights of key findings that emerged from the focus group are shared below:

- CMC students are extremely satisfied with the support they receive from counselors and teachers at their school. Students report a strong sense of community at CMC where teachers connect with students as individuals and genuinely care about how students are doing—academically and emotionally.
- Students recognize (and appreciate) that the high expectations CMC holds for all students prepares them for the expectations they will experience in college and in life. Students also agree that CMC counselors do an excellent job ensuring students stay on track to reach their goals.
- Students report learning about college through frequent conversations with their CMC classmates. *“Conversations about college are embedded in the culture of CMC,”* says one CMC student. Conversations between students occur regularly throughout the day and cover a wide range of topics including getting into college, specific college courses, expectations of college classes, and college instructors.

- Students also gain information about college from CMC staff, primarily during Advisory periods. Topics discussed during Advisory include: the most important factors to consider when applying to college, expectations for what the college experience will be like, programs offered at specific colleges, and managing different aspects of one’s life—academic, social, and emotional—as a college student.
- Many students report they experienced a high level of anxiety when they entered college courses for the first time. They express a need for more support focused on the emotional aspects of the transition to minimize the apprehension and nervousness they felt during their first few days in college classes.
- CMC counselors encourage students to visit college campuses. Generally, students are responsible for arranging the visitations. Students recognize the benefits of college visits and would appreciate opportunities to visit more campuses.
- Factors students identify as important to their college selection include: programs and degrees offered; size of school; location (urban/rural, in-state/out-of-state); cost; GPA requirements; average SAT/ACT scores; personality and culture of the school.

Based on the key findings from the focus group session, CMC leadership and staff are encouraged to consider the following actions:

- Provide additional support for students—immediately before they enter their first college classes—focusing on the emotional aspects of the transition. Students offered the following suggestions: hosting a student panel; organizing a time for students who are just starting college classes to meet with current college students who are in the same or similar programs to talk about specific classes; providing a student-written article that addresses the emotional aspects of transitioning to college. Another idea to consider, not suggested by students: Provide each CMC student (who is just starting college courses) with a mentor student who has already been through the process. The “mentorship” could last just a few weeks or several months as needed and could be a very meaningful experience for the mentor as well as for the mentee.
- Organize and sponsor more visits to local college campuses. Since students’ greatest concerns about college appear to be around navigating the campus and learning what to expect on a college campus, providing opportunities for students to visit colleges and become more familiar with the campus environment is a wise and thoughtful investment. Leaving the scheduling of college visits up to individual students can create issues of inequity for students who do not have the resources that are available to other students.
- Regarding the curriculum for Advisory, ensure consistent learning targets are identified and posted so all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers) are clear about the expectations of

the Advisory sessions. As students reported what they learned during Advisory, their experiences seemed to be somewhat varied. Because the Advisory period is the primary venue for CMC students to receive information from CMC staff about preparing for postsecondary options, having a strong curriculum with clearly identified student outcomes is critical.

Background

Over the past year, Clackamas Middle College (CMC) has invested resources to expand and enhance the programs they offer to prepare students for postsecondary success. CMC's efforts in this area are well documented in the school's 2015-2016 Continuous School Improvement Plan.

In the fall of 2015, the North Clackamas School District commissioned the Center for Student Success (CSS) to conduct a study to assess the effectiveness of CMC's school improvement efforts. The CMC principal and the CSS researcher worked together to identify the specific research question which would guide the study:

- ❖ To what extent have CMC's investments in postsecondary transition programs impacted CMC students?

After a review of the data collected through surveys and observations during the most recent AdvancEd Performance Accreditation, the CMC principal and the CSS researcher determined that a student focus group would be the most appropriate methodology for this study. They worked collaboratively to design the protocol for the focus group session. The protocol addressed five key areas:

- Opportunities for students to engage in conversation (with other students) about college
- Opportunities for students to learn about college during regular meetings with counselors/other staff
- Opportunities for students to learn about and experience specific colleges
- College admission and placement
- Preparing for success in college

The protocol identified 2-3 questions within each area. During the session the facilitator followed up with additional questions as needed to clarify and to probe more deeply into participants' responses. The focus group protocol appears in the appendix of this report.

Important Notes:

- i) Within the narrative of this report, questions from the focus group protocol appear in red font.
- ii) Direct quotes from participants appear in italics.

Methodology

Focus groups are carefully constructed and facilitated discussions held in non-threatening environments designed to elicit candid responses in defined areas of interest. The result is a highly interactive process that helps the researchers understand some of the variables and underlying reasons for people’s opinions. The focus group methodology allows the facilitator to ask clarifying and probing questions in addition to allowing participants to interact with each other and to react to the ideas and comments of others during the discussion.

The CMC student focus group was held on May 4, 2016 from 1:30-2:30pm. The session was conducted in a classroom on the Clackamas Middle College campus. At the beginning of the session, the principal made brief introductions and expressed his appreciation to the students for their willingness to participate in the group. He then left the room and was not present during the discussion.

Prior to starting the focus group protocol, the facilitator emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the group so participants would feel safe to share openly and honestly. The facilitator explained that data generated from the session would be compiled and reported as themes, not associated with any particular person. Participants were also assured that direct quotations would not provide specific personal identifiers in an effort to maintain participants’ confidentiality. The session was audiotaped to ensure all comments and ideas were captured. Participants were assured that the CSS facilitator would be the only person to have access to the audiotape and the tape would be destroyed as soon as the final report was submitted to the school.

Ten students participated in the session. Demographics of the group are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Focus Group Participants

Year in School	Number of years at CMC
Grade 9	1 st year
Grade 9	1 st year
Grade 10	2 nd year
Grade 11	1 st year
Grade 11	3 rd year
Grade 11	3 rd year
Grade 11	3 rd year
Grade 12	1 st year
Grade 12	1 st year
Grade 12	4 th year

Student Focus Group Results

Opportunities to engage in conversation with other students about college

- To what extent do students at CMC engage in conversation (with each other) about college?
 - Do students at CMC talk with each other about taking college classes while in high school?
 - Do students at CMC talk with each other about going to college after graduating from CMC?

All focus group participants agreed that conversations about college happen frequently and regularly at CMC. One student explained since most students enter CMC fully aware of the school's focus on college, conversations about preparing for and attending college is a natural expectation and outcome.

When the facilitator asked students how often they have conversations about college, one student immediately and enthusiastically shouted, "Everyday!" The other students nodded in agreement—several students chuckled.

Another student added, "Yeah, we talk about college all day—everyday."

Other comments from students appear below:

"It's just something on everybody's mind –students are always talking about and thinking about preparing for college here. That's just what we do."

"Talk about college is embedded in the culture of the school because everyone here is so focused on getting into college."

"We talk about what kind of classes we are taking right now – how easy or hard they are – what classes we still have to take."

"It comes up in everyday conversations . . . 'Are we going to get into the Pathways program?' or 'How are we going to prepare for it?' or 'What's it going to be like?' "

"Sometimes people ask me what the teachers are like – or I ask them about the teachers in the next step or how they are doing in those classes in the next step, so I know what to expect."

Students reported they intentionally seek out and engage in conversations with other CMC students who are further along in their educational journey so they can learn what to expect in their own journey. Some of the questions students reported asking other students include:

- What college classes are you taking right now?
- How difficult are the classes?
- How are you doing in (a specific class)?

- What are the requirements in (a specific class)?
- What are the instructors like?
- How is (a specific class) the same or different from high school classes?

Opportunities to learn about college from counselors/other staff

- To what extent do CMC students have opportunities to learn about college during regular meetings with counselors and other staff?
 - When did your counselors (or other school staff) begin meeting with students to talk about college?
 - What types of things about college did you learn in meetings/classes with CMC staff?
 - What was the most helpful advice/support that CMC provided? What do you wish they had provided?

Students reported that although the majority of the day-to-day “college talk” at CMC occurs between students, conversations about college are also initiated by CMC staff. When the facilitator asked students at what point CMC counselors started talking to them about college, one student replied: *“The first day of freshman year—day one!”* Other students expressed verbal and nonverbal signs of agreement.

One student indicated that talk about college started for him during Orientation Day when CMC students participated in a tour of the CCC Harmony Campus and were given the opportunity to ask questions about the college experience. Other students reported it was also during Orientation Day that they learned about the options available at CMC—College Prep, Pathways to Career, Pathways to College and College Extended Options.

Students reported in addition to what they learned during the introductory sessions on Orientation Day, they continued to increase their knowledge and understanding about college through the CMC college prep programs and during Advisory meetings on Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

When the facilitator asked students what types of things CMC staff talked to them about during Advisories and/or during classes, students provided an array of topics. One student shared: *“[CMC staff] really help you think about what kind of colleges you are interested in. We talk about things like private versus public, urban versus small town, large versus small. They are really good about encouraging us to generate our own questions about college.”*

Another student described some of the talk that has occurred in her Advisory classes: *“In P1 and P2 advisory we talked about our expectations about colleges versus what colleges really are, what its going to look like going into college, and how to manage different parts of our life (during college) such as homework, our social life and even our mental health. They go into a lot of depth in all of those topics.”*

A third student shared her experience in Advisory this year: *“In P3, we have been focusing a lot more on making sure that we know what kind of program we want to go into and to know we are selecting the right colleges based on what programs we are interested in. We also talk about looking at colleges that are within our budget.”*

Seven of the ten students reported they are currently enrolled in college classes. The facilitator asked students to identify the most helpful information CMC counselors have shared in terms of preparing them for the college experience. One student, identified guidance in the area of course selection as the most valuable support she has received from her counselors:

“Since I am a CEO student, I am completely on my own because I am not taking HS classes. So the most beneficial thing for me is [counselors] helping me plan my courses for the next term, the next year. I appreciate the counselors keeping me focused. There are so many courses that sound fun, but may not move me forward in my program. I want to do all these fun classes, like tennis and golf, but I appreciate the counselors keeping me focused on my ultimate goal. They help you focus so you don’t lose track of the core curriculum. [CMC counselors] are really good about encouraging and supporting you to chase your dreams, but keeping you on a straight path to achieve those dreams.”

Another student agreed and added: *“The planning and organizing for every term is super helpful, especially when you are in Pathways because when you get to CEO you are totally on your own. It’s really important to stay on track.”*

One student reported that during individual meetings with counselors, the counselor usually allows the student to set the agenda and lead the meeting. While she recognizes the purpose of this strategy is to encourage students to take on more responsibility for their educational experience, she acknowledged that occasionally she needs the counselor to be more directive: *“Sometimes I would like [the counselor] to just step up and say, ‘Here is something you might want to know . . . ’ because sometimes I don’t even know the questions that I should be asking.”*

Another student agreed that although she appreciates the freedom and increased responsibility students have at CMC, sometimes she wants—and needs—her counselor to tell her exactly what to do: *“Sometimes I just want my counselor to give me a list of the steps I need to take to help me . . . it’s hard to balance working toward graduation while I’m taking college classes at the same time.”*

One student explained how her counselor has helped her be more realistic in terms of her class load: *“Sometimes I bite off more than I can chew – like I aim for taking too many classes. [Counselors] help me make a more manageable schedule. Like asking, ‘Do you really want to take this?’ or ‘Why not take this class instead?’ ”*

All students in the group agreed that CMC counselors do an excellent job ensuring students are on track to reach their goals. Students reported they are also fully supported by CMC teachers. One student described an encounter with a former teacher: She had been in this teacher’s class

the previous year but no longer had the teacher as an instructor. The student reported when she ran into the teacher at the CMC campus, the teacher was extremely supportive and genuinely interested in how the girl was doing academically in her college courses. The student shared she was impressed that the teacher still cared about her academic progress even though she was no longer in the teacher's class. Other students reported they have had similar experiences and expressed appreciation that CMC teachers continue to support and encourage them even when students have moved on to the next level.

The facilitator asked 9th grade students what types of things they are hoping a counselor or teacher will discuss with them in preparation for their college experience. The responses focused on logistical concerns such as: *"What does a typical day at college look like?"* and *"How do I choose a program to study?"* and *"What if I change my mind?"*

The facilitator asked the 10th through 12th graders—who are already taking college classes—to identify how CMC staff could have done more to help them transition to college. The theme of the students' responses centered on finding ways to reduce the high level of anxiety students felt as they entered their first college classes. One student shared: *"I was terrified on that first day of going to college. I was pretty prepared academically, but I was so terrified. I wish someone could have just taken away my nerves."*

Many other students admitted they, too, had been extremely nervous at the beginning of their college experience and wish they had been more emotionally prepared for the transition.

The facilitator asked if CMC had provided any opportunities for them to talk to former CMC students who had already gone through the transition experience.

One student reported: *"We do a student panel on our Orientation Day but perhaps it would have been beneficial to do it again. I know for me on the Orientation Day I was thinking more about staying afloat in this new school where I didn't have any friends. I wasn't really thinking about my first day in college. My questions revolved about the pathways program rather than the college prep program or the CEO program."*

Other students supported the idea of having the student panel closer to when students enter their college classes for the first time. Hosting events, in addition to the student panel, that offer opportunities for open dialogue between students—between new students and students who have already transitioned into college classes—was also recommended by focus group members as a strategy to decrease the high levels of anxiety felt by many students.

One student suggested: *"For me, like within the week that I was starting in P1, it would have been extremely helpful to be able to sit down with other people who had gone through the pathways and just said, 'I am really anxious, were you anxious?' Tell me about your experience."*

Bringing students together who share common interests in terms of programs of study was also identified as a means of helping ease the nerves of students preparing to enter their first college

classes. A student noted: *“It would be helpful to be able to ask other students about the classes and about different teachers in the same programs I’m interested in to find out what it will be like before we start into the program. That would have helped me.”*

Another student proposed that students might relate to a student-written article describing the expectations of and emotional aspects of entering your first college class. The student suggested: *“I think it would be helpful to have someone share what it was like for them going through the pathways, so I would find out ‘Wow, I am not the only person who is nervous about this.’ “*

Many students shared that much of their initial anxiety about entering college was related to concerns about their ability to navigate the college campus. They unanimously agreed that tours of different college campuses would help reduce students’ anxiety.

One student described how even a campus tour of CCC Main Campus could help students: *“During the Orientation Day, we took a tour of the Harmony campus, but I think it would be helpful to go to the CCC Main Campus and do the same thing. See where you will eventually end up. To be able to look around and see the Community Center and see where the classes are, so it isn’t such a foreign environment. You get an idea what your day might be like – where you will be spending your time eventually.”*

Another student pointed out that a campus tour is also a good opportunity to see other students and potentially to meet some of the faculty.

Opportunities to learn about and experience specific colleges

- To what extent do CMC students have opportunities to learn about and experience specific colleges?
- What colleges have you visited?

Eight of the ten students reported they have been to the CCC Main Campus; two students reported they have never been to any college campus, including CCC. One student recalled a few years ago CMC took all students to CCC Main Campus for a scavenger hunt activity to help them become acquainted with key structures at the campus. Another student reminded the group that more recently all CMC students were invited to the CCC Main Campus for Skills Competition Day and a campus tour was provided for anyone who was interested. About half the students in the group remembered this opportunity and the others reported being unaware that this event had occurred.

The same eight students who reported having been to the CCC Main Campus also reported they have visited other college campuses including: MHCC, PCC, PSU, University of Oregon, Oregon State University, Western Oregon University, Willamette, Reed, and University of Washington. The majority of college visits have been on their own rather than organized by CMC.

Two students remembered being on college campuses for conferences or field trips, not specifically focused on preparing for transitioning to college. Although these experiences provided students with a general idea of the culture of the college, learning specific information about the school was limited. One student reported he visited the campus of WOU for the Cesar Chavez Conference. Another student recalled: *“The fall of freshman year we took a field trip to downtown Portland and we saw the Art Museum and we also took a tour of PSU. But it was very quick and short.”*

Another student referenced the same brief field trip to PSU and offered a suggestion: *“We did take the field trip to PSU, but we didn’t get an in depth understanding of PSU because the day included visiting other places. I think they need to schedule a trip specifically to the college (not other places, too) like a whole day there, so people could explore the departments, maybe see a classroom, maybe observe a class in session, and get to ask some questions.”*

The 11th and 12th graders reported that CMC counselors have encouraged them to visit colleges on their own; all seven upperclassmen in the focus group reported they have made visits to at least one college in addition to CCC. All ten students in the focus group acknowledged the benefits of visiting college campuses. When one student suggested CMC should consider organizing more field trips to colleges—especially schools in the Portland Metropolitan area—other participants voiced unanimous support for the idea. Several students indicated they would also like to visit campuses outside of Portland, including OSU, UofO, and WOU.

One student recalled the college visits that were routinely scheduled at her previous high school, visits to local community colleges for freshmen and sophomores, visits to university campuses for juniors and seniors. She suggested CMC staff should consider offering similar experiences and claimed: *“I know our students would enjoy something like that and it would help them prepare for college. It helped me.”*

- **What are the most important aspects of a campus visit?**

A campus tour was identified as the most important feature of a campus visit—preferably with a tour guide who currently attends the college. Students mentioned talking to current students at the college was a priority. Many students suggested they would like to sit in on a college class. Several students expressed a desire to talk to a college representative who could provide information on topics such as programs offered, approximate class size, admission requirements, and financial assistance. One student indicated she would also be interested in seeing dorm rooms during the campus tour; she has heard that the size and the quality of the dorm rooms vary significantly.

Several students recalled that college representatives have visited the CMC campus to promote specific colleges, though consensus among the group was that these visits were not very effective. One student explained that the presentations occurred during students’ 45-minute lunch break and most students leave campus during lunch. Another student reported because

she brings her lunch she was able to attend all of the presentations and thought they were very informative. She is not sure if she will stay in Oregon for college, but she indicated the college presentations provided a solid, initial overview and a good start in her exploration of schools.

Another student recalled that in addition to the lunchtime presentations during college week, representatives from the University of Oregon and Oregon State University set up booths on the CMC campus for about a week and made themselves available for students to ask questions. Many other students then remembered the weeklong visits from OSU and UofO; students reported these sessions were more effective than the lunchtime presentations. The opportunity for dialogue between CMC students and the college representatives was identified as a high priority for all students in the focus group.

College Admission and Placement

- How difficult do you think it is to gain admission to a public university in Oregon? Why do you think that?
- Do you know what the requirements are to get into one of Oregon’s public universities? Are there differences in requirements between say, UofO, OSU and PSU?

The facilitator asked students to describe their level of awareness and understanding of the admission requirements of different Oregon colleges. Students did not respond immediately, so the facilitator probed with more questions, trying to determine to what extent students were aware of how competitive the Oregon schools are with respect to GPA, SAT/ACT scores, and other admission requirement. Still the response was limited.

Finally, one student reported: *“In Pathways right now, in EL120 – its kind of like an advisory, we have to pick a few colleges that we are interested in and we have to find out when the applications are due, what the requirements are, what the acceptance rates are, and what they offer as classes and things like that.”*

Students reported that the curriculum of the EL120 course has been different depending on the teacher currently assigned to the class; they were unsure if all students had the same learning experiences or covered the same curriculum in the EL120 course.

Two students explained in addition to learning things during Advisory, they have also learned about the college admission process by engaging in conversation with friends and siblings of friends about their experiences working through the process. One student shared: *“Just by talking to others you run into people who have applied to the various local schools and talk about what their experience has been. It isn’t hard statistics, but you get an overall sense of who gets in and who doesn’t.”*

All 11th and 12th graders agreed that CMC counselors are excellent resources for helping students access information about specific colleges. One student reported that CMC counselors are strong

advocates for the in-state schools: *“Counselors encourage us to consider attending the state schools because they are required to accept our AAOTs as a ‘chunk.’ You apply as a freshman and then transfer in all your credits and enter as a junior. So [counselors] really advocate for those schools for the ease of your benefit.”*

Another student who is looking at out-of-state schools and private universities, as well as Oregon colleges, reported that CMC counselors have connected her with many resources to assist her with her college decisions. Counselors have encouraged her to access the College Board to learn about the admission requirements—including minimum GPA, average SAT scores, and average ACT scores—of the schools she is considering. Other focus group participants indicated that counselors promote the use of Naviance as a tool for their college exploration. As one student explained: *“Counselors encourage you to explore on your own at first making a list of potential colleges, and then bring that list back to them to share what you have learned. Then the counselor helps us tune up our list.”*

All students reported the majority of conversations about college admission requirements occur during Advisory.

One student described an assignment he was given during Advisory: *“We had to select a college and make a poster with information about that college.”* He explained that although the assignment was focused on just one college, by doing the assignment he became familiar with the variety of information that is available (primarily on the internet) for other colleges. He indicated that he can—and will—continue to research other schools on his own.

Several students shared that although CMC counselors and teachers do an excellent job helping student access resources about colleges, students are also expected to accept responsibility for conducting their own research. One student explained: *“I think CMC gives you a good basis—but you still need to be proactive and research things yourself . . . You are encouraged to go off and learn on your own. You must be an independent learner.”*

Another student agreed that CMC students are expected to take personal responsibility for all their learning, including their college searches. She described how the locus of responsibility changes as students move from 9th grade to upperclassman level: *“They do a lot for you during your freshman year and then they back off a little bit and encourage you to take more on yourself—as you gain independence and take on more responsibility for your own learning. You have to learn how to be a high school student and a college student at the same time.”*

- How do you think students are placed into, for example, math classes at one of the public universities in Oregon? What is the process?

All students in the focus group reported they understood that college students are placed into math classes based on how they perform on the required math placement test. One student

shared that the placement test is administered at the testing center located on the Harmony Campus.

One student reported she was surprised to learn that CCC offered such a wide variety of math classes. Another student cautioned that some of the math courses do not give college credit. No student seemed surprised to learn there are courses offered on a college campus that do not qualify for college credit. Comments about non-college-credited courses spurred conversation among the students about the importance of striving for high levels of achievement in math so you can test into college level courses. All participants appeared to understand the benefits of entering college at the highest academic level possible. One student noted that the high expectations and the emphasis on striving for excellence at CMC, helps students learn to push themselves so they are achieving at the highest level possible.

Two of the upperclassmen were extremely knowledgeable about the different math options available at CCC. One student explained: *“I appreciate that there are math classes specific to if you are going into a math/science major or not. There are less technically-oriented classes and more application-oriented classes if that is what you need.”*

- **What do you think are the main differences between the public universities in Oregon?**

When students were asked what they understand as the main differences between the Oregon universities, responses were limited. Most of the students remained silent, while one student jokingly shared a comment about the Ducks and the Beavers. Eventually, one student responded: *“From my own knowledge, UofO tends to be more about business programs, medical programs and law. While OSU is focused on more “earthy” things like agriculture, veterinary and engineering.”*

When students were asked to identify the aspects of a school they deem most important as they consider college choices, the programs a college offers was identified as one of the most important factors. A student reported: *“I recently did an assignment in P2 and we had to look at the programs that a specific college offered and see if they matched with the programs we are interested in.”*

In addition to programs of study and the GPA requirements, students were asked what additional factors they consider as they look at colleges. The responses included factors such as: location (city versus rural community, and in-state versus out-of-state); cost; and whether the school requires SAT or ACT (one student did not want to take the SAT). Four of the students in the group specifically identified the *“culture of the school”* as an important factor in their college selection. One student recognizes that she is *“very social and needs a warm, welcoming learning environment that offers lots of activities and social events.”*

Another student shared that she believes the *“personality of the campus is very important and really requires a visit to the school to find out if it’s a good fit.”* She also described, very clearly,

what she does not want in a college environment: *“I don’t want a school that is party-oriented. I have focused on some religious schools not because I am of that particular denomination, but because I think some of these schools might be less apt to be party schools. So, students are probably less likely to be doing drugs or having parties filled with alcohol on the campus.”*

One of the 12th graders shared that location is one of the main factors on her list of priorities for selecting a college; she wants to be in a big city. She is seriously considering PSU, but is also interested in colleges in southern California. She shared that the deciding factor in her decision will be finances—it will depend on how much financial assistance she receives.

One of the senior CEO students explained identifying colleges that accept dual credit courses is an important factor in her college search. She shared that when she made the decision to attend CMC, she was not aware that many universities would not accept the dual credits. She also reported that although her experience at CMC has been extremely positive, knowing that her college choices would be limited may have impacted her initial decision to attend CMC.

The 11th and 12th graders were knowledgeable about financial aid options and were aware of steps they need to take regarding completing the FAFSA and accessing scholarship applications. One student mentioned she was aware of recent federal legislation that will increase financial assistance for students and families who qualify.

Preparing for Success in College

- Do you feel like you understand what will be expected of you if/when you take classes at Clackamas Community College or college after high school, academically, and how you should prepare for it?
- What kind of classes should you be taking to prepare for college after high school? Are you taking those classes now? If not, why not?
- Do you have any suggestions about ways to improve the information you receive about the college admissions process – either how you receive the information, or the content of the information that you receive?

When asked about how prepared students feel to be successful in college level classes, the unanimous response was *“extremely well prepared.”* One student answered: *“They have very high expectations here to help us get ready for taking college classes—attend class, do your work, get work completed on time.”*

Another student suggested the preparation for college level work is not limited to knowledge and skill, and grades — but also includes habits of mind and work ethic: *“They also look at your personality and work ethic – focusing on class work, maturity, etc. They don’t just throw you in there and give you a college class. They want to make sure you are ready for it.”*

Students talked about the process of getting into the CMC college program. They reported that they understand the need for the process to be rigorous, competitive and comprehensive to ensure students who are accepted are ready and well-prepared for success at the college level. Students expressed a high level of trust for CMC teachers with respect to decisions about which students are ready for college level classes. Students also shared that they understand why CMC staff hold high expectations for students in the college prep and pathway programs. As one student explained: *“They want to prepare CMC students to be able to manage the high expectations that we will encounter at the college level.”*

One of the CEO students shared: *“In the CEO program, they are really good about having high expectations so the student is prepared to meet the expectations at the next level. It requires managing your time and managing your schedule. Being able to do this independently is very important. It is your responsibility.”*

Another student described in more detail how CMC emphasizes a strong work ethic and high expectations for students: *“They make it clear it isn’t about the institution just having rules and policies. They make it clear if you are going to succeed in this institution and beyond, you have to want it and you have to work at it. It isn’t about the teachers telling you that the assignment is due and reminding you about it. Its about you taking responsibility for getting your work done and turned in on time. That’s how you will be prepared for the future.”*

Additional comments from the focus group participants:

The facilitator closed the session by giving students the opportunity to share any additional comments, advice, suggestions, or questions with the CMC staff/leadership. Students’ responses are listed below:

- Integrate the required Youth Taking Action (YTA) experience into the Pathways program or do it while the student is taking classes on the CMC campus. Two CEO students reported they had to leave CCC campus during the day to come to CMC for YTA and not only was it *“extremely inconvenient,”* but it limited their course selection because of the midday break in their schedule. They recognize the importance of YTA and are not advocating eliminating it as a school requirement, but encourage CMC to make sure students complete YTA while they are on the CMC campus.
- Offer languages at the CMC campus for students who are not going into Pathways. Suggested languages included: Mandarin, Japanese or Sign Language.
- Provide extra-curricular activities; choir was suggested by one student.
- Make sure students are aware (before they come to CMC) that some colleges may not accept the dual credit students earn here. *“Students should be aware that the college they really want to attend may not take their dual credits so they will have to make a difficult choice.”*

Key Findings

- Students report they are engaged in conversations about college (with other students) on a daily basis. Students report “college talk” is embedded into the culture of the school.
- Students report conversations about college range from general topics: “What is a college class like? How is it the same or different from a high school class?” to more specific topics such as the requirements of a particular course or the best instructor for a specific course.
- In addition to the frequent “college talk” that occurs between students, CMC staff talk to students about college issues; these conversations happen primarily during Advisory. The topics discussed during Advisory include: factors to consider when applying to college, expectations for what the college experience will be like, programs offered at specific colleges, and managing different aspects of your life—academic, social, and emotional—as a college student.
- Students access information about preparing for college during Advisories, but they report they are also expected to do much of their research about colleges on their own. Although counselors provide students with support and resources, they also hold students accountable for being self-directed researchers.
- Students report having a high level of anxiety when they entered college classes for the first time. They all expressed a strong desire for support to help them emotionally during the initial transition.
- Some students have visited a few college campuses (in addition to CCC); students are responsible for visiting colleges on their own. Students would like CMC to organize more field trips to local college campuses.
- Students view the visits from the college representatives to the CMC campus as moderately effective—certainly not as effective as the students visiting the schools.
- Although students do not seem to have specific admission requirements for Oregon colleges committed to memory, they are keenly aware how and where they can access the information.
- Similarly, students appear to have a limited awareness of the key differences between Oregon colleges, though they admit they could “*look it up if they needed the information.*”
- Factors students consider as they are making their college selection include: programs and degrees offered; size of school; location (urban/rural, in-state/out-of-state); cost; GPA requirements; average SAT/ACT scores; personality and culture of the school.
- Students report being surprised that some colleges will not accept the dual credits they have earned at CCC and recommend making sure this information is shared with students before they commit to CMC.
- Students feel extremely well-prepared (by CMC) for success in college. They acknowledge the high expectations CMC holds for all students is preparing them for college level expectations. The anxiety many students express about entering college does not seem to be related to lack of confidence in their ability to do college level work; it is more about the general experience, including navigating the campus and managing the schedule.

Considerations / Recommendations

The CSS facilitator encourages CMC to consider the following:

- Students offered several suggestions to CMC leadership to help minimize the high level of anxiety nearly all of them felt when they entered their first college classes. Suggestions included: continuing the student panel but having the panel closer to when students start in their first college class (this might require having more than one panel); organizing a time for students who are just starting college classes to meet with current college students who are in the same or similar programs to talk about specific classes; providing a student-written article that addresses the emotional aspects of transitioning to college. Another idea to consider, not suggested by students: provide each CMC student (who is just starting in the college courses) with a mentor student who has already been through the process. The “mentorship” could last just a few weeks or several months as needed and could be a very meaningful experience for the mentor as well as for the mentee.
- Since students’ greatest concerns about college appear to be around navigating campuses and not knowing “what a typical day in college will look like,” providing opportunities for CMC students to visit campuses, to become more familiar with and more comfortable on a college campus seems to be a wise and thoughtful investment. Leaving the scheduling of college visits up to individual students can create issues of inequity for students who do not have the resources that are available to other students.
- Although students indicate they receive much of their information about preparing for college during Advisory, it appears that the Advisory curriculum is somewhat inconsistent with students’ experiences varying depending on the teacher of the course. CMC is encouraged to ensure consistent and appropriate Advisory learning targets are identified and posted so students (and parents) are aware of the expectations of the Advisory sessions. [NOTE: The CSS researcher acknowledges that the inconsistencies reported by students may be attributed to the fact that improvements (changes) in the Advisory program have been made over the past 2-3 years so obviously students in grades 9-12 are reporting different experiences. It is still worth mentioning the importance of having strong curriculum with clear targets/outcomes since Advisory is the primary place students are accessing information about preparing for college.]

APPENDIX

CMC Student Focus Group Protocol

Opportunities to engage in conversation with other students about college

- To what extent do students at CMC engage in conversation (with each other) about college?
 - Do students at CMC talk with each other about taking college classes while in high school?
 - Do students at CMC talk with each other about going to college after graduating from CMC?

Opportunities to learn about college during regular meetings with counselors/other staff

- To what extent do CMC students have opportunities to learn about college from counselors and other staff?
 - When did your counselors (or other school staff) begin meeting with students to talk about college?
 - What types of things about college did you learn in meetings/classes with CMC staff?
 - What was the most helpful advice/support that CMC provided? What do you wish they had provided?

Opportunities to learn about and experience specific colleges

- To what extent do CMC students have opportunities to learn about and experience specific colleges?
- What colleges have you visited?
- What are the most important aspects of a campus visit?

College Admission and Placement

- How difficult do you think it is to gain admission to a public university in Oregon? Why do you think that?
- Do you know what the requirements are to get into one of Oregon's public universities?
- How do you think students are placed into, for example, math classes at one of the public universities in Oregon? What is the process?
- What do you think are the main differences between the public universities in Oregon?

Preparing for Success in College

- Do you feel like you understand what will be expected of you if/when you take classes at Clackamas Community College or college after high school, academically, and how you should prepare for it? Explain what you believe are the academic expectations.
- What kind of classes should you be taking to prepare for college after high school? Are you taking those classes now? If not, why not?
- Do you have any suggestions about ways to improve the information you receive about the college admissions process – either how you receive the information, or the content of the information that you receive?