



COLLEGE
of the **DESERT**



**Guided Pathways
Student Support
Research Report**

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**



interact

Executive Summary

Introduction

The College of the Desert sought to gather student input to assess the extent to which current support services were accessible and effective in helping students make progress toward degree completion and/or transfer to a four year university. Using the Guided Pathways framework, degree progress was operationalized as an “educational journey” and parsed into four distinct stages (or “pillars” as outlined by Guided Pathways) that demarcate critical milestones of progress, including:

- A. **Clarifying the path** (information and support needed to apply and to enroll);
- B. **Entering the path** (information and support needed to select a degree and/or a major);
- C. **Staying on the path** (information and support needed to move toward completion); and
- D. **Ensuring learning** (information and support needed to assess the extent to which students have acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for their “next steps,” transfer and/or job/career placement).

The parsing of progress (i.e., the educational journey) into distinct stages served to structure the discussions with students and facilitated examination into how specific support services are linked to each stage of the educational journey.

As a result, student perceptions and opinions of, and experiences with, support services were collected via focus groups and an online survey to provide insights into what should or could be done to create, enhance, and/or change support services to promote student success at each stage of the journey, culminating in degree completion and/or transfer.

Goals

Several goals influenced the design of the project, including gaining an understanding of how students perceive and experience the educational journey at College of the Desert, and examining the extent to which students perceive current support services as effective, helpful, and valuable. As a result, the findings from this project are intended to generate insights that will:

- A. Assist College of the Desert in assessing its progress toward achieving measurable outcomes regarding student support services along the four stages of the educational journey as defined by the Guided Pathways process (also taking into account, to some extent, the broader issues outlined in the Vision for Success initiative such as its goals and core commitments); and
- B. Provide clear, actionable evidence for College of the Desert to use to develop, enhance, and/or transform its current student support services to meet the needs of its students more effectively.
- C. Inform the college on how students envision “meta-majors” and how best to organize them.

In addition to the above three goals, additional outcomes from this project are likely to include insights into how to:

- A. Position Guided Pathways as an effective way to design support services that promote student progress and success;
- B. Promote student support services that are being developed, enhanced, and implemented across the college's campuses; and
- C. Inform students and the local community that the college is committed to helping its students succeed by acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in their personal and professional lives.

Contents of the Main Report and the Executive Summary & Research Brief

The **Main Report** stemming from this research contains the results from the focus groups and the online survey in which students were asked to discuss or report their perceptions and opinions of, and experiences with, support services that aim to help them through the stages of their educational journey. Based on the results, conclusions and recommendations are advanced to help the college move forward toward meeting student needs and demand, and to show how these efforts link to the goals and core commitments outlined by the **Vision for Success** initiative. The **Main Report** also contains extensive supporting materials that provide details from the online survey regarding student perceptions and opinions of, and experiences with, the college's support services across the stages of the educational journey. *Note: The **Main Report** is still in process, but is expected to be completed in early 2019.*

In addition, the **Main Report** presents results from a sorting task performed by the focus group participants that show how the college's majors can be grouped into "meta-majors." These results are not presented in this document, but in addition to being included in the **Main Report**, they are also presented in a separate document entitled "College of the Desert: **Identifying Meta-Majors**" (expected to be completed in early 2019). Finally, a fourth component of this project involved interviewing students over the phone to uncover the reasons why they applied but did not enroll. The results of this research are not included in the **Main Report** or in this document, but are presented in a separate document entitled "**College of the Desert: Failure to Enroll Report**" (expected to be completed in early 2019).

For this **Executive Summary & Research Brief**, the methods, findings, and conclusions from the focus groups and the online survey are condensed into critical "takeaway" points to provide an overview of the contents of the **Main Report**.

Brief Overview of Focus Group and Online Survey Methodologies

Protocols and question sequences for focus groups and an online survey were developed by Interact Communications and College of the Desert administrators, faculty, and staff to gather student perceptions and opinions of, and experiences with, support services that align with the four stages of the Guided Pathways process.

Focus Group: Methods & Demographics

Recruitment for the focus groups was conducted by Interact Communications and consisted of multiple emails and calls to current students asking them to participate in one of four 60-90 minute on-campus discussions, with the promise of refreshments and a \$20 gift card for participation. Approximately 113 students responded to the emailed requests. These 113 students (who met the college's stated criteria for inclusion) were sent follow-up emails and were called to confirm attendance, with 66 confirming prior to the focus group. All of those who confirmed attendance were called a second time to verify attendance. Of the 66 who confirmed, 25 actually showed for one of the four focus group sessions. Of those who participated in the focus group discussions, most reported that they identified with Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origins (n=18; 72%), followed by White (n=6; 24%), one student reported that she was African American/Black (n=1; 4%). There were 17 females (68%) and 8 males (32%) across the four groups. Three of the focus groups were held at the main College of the Desert campus, with groups held in both the daytime and early evening, consisting of 19 students. One of the focus groups was held at the Indio campus and consisted of six students.

Students were primed for the discussion by asking them to think about the barriers and obstacles that they experienced as they entered college and during their educational journey. The fact that Guided Pathways compartmentalizes the educational journey into four distinct stages provided an understandable platform to help students discuss the complexities of being a community college student and moving through distinct stages of the educational journey. Discussion of specific types of support services was promoted during the focus groups to examine the extent to which students were aware of and/or had direct experience with each type of support service.

Each focus group was audio recorded and transcribed into written format by a professional transcription service. The written transcripts were submitted to content analytic procedures performed by a professional researcher with several decades of experience analyzing focus group transcripts. Prior to analysis, the transcripts were segmented into the sections outlined by the four stages of Guided Pathways. Then, each transcript was carefully read and coded for themes and illustrative examples, which can be examined in the appendices presented in the **Main Report**.

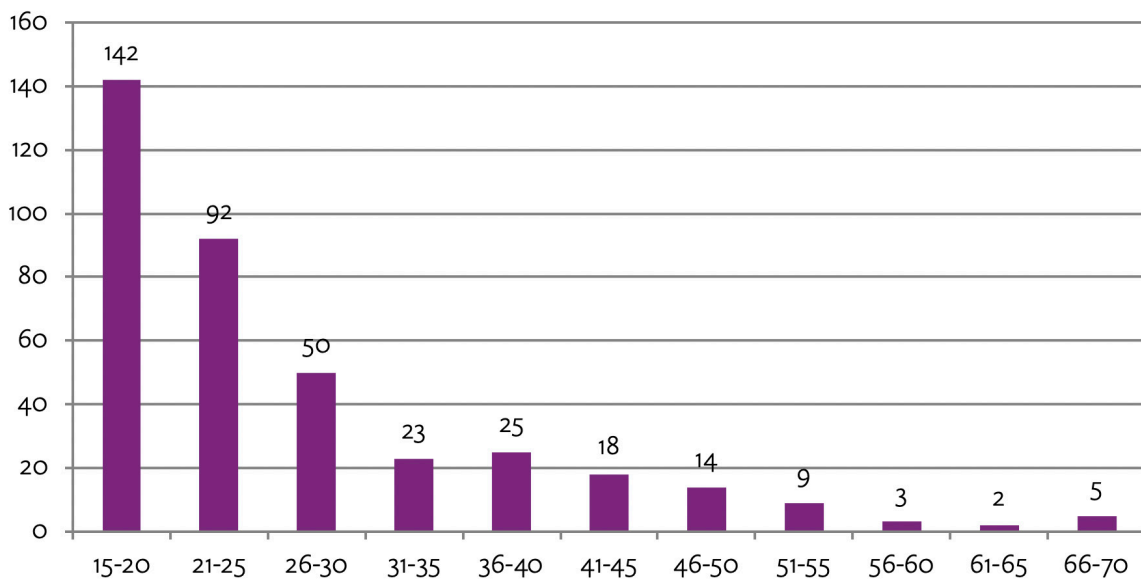
Analysis of student perceptions and opinions of, and experiences with, the college's support services at each stage of the educational journey was conducted to understand the extent to which students were generally aware of existing support services, the extent to which support services were useful, and the extent to which support services needed to be revised and/or enhanced to meet student needs. The findings were aggregated across transcripts to glean overall patterns and to draw general conclusions (see the **Main Report** for additional details).

Online Survey: Methods & Demographics

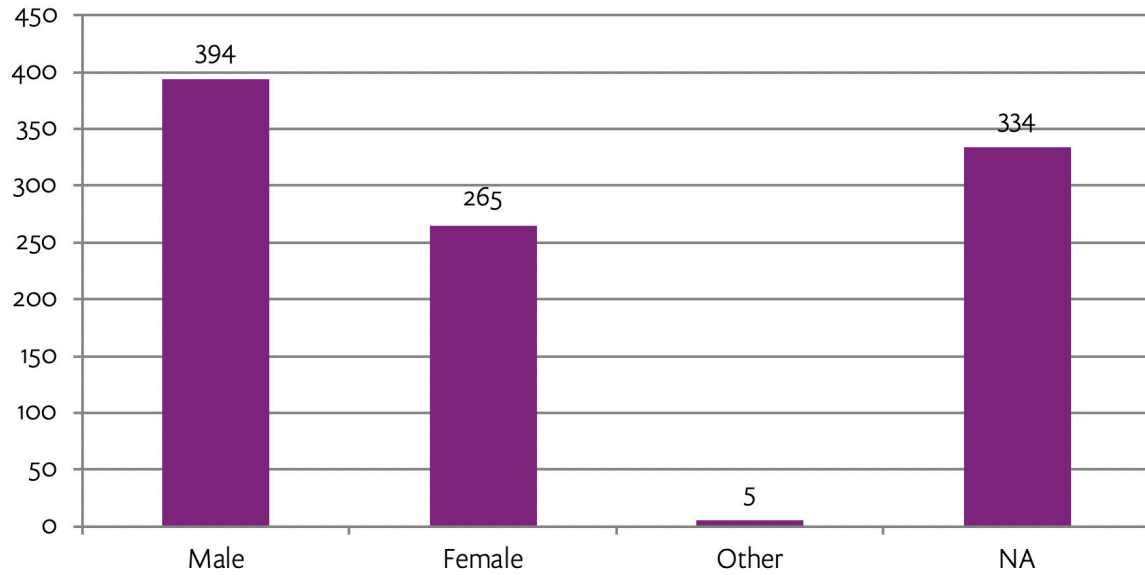
Recruitment of students for the online survey was conducted by Interact Communications and college staff. Interact sent out several emails inviting students to participate in the survey, with the possibility of receiving a \$100 gift card as an incentive (based on a random drawing of those who participated). In addition, college staff placed the link to the survey on the student portal to increase awareness and access to the survey.

As a result of the recruitment efforts, a broad set of students completed the online survey (N=998). The content and format of the survey paralleled the approach and question sequence used in the focus groups. The average age of the online participants was 27 (range 15-67), with 39% (n=394) reporting that they were male and 27% (n=265) reporting that they were female (*Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to missing data*). Most of the students indicated that they identified with Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin (n=255; 25%), followed by White (n=89; 9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (n=18; 2%), and African American/Black (n=11; 1%).

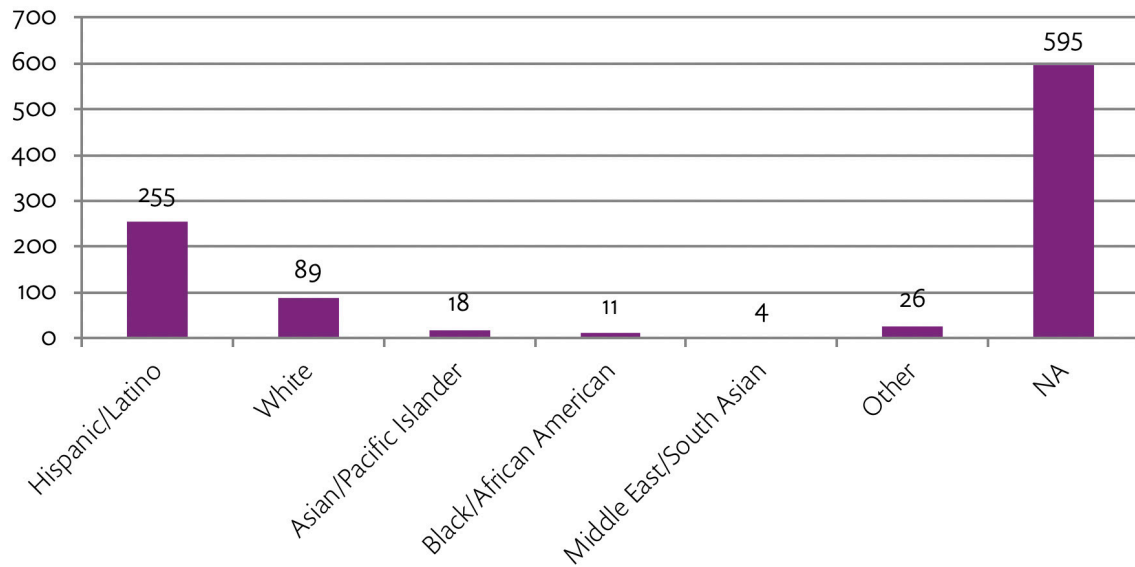
Age ranges



Gender frequencies

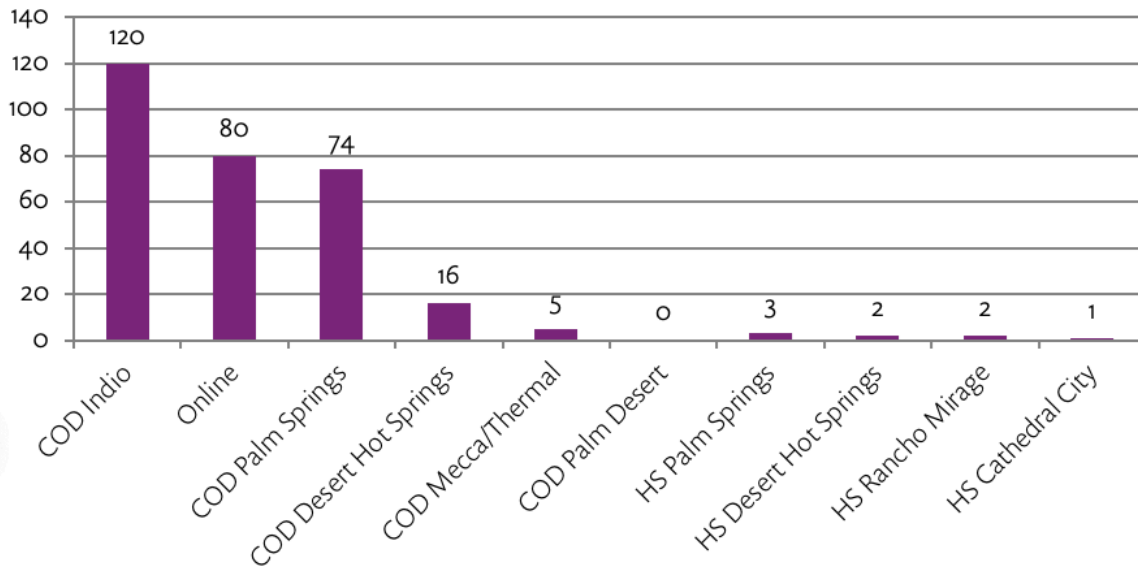


Ethnicity frequencies

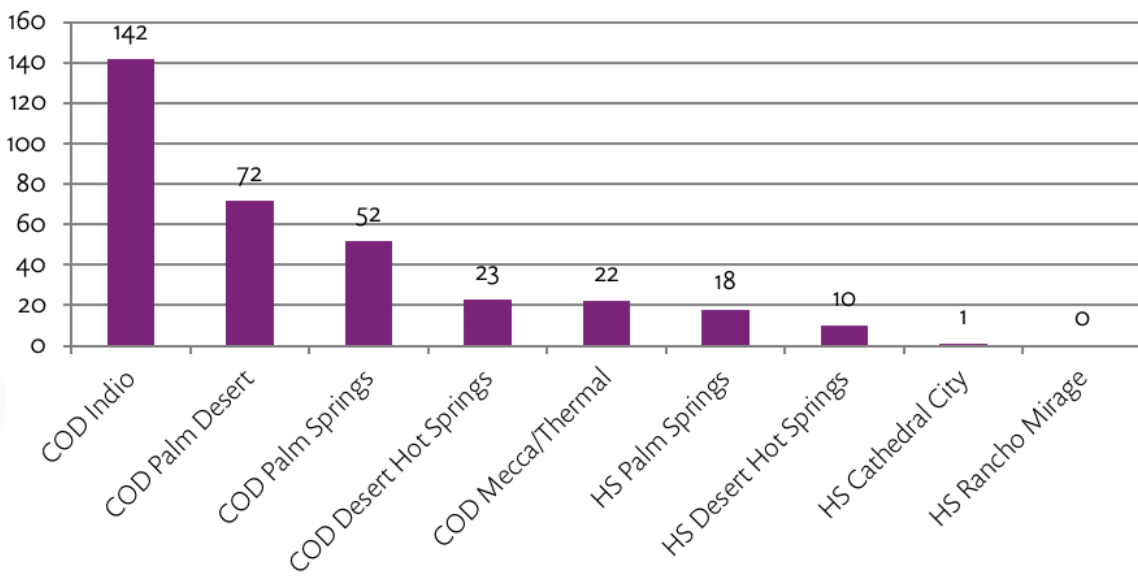


Students reported that they took classes at the following campuses:

Where have you taken the most classes?



Where have you taken a class?



Similar to the focus groups, students were primed prior to answering the main questions of the online survey by asking them to think about the barriers and obstacles they experienced as they entered college and during their educational journey.

Analysis of the online data followed two separate approaches. The quantitative data were analyzed using standard statistical procedures, typically by using SPSS analysis routines. The qualitative data were analyzed using similar content analytic procedures as used for the focus group data. Prior to analysis, the qualitative data needed to be standardized. Each phrase generated by the students was segmented into meaningful and non-redundant sentences and/or statements, copy-edited, and then analyzed by the same researcher who analyzed the focus group data. These standardized phrases compose many of the appendices found in the **Main Report**.

Given that a large and diverse set of students completed the online survey, the results are nuanced and complex. To streamline the presentation of these data, when the qualitative results are presented, only “conceptual” categories are discussed. To examine the depth and breadth of the qualitative results, readers are encouraged to consult the appendices contained in the **Main Report** (e.g., B through Q), where detailed and organized data tables present actual and illustrative examples of student responses.

Summary of the Findings

In this section, a brief of the main findings and conclusions across the focus groups and the online survey are presented to provide an overview of the depth, breadth, scope, and potential reach of this project.

General Overview

In general, as the focus groups progressed and as students moved through the online survey, many voiced concerns about how hard it was to get into college and to stay in college, listing significant barriers and obstacles that they had to overcome and manage before and during their educational journey (e.g., financial problems, scheduling problems, transportation problems, child care problems, personal problems, and course access and completion problems). Students articulated that these “real-world” barriers and obstacles are very difficult to navigate and to manage, and that they need substantial assistance and support from the college, the community, their family, and their friends to help solve, manage, and/or reduce barriers in order to succeed. Students also made it clear that the barriers and obstacles are ever-present and that they cause financial, social, and psychological stress, which at times, is difficult to handle. Thus, the need for on-campus support services is warranted, sought out, and expected by students.

Despite the significant barriers and obstacles that students encounter, the majority (as reflected in the online survey and to some extent in the focus group discussions) report that they received substantial and effective assistance and guidance from various staff at College of the Desert, when assistance was sought. Students specifically mentioned the counselors, instructors, professors, and program staff (many by name) as being particularly helpful in bringing them along their educational journey. So, for the majority, the existing counseling, advising, and guidance procedures and processes are working as intended, as designed, and are effective (these findings are detailed in depth in the **Main Report**).

That said, as students worked their way through the focus group discussions and the online survey specific issues and concerns surfaced. It is within these sections of the focus groups and the online survey, that important insights are found regarding what may need to be addressed and/or changed to meet the demands of students who may need additional and/or specialized counseling, assistance, and/or guidance. This issue becomes especially important given the fact that many students reported in the online survey (and to some extent in the focus groups) that they do not rely on college support services and “prefer” or “choose” (for a variety of reasons) to manage the impediments that they encounter on their own, which in some cases leads to significant delays in degree progress and/or dropping out of college (see “Pillar 3: Staying on the Path” of the **Main Report** for details). Thus, these results are of special significance and are highlighted, unpacked, and examined in the following sections of this report.

Specific Findings

Next, specific findings from the focus groups and the online survey are presented, organized along the four stages (“pillars”) that comprise the Guided Pathways framework. Readers are encouraged to read the **Main Report** for additional details and to consult its appendices for extensive illustrative examples. A note of caution: presentation of the qualitative results across the focus groups and the online survey is without ascription of importance tied to any of the categories that compose the typologies. The categories of each typology are listed “as is” to give the readers a broad sense of the depth and breadth of student responses, without imposing an order or significance to each. Some of the categories are composed of dozens of student responses, while some are composed of just a few. The reader is encouraged to examine the appendices in the **Main Report** to come to a judgment of significance and/or importance for each category.

Pillar 1: Clarifying the Path (Application and Enrollment Assistance)

In this section, students were asked to recall their perceptions and experiences as they sought information about the college. Most students reported in the online survey that they found the college's website helpful (89%) and valuable (95%), and these sentiments were generally mirrored in the focus groups. In addition, most students (89%) reported in the online survey that they also found the college's printed schedule/catalogue useful to find information about the college and course schedules, and these sentiments were generally mirrored by the focus group participants. In fact, the following results illustrate the extent to which students found the website and printed catalogue of value:

Focus group results
Website benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Students liked the convenience of 24/7 access to college information, specifically highlighting the Web-Advisor, online course catalog, and other functions embedded in the website as useful and valuable.- Students mentioned that the college website is a comprehensive resource that they can rely on for information and guidance.
Course catalogue benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Students appreciated the course catalogue and relied on it to find information about courses.- Students found the printed catalogue useful in particular because they did not need to be online to access course information, highlighting the course summary information as especially valuable.
Online survey results
Helpful aspects of the website <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Easy to use and saves time- Provides answers to questions, clarifies issues and concerns, and reduces uncertainty- Provides access to essential services- Serves as a central hub for campus events and activities
Useful aspects of the printed schedule/catalogue <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Easy to use, convenient, saves time, and well organized- Use as a planning tool/workbook to organize and schedule classes- Tactile preference (like books)- Informative and comprehensive resource for courses and campus events- Use as a common and shared resource

These results show that these communication assets are working as intended for the majority of students who participated in this research.

However, as the students elaborated on these communication assets during the focus group discussions and in the online survey and recalled their specific experiences more clearly, they reported that they had issues and concerns. These included issues about how the college communicates with students in general and how the college sets up the website and printed schedule/catalogue specifically, that, if addressed, may make communicating with students at this stage of the educational journey more effective:

<p>Focus group results</p> <p>Website limitations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students expressed concerns that the website may not be up to date regarding degree requirements, specifically stating that they thought that some of the information was incorrect. <p>Course catalogue limitations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students stated that they were concerned by the potential that the information contained in the course catalogue may not be up to date and/or accurate at the levels that they expected (or wanted and needed) to make informed decisions about classes. For example, extensive discussion surrounding use of the term “staff” in the catalogue to designate teaching assignments suggested that students did not appreciate or desire use of this term. The students expressed concern over seeing the term “staff” because they had no way of knowing how difficult the class may be or what to expect without knowledge of who was teaching the class.
<p>Online survey results</p> <p>Unhelpful aspects of the website</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not easy or clear to use - Not comprehensive - Not up to date <p>Not useful aspects of the printed schedule/catalogue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not up to date - Confusing - Inconvenient, redundant, or not needed - Not known about

These results suggest that as the students recalled the specifics of their experiences with these aspects of the college, certain issues and concerns that they hold came to surface. The results presented above are generalized to streamline the contents of this report. Detailed information about these issues can be found in the appendices of the *Main Report*.

Across the focus groups and the online survey, students reported that they held the following issues and concerns relevant to clarifying the path, and that addressing these issues and concerns would help them to make progress toward degree completion:

A. Be proactive, engaged, and timely when communicating with students

1. Implication/recommendation: Implement more and regular notifications to students about events, courses, degree/major requirements, and transfer information.
2. Implication/recommendation: Implement a campus-wide effort to promote use of Canvas among part-time instructors and full-time faculty.
3. Implication/recommendation: Encourage instructors and professors to respond to student messages (typically via email) in a timely manner.

B. Ensure that communication (specifically public information) is accurate, clear, complete, and comprehensive

1. Website: The students reported that the website was working well. However, a few concerns were reported, including perceptions that some sections are not comprehensive and incomplete.
 - a. Implication/recommendation: Identify the sections of the website that students find not comprehensive and incomplete and re-design them using student input.
2. Printed schedule/catalogue: The students reported that they valued the printed schedule/catalogue. However, a few concerns were reported, including perceptions that certain sections are difficult to understand, confusing, and/or not clear.
 - a. Implication/recommendation: Identify the sections of the printed schedule/catalogue that students find difficult and confusing and re-design them with student input.

The fact that the students who participated in the focus groups and the online survey were currently enrolled at College of the Desert and were asked to recall their experiences during the application and enrollment stages and likely held differing views of what constituted “clarifying the path” (despite the fact that they were given a definition to use to respond to this set of questions), suggests that it is likely that some of their responses are conflated with later stages of the educational journey. Nonetheless, the results provide clarity in terms of what specific aspects of student support offerings could be targeted for change, as listed above.

Pillar 2: Entering the Path (Degree and/or Major Selection Assistance)

In this section, students were asked to recall their perceptions and experiences as they decided which degree and/or major to select. Given that all of the students who participated in this research were currently enrolled, their perceptions and experiences were top of mind and current.

Slightly more than half (52%) of the students who responded to the online survey reported that they had sought and received assistance from college staff in selecting a degree and/or a major and that they found that assistance to be valuable, relevant, and up to date, suggesting that the counseling and guidance services work well for many students at this stage of the educational journey. However, nearly half (48%) of the students who responded to the online survey (and several from the focus groups) reported that the college did not help them select a degree

and/or a major, and one-third (33%) reported experiencing impediments that made selecting a degree and/or a major difficult. These results were generally mirrored during the focus group discussions. The following results illustrate the types of impediments that students recalled in the focus groups and in the online survey (see the *Main Report* for more detail):

<p>Focus group results</p> <p><i>Counseling, advising, & staff issues</i></p> <p>Several issues and concerns surfaced during the focus group discussions that illustrated frustration over how students are advised by counseling staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some students stated that they receive inconsistent, and at times incorrect and/or out of date information from counseling staff. - Some students expressed concerns over information that they have actually received that was not correct and they were not certain who to talk to help them proceed (e.g., about courses, majors, degree requirements, and transfer procedures). - Some students stated that they are often indecisive and somewhat confused at this point in their journey (e.g., not certain about majors and which classes to take), so they must rely on counseling staff to help them, making accurate and consistent information important, highlighting the need to trust counseling staff, and making access to counseling staff critical. - Some students expressed concerns over temporary instructors and their potential to be less engaged, not willing to help them, and being inconsistent when designing courses and setting course requirements (e.g., some may not teach necessary skills needed for upcoming courses).
<p>Online survey results</p> <p><i>Personal & psychological issues and/or life circumstances</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty selecting and/or choosing a major or career due to indecision - Lack understanding and/or skills to meet course requirements/expectations - Lack of finances/financial difficulties - Life circumstances made it hard to complete course/major requirements <p><i>Advice & guidance issues</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty meeting with and/or receiving assistance from a counselor - Received incorrect, misleading, or discouraging information from a counselor and/or a staff member <p><i>Course enrollment & major requirement issues</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Courses not offered or not able to get into required courses - Excessive and/or difficult requirements/prerequisites for major - Not clear on course and/or major requirements

Thus, for a significant number of students, additional and specialized assistance may be needed to help them select a degree and/or major.

Students who participated in the focus groups and the online survey reported that they held the following issues and concerns relevant to entering the path, and that addressing these issues and concerns would help them to make progress toward degree completion:

A. Show that college staff is proactive and engaged

1. Implication/recommendation: Establish an outreach program that brings counselors to the classrooms to answer student questions and set up appointments with counselors.
2. Implication/recommendation: Establish dates for students to visit counselors on a regular basis.

B. Provide ongoing, regular training and evaluation for staff

1. Implication/recommendation: Assess course requirements across semesters and years to ensure that staff are meeting minimum standards and teaching students necessary skills to prepare them for the next steps in their programs.
2. Implication/recommendation: Establish additional counseling staff training to enhance “on the ground” strategies to streamline the workload and to help students who experience difficulties in selecting a degree and/or a major.
3. Implication/recommendation: Provide ongoing training for counselors so that they are up to date on course, major, degree, and transfer information.

C. Ensure that communication (specifically course information) is accurate, clear, complete, and comprehensive

1. Implication/recommendation: Establish a communication program that informs students of the general nature and parameters of each class that outlines:
 - a. what is typically taught in that class
 - b. what to expect from each class in terms of workload
 - c. how the class fits into a degree program and/or major

D. Develop and/or promote assistance programs that help students select a degree and/or major

1. Implication/recommendation: Identify and promote existing programs, communication channels, and processes that help students select a degree and/or a major.
2. Implication/recommendation: Develop and promote new programs, communication channels, and processes that help students who have difficulties selecting a degree and/or a major to select a degree and/or a major.

Pillar 3: Staying on the Path (Degree and/or Program Completion Assistance)

In this section, students were asked to recall their perceptions and experiences as they made progress toward degree completion, specifically discussing the impediments that they have encountered that threatened their ability to stay in college. Given that all of the students who participated in this research were currently enrolled, their perceptions and experiences were top of mind and current.

The majority of students (76%) responding to the online survey reported that they found College of the Desert counseling and assistance to be effective in helping them stay on the path, suggesting that existing student support services work well and that these services perform vital functions for students at this stage of their educational journey (these findings were not mirrored in the focus groups as strongly). However, for a significant number of students, additional assistance is needed, which was detailed by the students in the focus groups and in the online survey. The following results illustrate the impediments that students encounter at this stage of the educational journey:

Focus group results
Counseling/advising staff & program limitations <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Students made note of the fact that the counseling office is “overloaded” and under staffed. They stated that the counseling staff is overwhelmed, too busy, and difficult to see (wait times are too long).- Students stated that the counseling staff sometimes gives them incorrect information regarding degree completion and/or transfer procedures and next steps, which affected their degree progress (<i>Note: discussion did not reveal the extent to which these issues are true and/or valid, but students were clear and articulate about these issues during the focus groups</i>).- Students made it clear that they receive inconsistent information, stating that they get different advice from different counselors. Students discussed the need for the counseling center to offer evening office hours so working adults could access these services.- Students recommended that the college needs to develop and offer online support services. Students stated that this type of option would be valuable for “quick questions.”
Online survey results
Assistance is not working <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Assistance is not available, difficult, and/or inaccessible- Assistance is not effective and/or confusing- Staff is not able to solve issues- Inadequate resources- No assistance has been offered, provided, and/or sought

Students who participated in the focus groups and online survey reported that they held the following issues and concerns relevant to staying on the path, and that addressing these issues and concerns would help them to make progress toward degree completion:

A. Develop and offer additional support services with flexible, accessible options

1. Implication/recommendation: Develop and offer online support services.
2. Implication/recommendation: Counseling staff need to document degree and major requirements/changes and make them easily accessible for students for reference and advising.
3. Implication/recommendation: Ensure that adequate counseling staff is available to meet student demand.
4. Implication/recommendation: Add counseling staff to address student-specific special needs.

B. Promote support services more frequently and broadly

1. Background: Many students (67%) reported in the online survey that they have not received assistance from the college to help them stay in college, stating that they relied on themselves to solve their difficulties. This suggests that many students perceive that they are on their own to deal with the impediments that threaten their ability to stay in college.
2. Background research (part 1): Comparison of the “entering and selecting a degree/major” stage to the “staying on the path” stage shows that significantly more students experience obstacles at the “staying on the path” stage than during the “entering and selecting a degree/major” stage (see the **Main Report** for details). This result reveals that the educational journey gets more difficult as students move closer to degree completion, eventually forcing them to rely more heavily on support services or, if they find the support services lacking, tough it out on their own, making them vulnerable to delay and/or dropping out.
3. Background research (part 2): Comparison of the “entering and selecting a degree/major” stage to the “staying on the path” stage also shows that students tend to receive less help from college support services in the “staying on the path” stage compared to the “entering and selecting a degree/major” stage (see the **Main Report** for details). This result reveals that the educational journey gets less supportive as students move closer to degree completion, suggesting that vulnerable students will rely less on support services to manage the impediments and threats that they encounter at this stage of their educational journey.
4. Implication/recommendation: Promote a student culture that seeks out support and assistance and believes that seeking out and receiving support and assistance are acceptable and, to some extent, expected behaviors.

Overall, these results suggest that access to and availability of counseling, and increased efforts to reach out to students, may be needed to address the difficulties that students experience at this stage in their educational journey. In addition, changes within the student population that make seeking assistance acceptable may be needed to solve and/or reduce the difficulties that students experience at this stage in their educational journey, especially in light of the findings that as students move through the stages of their educational journey they encounter more challenges and impediments and receive less support and assistance (for a variety of reasons).

Pillar 4: Ensuring Learning (Assessment & Next Steps Assistance)

In this section, students were asked to recall their perceptions and experiences as they move toward degree completion and/or “next steps,” specifically addressing the issues and concerns that they have, or may have, as they prepare to take those next steps. Given that all of the students who participated in this research were currently enrolled, with many progressing toward and/or thinking about their next steps, their perceptions and experiences were top of mind and current.

The majority of the students (83%) responding to the online survey reported that they were prepared for the next steps in their educational journeys, recounting that they are confident that they have acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for transfer and/or a job, have received effective support and guidance, and have developed the confidence to “move on” to a four-year university, graduate, or start a job (these findings were generally mirrored in the focus groups). However, for some students, additional assistance is needed. As the focus group discussion progressed and as students responded to the sequence of prompts in the online survey, a variety of perceptions and opinions surfaced.

Students who participated in the focus groups and online survey reported that they held the following issues and concerns relevant to ensure learning, and that addressing these issues and concerns would help them to make progress toward degree completion and move to the next phases of their lives:

A. Train counseling staff so that they are up to date and accurate with transfer information

1. Students reported that it is difficult to get accurate and up to date information on transfer paths and degree requirements from counselors (see *Main Report* for additional details).

B. Provide student-centered/student-specific counseling, assistance, and guidance

1. Students reported that counselors seem to have a “standardized script” that students must follow to complete a degree and/or a major across all programs, which suggests that there is a lack of individualized, student-specific counseling. However, for students who feel unprepared, uncertain, and confused, preparation for the next step is difficult. These students reported that they were having difficulty making progress toward their degree.
2. Implication/recommendation: It may be beneficial to re-conceptualize, to some extent, how student support services are delivered at this point in the educational journey and incorporate **more specialized wrap-around services** (e.g., social services and psychological counseling assistance) to help students who have become sidelined, left behind, and or disenfranchised by their life circumstances and/or by their experiences with the educational process, including their experiences with the current system of support.

Insight into this process is provided by the focus groups and the online survey, in which some students expressed disillusionment and dejection by the current support system, resulting in educational delays, some significantly altering their educational plan when faced with impediments that they were not able to manage (see section “Pillar 4: Ensuring Learning” of the *Main Report* for details).

Thus, for some students, the current system of support just does not work, suggesting that it may need to be fine-tuned to capture those who fall behind, become disenfranchised, and need specialized support to complete their educational journey. Developing a specialized counseling unit to address the special needs and circumstances of specific students at this stage of their educational journey may be beneficial.

C. A few additional ideas (recommendations) were provided by some of the students across the focus groups and in the online survey:

1. Offer additional hours of on-campus counseling and guidance for working adults.
2. Add licensed social services and psychological counselors to the menu of counseling services.
3. Start a counseling unit that targets and reaches out to students who have expressed difficulties or have dropped out to help them overcome the impediments that are affecting their degree progress.
4. Organize a forum for students, faculty, and staff to share their experiences and concerns about what has worked well, did not work well, and what the next steps are for counseling and guidance for this stage of the educational journey. In addition to assistance and support services, students were also asked about aspects of curriculum design as another way to assess if they are prepared for their next steps, specifically along the lines of having the knowledge and skills that may be needed to take the next steps such as transfer or job placement. Students were asked to comment specifically on sequenced courses and General Education (Gen Ed) courses at the college.

In terms of sequenced courses, most students reported in the online survey that sequenced courses were helpful (88%) and valuable (85%); similar sentiments were reported in the focus groups. Overall, students generally see the value in these types of courses in terms of providing a step-by-step process to acquire knowledge about subject matters, degrees, and majors, developing an understanding of and/or insights into degree requirements and paths for goal and degree completion (see *Main Report* for additional details).

The focus group participants reported that sequenced courses were difficult to get into, so they “crashed” them, hoping that a seat would open so they could enroll officially. This issue led to discussions of priority registration in terms of its effect on availability to enroll in sequenced courses and its effect on delaying degree progress. Students also mentioned that due to the requirement of sequenced courses, courses tend to fill up during the day and that more evening and/or online courses are needed to be offered to accommodate working adults and/or single parents. A few students in the online survey reported that sequenced courses were difficult to complete.

In terms of Gen Ed courses, most students reported in the online survey that the Gen Ed courses were helpful (77%) and valuable (76%), providing basic training, a refresher, and preparation for upcoming courses for those who needed that level of education (the focus group participants made similar comments). Many students in the focus groups and in the online survey stated that if they thought that they did not need basic training, a refresher, or additional preparation, taking Gen Ed courses was not desired. Under these conditions, students perceived the Gen Ed courses as a waste of time and resources, and redundant/not necessary (see *Main Report* for additional details). Due to the potential burdens that the Gen Ed courses may pose for students, some reported in the online survey that they dropped out of college for a period and/or delayed their progress due, in part, to the Gen Ed requirements. Across the focus groups and in the online survey, some students reported that they think that there are too many Gen Ed requirements and that degree and major programs lack options to avoid Gen Ed courses. In addition, students expressed concern over the fact that due to Gen Ed courses being required, they tend to fill up during the day, making it hard to enroll in them and make degree progress.

These results suggest that the following curriculum issues may need to be considered:

1. Sequenced courses

- a. Implication/recommendation: Sequenced courses are natural paths to understanding and building knowledge and skills. Offering more options for students to enroll such as in the evenings, on the weekends, or offering more sections during the semester may be necessary.

2. Gen Ed courses

- a. Implication/recommendation: Given that many of these courses are required and in many cases necessary to prepare students for the next levels of a degree and/or major, offering more options for students to enroll, such as in the evenings, on the weekends, or offering more sections during the semester and/or online options may be necessary to accommodate working adults and/or single parents.
- b. Implication/recommendation: Additional and/or more extensive/accurate screening and/or pre-requisite changes should be considered to help avoid students becoming bored, irritated, and/or dropping out by being required to take Gen Ed courses that they feel are not necessary and/or are not relevant to their degree and/or major.
- c. Implication/recommendation: Remove and/or reduce some of the Gen Ed requirements from the curriculum for certain degree programs.

Deeper Analysis: Overarching Issues and Concerns across the Educational Journey

In addition to the findings and conclusions presented above, a deeper analysis of the data revealed several overarching, fundamental issues and concerns that cut across all of the stages of the educational journey.

As described above, across the focus groups and in the online survey, those who reported that they were not being guided properly by the college counseling staff also reported that they needed more “wrap around” assistance to help them, including more counseling, guidance, assistance, and to some extent, additional social services such as help with specific life issues and circumstances such as psychological counseling and support. These students report that they feel disillusioned and dejected, which causes them to drop out and/or delay their educational journey (these sentiments were generally mirrored during the focus group discussions). Synthesis of these results shows that most of these issues and concerns can be captured by the following list (see **Main Report** for additional details):

- A. Lack of communication
- B. Lack of coordination
- C. Lack of an interrelated, coherent system of support(s)
- D. Lack of up to date information (including receiving inconsistent and incorrect advice and information, especially from counselors)
- E. Lack of informed and available staff (especially counselors)
- F. Lack of (or lack of use of) automated systems that monitor student progress and send out reminders for them to take specific action to stay on track (especially in terms of faculty using Canvas for course management and counselors using technology to schedule appointments with students)
- G. Lack of flexibility in meeting non-traditional students’ needs (e.g., working adults, single parents)

The list of issues and concerns presented above can be further synthesized into three overarching principles that represent core, fundamental issues and concerns that students hold across all four stages of their educational journey, that if addressed, would help to solve many of the issues and concerns listed above:

- A. The **inaccessibility and lack of availability** of services that make it difficult for students to receive apt, accurate, and timely advice and guidance from support staff (e.g., inconvenient hours, lack of counseling staff).
- B. The **lack of communication, training, and coordination** of staff that confuse students, cause them to spend more time and money taking classes that may not be relevant, and lead to perceptions that the staff are incompetent and cannot be trusted.
- C. The **lack of proactive/active engagement** of staff that lead to perceptions that the support staff do not care about students and/or do not perceive students as “critical clients” (in the sense of the central tenets of Guided Pathways, the fundamental mission of community colleges, and the core commitments outlined by the Vision for Success initiative) who should be treated with empathy, respect, and patience, and guided, counseled, and advised with state-of-the-art knowledge and techniques to ensure that they are moving along their educational paths with diligence and confidence.

These three core issues seem to follow students across all stages of the educational journey, presenting impediments (obstacles and barriers) at every stage. Not to say that these are the only impediments that students encounter— there are a host of others (e.g., environmental, personal, and social factors), including regional equity gaps, student-level equity gaps, lack of motivation and interest, life circumstances, and difficult work schedules (to name a few). However, the three core issues listed above are solvable and reside within the executive, administrative, staff, and faculty cultures of the college. Small actions taken to make changes in these three core issues, across time, will add up to culture-level transformations.

Overall Conclusions

Synthesis of the results presented above suggests that the following conclusions can be drawn:

- A. Overall, the results show that for the majority of College of the Desert students, the current system of assistance, support, and guidance is working well (as intended and as designed) across the four stages of the educational journey. Many students expressed appreciation for the counseling staff, the professors/instructors, the program staff, and others who have helped them navigate the barriers and obstacles that impede, or may impede, their degree progress. For these students, the educational journey should end in them being able to move to the next phases of their lives (e.g., transfer or job placement).
- B. However, for a subset of the College of the Desert students, the educational journey is less smooth and guided. Many students reported that they experience obstacles and barriers that impede, or may impede, their degree progress, including administrative problems, personal problems, social/family problems, financial problems, etc. For a variety of reasons, for some of these students the extensive support services and programs provided by College of the Desert (and others outside of the college such as family and friends) just do not work or are ineffective. These are the students who need assistance and these are the students who need to be embraced more fully to help them along their educational journey. Setting in place assistance and support programs that identify and track these students, and that are proactive and engaged, should go a long way in terms of keeping them “on the path” and progressing through their educational journey.
- C. This research also shows that across the stages of the educational journey, specific types of barriers and obstacles surface for students, as listed above and in the **Main Report** in detail. A set of these barriers and obstacles seem to cut across all of the stages of the educational journey, including inaccessibility and lack of availability of services, lack of communication, training, and coordination of college staff, and lack of pro-active/active engagement of college staff. It is difficult to determine the extent to which these issues are valid at College of the Desert, but the triangulation of evidence across the focus groups and online survey suggest that these three issues are real concerns that affect students.
- D. There are many ways to make changes that will help those students who need more assistance and guidance during their educational journey. One way is to offer more student-centered assistance that provides options for the specific issues that specific students may be experiencing. A second way is to be pro-active and engaged and reach out to students who have demonstrated problems to keep them on track and moving forward. A third way is to change the life circumstances of these students so that they are less likely to encounter impediments during their educational journey (as outlined in the Vision for Success initiative in terms of regional and student-level equity gaps). What binds these approaches together is the notion that students are “critical clients” (see above) who should be treated with empathy, respect, and patience, and guided, counseled, and advised with state-of-the-art knowledge and techniques to ensure that they move along their educational paths with diligence and confidence. Thus, adopting this central tenet should prove to be effective to make the fundamental changes that may be needed to assist and guide those students who need assistance and guidance along their educational journeys.