STUDENT VOICES: NON-COMPLETING COLLEGE STUDENTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF A SENSE OF PURPOSE TO SUPPORT COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

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Abstract

The Tacoma Completes Student Voice project is a community-driven effort to explore why students leave college before completing their degree. In 2020, we interviewed 56 former students from the University of Washington Tacoma and Tacoma Community College, which serve diverse student bodies. Students' reasons for not completing their

degrees were complicated and interdependent. Nineteen themes emerged from the following seven categories: Sense of Purpose and Belonging, Financial and Basic Needs, Family Care and Life Events, Mental Health, Physical Health, Classroom Experience, and College Navigation. The most common reason was related to their 'sense of purpose,' their reason for being in college. Purpose is a foundational but underexplored driver of student success that can be intentionally developed through thoughtful programming.

Keywords: sense of purpose, sense of belonging, some college no credential, some college no degree, college persistence, college retention, community-engaged, student voice, returning students

Introduction

Recent estimates suggest that 39 million Americans (12% of the United States population) fall under the category of 'Some College, No Credential' (SCNC) (Causey et al., 2022). SCNC denotes individuals with post-secondary experience who haven't obtained their first post-high school credential. This group, disproportionately comprising students of color such as Black and Latine individuals, constitutes 43% of all SCNC students, making up 34% of all undergraduates. More than half (58%) of SCNC students attend community colleges (Causey et al., 2022). Despite incurring college costs, including debt, SCNC students don't reap the same economic benefits as their credentialed peers (Shapiro et al., 2014). For instance, roughly 700,000 Washington residents (1 in 5 adults) aged 17-54 have attended college without earning a degree, facing lower wages and higher unemployment rates than those with at least a 2-year credential (Shankster, 2015). Earning a college degree correlates with higher wages (Abel & Deitz, 2019), increased intergenerational income mobility (Chetty et al., 2017), and various social and health benefits (Trostel, 2015).

Given the consequences of starting and not completing college, institutions must understand the complicated and interdependent reasons students leave to innovate and improve retention outcomes. Students are not passive subjects of study but active contributors to knowledge about their experiences. Community-engaged, participatory research seeks to position participants as co-creators of meaning, emphasizing relational, collaborative, and action-oriented inquiry (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Within this tradition, student voice scholarship in higher education highlights the importance

of listening directly to students to improve institutional practices and outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2006). Student voice approaches recognize that students bring unique insights about the barriers and support that shape their educational journeys, particularly for those from historically underserved backgrounds. Research has shown that engaging students as partners rather than subjects can enhance findings' relevance, legitimacy, and impact (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). This project builds upon that tradition by using a community-driven, relational, and participatory approach to understand why students in Tacoma, Washington, leave college before completing their degrees.

Research indicates that communities benefit from higher rates of college completion, leading to increased economic activity (Rothwell, 2015), enhanced growth and resilience (Glaeser & Saiz, 2003), boosted tax revenue, philanthropy, volunteerism, and political engagement (Trostel, 2015). Given the pivotal role of college completion in driving economic vitality and community well-being, some community-based organizations operate across social and community-level sectors to foster student success throughout the student life cycle. One such organization is the Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS) in Washington State. Following a collective impact model (Kania & Kramer, 2011), a structured approach to cross-sector community collaboration, FFTS serves as a backbone organization with the mission to "build and strengthen Tacoma's community-wide movement to help every child achieve success from cradle to career by aligning goals, data, resources, and partners" (Foundation for Tacoma Students, 2024). This is done through facilitating convenings, providing data and analytics, aligning resources and funding, public policy advocacy, and professional development. Established in 2010 with a primary focus on K-12 education, FFTS initially engaged 250 community partners. They aimed to boost Tacoma, Washington's high school graduation rate from 58% in 2010 to 87% by 2020 while narrowing racial and socioeconomic equity gaps. The organization achieved this goal in 2019, with Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) reporting the state's highest on-time graduation rate of 89.9%. Additionally, the disparity in graduation rates between historically marginalized students and their counterparts decreased from -8% to -2%, while for students affected by poverty versus those not affected, the reduction was from -8% to -4% (Graduate Tacoma, 2020). However, during this period, college enrollment and completion rates experienced a decline. For example, 58% of 2010 TPS graduates enrolled in college

compared to 49% (817) of 2017 graduates. Among those that enrolled, 57% of 2010 TPS graduates completed a credential (2- or 4-year degree or technical certificate) compared to 53% of 2012 TPS graduates (Graduate Tacoma, 2019; Needles, 2019).

In response to declining college rates, FFTS expanded its focus to support college completion by collaborating with a local college-focused nonprofit, Degrees of Change. Together, they formed Tacoma Completes, involving the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) and Tacoma Community College (TCC), where many TPS students enroll. UWT, an urban-serving institution, had 4,565 undergraduates and 787 graduate students in the fall of 2019, with 30% from underrepresented minority backgrounds and 38% eligible for need-based federal Pell Grants. Most UWT undergraduates transfer from local 2-year colleges like TCC, where 477 students transferred to UWT in the fall of 2019. TCC, serving around 11,000 students, has a diverse student body, with 33% of students of color. Nearly half work while studying, and 56% receive financial aid.

In 2022, FFTS convened community partners to craft a new goal: to increase the number of TPS high school students earning a degree, certificate, or a good-earning job within six years of graduation to 70% by 2030. To guide this effort, they sought to leverage their community-engaged approach to hear directly from local college students who left before completing their credentials. With funding from the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*, FFTS contracted Degrees of Change to interview students who left either UWT or TCC, yielding insights shared in a report dedicated to amplifying student voices on leaving college prematurely (Bay-Meyer et al., 2020).

Methods and Materials

The Tacoma Completes Steering Committee assembled a research project planning committee. Comprising faculty and staff from TCC, UWT, Degrees of Change, and FFTS, this group met five times to design the study and recruit prospective students for interviews. The University of Washington Human Subjects Division reviewed the research and determined not to involve "human subjects" as defined by federal regulations (Study #00013663). Degrees of Change staff conducted the interviews. Most interviews were conducted by a staff member with an MA in Policy Studies and three years of applied qualitative research experience focused on youth and equity projects. A smaller number was done by a researcher with a BA in Sociology and nine years of experience coding survey data to inform student program design. The approach to these

interviews was relational and conversational, including sharing the story and background of the interviewer and using open-ended questions to allow students to drive the discussion toward their individual reasons for leaving college.

Between January 24 and April 17, 2020, the research team contacted 462 former TCC and UWT students via ten emails, six ringless voicemails, and 243 individual phone calls. Degrees of Change initiated communication with 457 (99%) via email, 394 (85%) via voicemail, and 462 (100%) via email or phone due to a small number of bounced emails or inaccurate phone numbers. Criteria for selecting participants for follow-up interviews included graduation from a Pierce County high school between 2013 and 2019 and attendance at TCC or UWT for at least two terms without obtaining a degree. This study aimed to hear from students who had recently spent sufficient time at our institutions to comment on our student experience and support services. Those who left due to academic standing issues as required by their colleges were excluded from the study, as the reasons for leaving or not returning would likely be more academic. As the study progressed, additional refinements to the outreach process and interviewing approach were made in response to emergent logistical challenges and participant needs. For TCC students, we utilized a snowball sampling approach, initially recruiting participants through institutional outreach and subsequently through peer referrals (Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling is particularly well-suited for engaging participants who have exited traditional institutional structures and may be otherwise difficult to reach.

The desired sample size was 25–30 interviews per college, totaling 50-60 (Dworkin, 2012), with a similar demographic representation for students attending both schools. Former students were asked to confirm their eligibility and demographic information and were instructed to read and sign an electronic informed consent document. They were then presented with open-ended questions on the following topics: (1) What was your experience in college? (2) Why did you not re-enroll at your academic institution? (3) Under what situation(s) would you return to your institution? Interviews lasted 20 to 60 minutes, and respondents received a $50 gift card via email for participation. The full interview protocol can be found in Bay-Meyer et al. (2020).

Data Analysis

The statistical differences between the sampling frame and interviewees were tested where possible (Table 1). Since the two schools routinely collected or provided access to different types of demographic data, some sampling frame elements were missing: financial data from UWT (access not provided) and gender and race/ethnicity data from TCC (not routinely collected). Therefore, the research study team could not test for statistical differences between the sampling frame and interviewees for these factors.

Interviews were initially recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Transcriptions were later improved using Otter.ai (n.d.) to enhance accuracy and reduce transcription cleaning time. Two researchers reviewed existing research addressing barriers to college access and success (Adelman, 2006; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Strada Education Network et al., 2019) and generated a list of established reasons why students leave college. Examples include navigating administrative tasks, financial burdens, health and well-being, family responsibilities, and lack of connection with career goals. As the researchers coded each interview independently, they noted the observed theme and reviewed the codebook to ascertain whether it was presented. For themes not in the codebook, the researchers discussed their observations and added the theme. The first researcher coded directly on the transcript in a Word document and exported the quotes with their codes using an Excel macro. The second researcher coded the quotes directly on the spreadsheets and then compared the codes to the first researcher's version. If the codes did not match, they were highlighted and discussed by the two researchers until a consensus was reached on the most appropriate coding. Finally, a third researcher reviewed all coded quotes and identified the primary reason(s) students indicated were most important in their decision to leave college. The coding process resulted in the identification of 19 themes.

Results

Demographics

In total, 56 students participated in interviews: one in person and 55 via phone (see Table 1). The sample comprised 23 former TCC and 33 former UWT students. Partner colleges provided 55 interviewees, while one student was referred through snowball sampling. There were no significant differences between UWT's

sampling frame and interviewees regarding gender, race/ethnicity, age, or high school district. Similarly, no substantial differences were found between TCC's sampling frame and interviewees by income status. However, a notable difference emerged regarding age among TCC interviewees: a higher proportion of 19-year-olds responded compared to those 20 and older (30% vs. 7%), while a lower proportion of 21-year-olds responded compared to those 19-20 or 22 years old (9% vs. 31%).

Table 1

Interviewee Demographics compared to the sampling frame

	Interviewees			Sampling Frame		
	TCC (N=23)	UWT (N=33)	Total (N=56)	TCC (N=178)	UWT (N=289)	Total (N=467)
Gender						
Female	57%	64%	61%	35%	55%	48%
Male	35%	36%	36%	36%	45%	41%
Non-Binary	9%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%
Not Provided	0%	0%	0%	29%	0%	11%
Race or Ethnicity						
White	26%	42%	36%	27%	32%	30%
Hispanic/Latine	44%	18%	29%	12%	25%	20%
Two or More Races	13%	15%	14%	14%	17%	16%
Asian	9%	12%	11%	8%	11%	10%
Black or African American	9%	6%	7%	11%	6%	8%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%	3%	2%	0%	3%	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Not Provided	0%	0%	0%	27%	6%	14%
Income						
Pell/SNG Eligible	48%	64%	57%	60%	N/A	N/A
Not Sure Pell/SNG Eligible	26%	9%	16%	0%	N/A	N/A
Not Pell/SNG Eligible	26%	27%	27%	40%	N/A	N/A
Age						
19	30%	12%	20%	7%	11%	10%
20	4%	30%	20%	11%	23%	18%
21	9%	27%	20%	31%	23%	26%
22	39%	21%	29%	31%	28%	29%
23 Or Older	17%	9%	13%	22%	15%	17%
School District						
Tacoma Public Schools	96%	27%	55%	N/A	27%	N/A
Other	4%	73%	45%	N/A	73%	N/A

Note Demographics of 56 interviewees from the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) and Tacoma Community College (TCC) vs. the overall sampling frame of undergraduate students at each institution in the academic year the study was conducted (fall 2019).

Categories Extracted from Study

Given the open-ended nature of the interviews, reasons for leaving college were often complicated and interdependent. Responses from 56 student interviews were

coded into nineteen themes, which were further grouped into seven categories: Sense of Purpose and Belonging, Financial and Basic Needs, Mental Health, Family Care and Life Events, Physical Health, College Navigation, and Classroom Experience. In Table 2, each theme is listed from most frequent to least frequent primary categorical reason for leaving college mentioned by interviewees. Exemplar quotes are given for each category; additional and expanded quotes from this study can be found in Bay-Meyer et al. (2020).

Three-quarters of interviewees mentioned financial struggles influencing their decision to leave TCC or UWT, though not all indicated that finances were the primary reason. Those who considered finances the most important reason offered a combination of one or more of the following circumstances: they were newly living on their own, did not receive adequate financial aid, could not afford tuition, could not pay their other expenses, or could not balance working full-time with coursework. One-quarter of students mentioned stopping out of college to take care of family members financially, physically, or emotionally; to get married or divorced; to mourn the loss of a family member or welcome a new baby; or to relocate out of state. One-fifth of students described facing mental health challenges while in college. The mental health concerns outlined by students included depression, anxiety, and substance addiction. In addition, social anxiety emerged as a sub-theme, with several students describing the debilitating anxiety they experienced while attempting to navigate college life for the first time. One-tenth of students reported physical health challenges as reasons for withdrawing from school or not re-enrolling. They identified various health conditions, including car accidents, chronic illnesses, and acute health conditions. Another theme was college navigation, which pertains to student-identified challenges experienced while negotiating day-to-day college participation. The challenges were particularly relevant to first-generation college students, with these respondents reporting insufficient understanding about the classes they needed to take to meet program requirements; insufficient comprehension of university technology, including university-specific course registration systems for adding and dropping classes; inadequate understanding about class meeting times and appointments with academic advisors; challenges accessing financial aid; and logistical difficulties navigating campus resources including parking spaces. Approximately one-quarter of students shared this challenge. Two

students described negative classroom experiences in which they felt discriminated against, sometimes after expressing their political views, or retaliated against after questioning their instructor's arguments.

Table 2

Categories and Themes

Category 1: Sense of Purpose and Belonging (N = 32)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
College Match	*So my major is animal science with pre veterinary medicine. So TCC didn't offer the specific major that I wanted, then that's why I decided to go to [a four-year university].* (Latine, female)
	Yeah, I've really enjoyed my time at UW Tacoma. I transferred because I changed my major. So it wasn't any negative reason why I wanted to leave. I'm going for dental hygiene now, and it wasn't offered at UW Tacoma. (White, female)
Career	*I didn't want to waste any more time and money not knowing what career I wanted to go into. So that's why I took a break, so I could figure it all out and see which career [I] actually wanted, to see a bit more of what I was interested in.* (Latine, female)
	I was thinking to myself, 'Okay, maybe I don't need school in order to start my business.' (White, male)
Sense of Belonging (if related to College Match)	*I felt a little just kind of like disconnected, you know, from what I was used to just coming right out of high school. It was a transition. I'm being very involved coming right out of high school and having that strong sense of community and I just felt kind of a little lonely there…It was just kind of like it didn't really fit by what I needed in that moment.* (Black, female)
	I go to class, I would go home, and I would live on my day and not even interact with a lot of people on campus…I think not being able to participate in sports was what was challenging for me and one of the reasons why I ended up leaving. (White, female)
Mindset (if related to Career)	*I didn't really have any idea what I wanted to do. And I think that's kind of the reason why I didn't continue with school…I really just think that I didn't have much motivation to be there because I didn't see what I was actually gaining by being in school. It was just kind of doing what everybody had always told me to do.* (White, male)
	The reason I stopped attending college was more from a personal standpoint of, you know, I never really enjoyed school, I was never a fan of just going to class and stuff like that. A lot of times, it felt like I was learning things that didn't really apply to my field and that became really frustrating. (Latine, male)

Category 2: Financial and Basic Needs (N = 18)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
Financial	*I was living on my own, so I needed to be able to pay my own rent, my own bills as an adult. And so I've been a juggle that financial hardship and make sure my schedule was my full forty hours and not anything short of it..* (Latine, female)

	I went off of my parents' income and we had the same problem…because if you make a certain amount, or if you make too much over a certain amount and they don't really support you financially, I guess, but just finding resources was probably the most challenging. (Black, male)
Basic Needs	*So, I changed my job so that I could pay for school. I just haven't been able to go back yet…I had looked into the affordable housing that they had there. At some point and saw that I didn't qualify for it either.* (Latine, non-binary)
	I had to make a quick decision: either balance school and work and have a hard time trying to pay off like hotels or I can just work full-time, know that I have somewhere to stay every night for however long. And I can always go back to school. So, at the time, putting in a pause so that I can focus on my more pressing needs. It was a no brainer. (Multi-racial, female)
Culture/Identity (if related to religious beliefs around accepting loans)	*It's just, it's I still had other expenses to take care of…I had the rent…car bills, gas and insurance, and phone bills and food expenses. It…totals up to like over $1,500 a month…Maybe you could easily make that from working [at] McDonald's or Uber or whatever but you gotta consider the amount of work you have to do for school in order to keep up your grades… As a Muslim…taking a loan was not…an option for me.* (White, male)

Category 3: Mental Health (N = 11)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
Mental Health	*I had a lot of anxiety just going to class so it would take me a minute before entering and then just having to calm down…And the buildings were connected but separated at the same time. So one class I would have in this building and then I would have to walk all the way to the other building. And then sometimes I wouldn't know [if] I'm in the correct building and I just feel overwhelmed…I just feel like I'm a little awkward. And talking to people or making new friends makes me feel a little anxiety. So sometimes I stop myself from doing stuff…I would miss assignments…and I wouldn't be able to fully concentrate or I would overthink it.* (Latine, female student)
Culture/Identity (if related to stress and identity and social acceptance)	*I came out to my mom and everything …That's when I started going to therapy too, was after that. Also, that was going on at the same time as the whole coming out thing.* (Latine, female)
Personal (if related to events that exacerbated mental health challenges)	*My second year I just wasn't doing good academically. I was going through a breakup and just home stuff. I don't want to tell anyone because I don't know why, but I think there's just me being prideful. It was just embarrassing to have to open up and explain that to people, what I was actually going through.* (Black, male student).

Category 4: Family Care and Life Events (N = 10)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
Family	*I put my life on hold to help my mom transferring my grandma back and forth to the doctor, making sure my siblings get to school on time and helping with my three-year-old sister.* (Multi-racial, female)
	And I essentially became part of like a counselor for my sister because she wasn't comfortable talking to anyone other than my family. So just sitting down with her for hours letting her…kind of just being there for her takes a lot of toll on you. You can't let your sister know, 'Hey, I have an exam, sorry, I can't talk to her…' (Asian, female)
Personal	*This will be my first child and my partner [and I] are both very excited. But what comes along with that is added financial burden. And also…I need to allocate my time to my partner right now, and then, after our child was born, then to our child, so, really, it's probably gonna be a while before I'm able to re-enroll because I want to make sure that I can provide my kid a*

stable life which means I need to become more financially secure. (Multi-racial, male)

Category 5: Physical Health (N = 9)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
Physical Health	*I had gotten into a pretty bad car wreck that caused me to have a mild to moderate concussion and having to go back to school even after a week of recovering as well as work, you know, just having the stress of work on it… I ended up having to do a hardship withdraw and tuition waiver and I wasn't able to go back.* (Multi-racial, male)
Physical Barriers/Accessibility (if related to physical health)	*A couple weeks into fall quarter I actually got diagnosed with narcolepsy…I know that you can get accommodations and things at school, but I guess it was just a lot and I didn't really know how to approach it. I know I talked to them in the disability office or whatever it's called but the whole process is kind of confusing to me…I was like, well, I'll take a quarter off and when I come back I'll sort that out, but then I just didn't.* (Multi-racial, female).

Category 6: College Navigation (N = 9)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
College Knowledge	*It was stressful because my advisor didn't really make it easier for me. Being the first person in my family, in my entire family, to go to college, coming from a different country. My advisors didn't really give me…a lot of information…I'm the kind of person that I really needed my advisor to really advise me what to do.* (Asian, female)
Academic Prep and Academic Behaviors (if related to college navigation)	*Students that are fresh out of high school are kind of ill-equipped with enrolling in courses and stuff like that. I didn't feel entirely supported by counselors, a lot of stress was provided by that. I think that that could be a bit more streamlined to better assist new students because they kind of just throw you in and expect you to figure it all out yourself… I think that public high schools and Tacoma aren't really preparing children that aren't on a track to attend colleges. And that was a lot of the reason why I left.* (White, female)
Physical Barriers/Accessibility (if related to navigating parking)	*Problems starting probably with the parking. I was located about 15 minutes from TCC and 30 minutes from [my current college], so it would have been easier to go to TCC, but…sometimes I'd have to scan like 15 minutes for parking. It ended up being about the same time as going to [my current college] if I had just driven straight to [my current college] and just parked, versus 15 minutes at TCC and then scanning 15 minutes for parking.* (Asian, female).

Category 7: Classroom Experience (N = 4)

Theme	Exemplar Quotes
Academic Experience	*I would ask a counter question like, 'How's that work when you just said this? How's this work?' And instead of explaining it or trying to help me understand it, they would just dismiss it. And when I would point out a flaw in whatever they're saying…and I'd be able to prove that what they were saying is wrong, they weren't trying to hear me. Instead, I actually got a lower grade on something that I passed. They did something, I don't remember what it was, but they deducted me 15% because I was questioning what they were saying even though I still got the questions right.* (White, male)
Discrimination/Harassment (if related to classroom experience)	*I don't want to proclaim that she was racist. But I felt like I had hints that she was. That's why I didn't feel comfortable in my classes just because I had a teacher or students that were kind of like her. You know?* (Asian, female)

Note Table 2 summarizes the seven overarching categories and nineteen themes that emerged from student interviews, along with exemplar quotes for each theme. Categories are organized around key factors influencing students' decisions to stop out or transfer, including sense of purpose, belonging, financial pressures, family responsibilities, mental and physical health, classroom experiences, and navigation challenges. N values represent the number of students whose *primary* reasons for stopping out or transferring aligned with each category. Quotes are presented verbatim to center student voices and illustrate the nuance and complexity of each theme.

Sense of Purpose + Sense of Belonging

The most frequent primary reasons for leaving college were related to students' sense of purpose and belonging. More than half of the interviewed students representing both TCC and UWT indicated that they left college before graduating mainly because they did not have a strong sense of purpose, changed their purpose to pursue a degree not offered at the institution, or because they did not have a strong sense of belonging at the college. At TCC, many students did not have a clear career goal or determined that college was not for them. At UWT, several students determined that their career goals did not require a college degree. Several students at both TCC and UWT transferred to different colleges because they wanted majors that were not offered. Several students at UWT transferred to a residential college to seek a stronger sense of community.

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Discussion

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A key finding of this community-engaged study is the importance of a student's sense of purpose to their persistence in college. As seen in broader national studies, financial challenges, family responsibilities, and mental and physical health concerns emerged as barriers (e.g., Strada Education Network et al., 2019; Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021; Kafka, 2022). UWT and TCC remain deeply committed to sustaining and improving our programs supporting student wellness, including financial well-being, physical and mental health, and logistical needs such as transportation support. We were struck, however, that the most common reason students cited for leaving school was associated with return on investment or, more broadly, the sense of purpose. As one student shared,

Yeah, I just ended up leaving because I was really honestly like, I just felt like I didn't really know what I was doing and I didn't want to spend money on classes that I might not need and I wasn't really sure what I needed and what I didn't. So I just decided to focus on work for a little bit… I really loved the school… There's nothing different that they could have done to make me stay there. (White, female study participant)

This sentiment echoed across many interviews, highlighting the foundational role of purpose in persistence. Many students reported uncertainty about their college goals, questioned whether their education aligned with their future aspirations, or determined that their desired career pathways did not require a college degree. These findings suggest that cultivating a sense of purpose may be a foundational driver of student persistence, underscoring the need for further exploration and targeted interventions.

The relationship between a sense of purpose and student success in college, using subtle differences in terminology, has been identified for many years (e.g., "an individual's educational goal commitment" in Tinto [1975]). However, there is growing interest in literature addressing the intentional development of a student's sense of purpose in college. We define purpose using the framing of Damon (2009): "Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self" (p. 33). Purpose and career development are tightly coupled, although we use this definition intentionally to indicate that purpose is inclusive of and larger than a career focus. More informally, it is the answer to the fundamental question of *Why?* "*Why* am I in college?" "*Why* is it worth it to me to make sacrifices for my family and me to graduate from college?" Recent studies have shown that having a strong sense of purpose is associated with resilience, motivation, and general well-being in college and beyond (Colby, 2020), as well as the development of "grit" (Hill et al*.,* 2016).

A sense of purpose can be measured and assessed beyond standard career preparation and success metrics. For example, Sharma et al. (2018) developed an instrument to evaluate three subscales: awakening to purpose, awareness of purpose, and altruistic purpose. Using this tool, researchers found a clear relationship between a student's sense of purpose and degree commitment (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart,

2018), especially resilience and persistence during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022). Both awakening to purpose and altruistic purpose were positively correlated to first-year student success, including GPA, academic standing, and retention (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020).

Purpose does not come naturally to most people; it can be nourished and developed intentionally (Colby, 2020; Damon, 2009). College provides a critical opportunity to foster the development of purpose in our students. One natural vehicle for developing a sense of purpose is career-connected learning and high-impact educational practices (HIPs). Although a sense of purpose is not often measured as an outcome of HIPs, practices such as internships, undergraduate research, capstones, community-based learning, and other forms of sustained work with peers and instructors have increased student engagement, retention, and deep learning (Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2013) as well as career preparedness and employment at the time of graduation (Miller et al., 2018). Notably, these practices have reduced equity gaps for students traditionally underserved by higher education (Finley & McNair, 2013). At the same time, there are inequities in access, resources, and appropriateness of the design of these opportunities for underserved students (Greenman et al., 2022).

Through an extensive survey of U.S. college graduates, their parents, and employers, Bates-Gallup (2019) explored the "purpose gap." While 80% of college graduates indicated that finding purposeful work was necessary, less than half stated that they had found it in their careers. They cite four key experiences in college that were related to finding purpose after graduation: having an applied internship or job, having a relationship with someone who encourages their goals, participating in programming that helps them to pursue meaning in their work, and having realistic expectations for their employment future. The first three are reflected in the key elements of high-quality HIPs (Kuh et al., 2013). They also note the importance of opportunities to reflect, which is also cited by Kuh et al. (2013) as an essential element of HIPs. Based on these findings, UWT plans to explicitly incorporate the development of a sense of purpose in its HIPs work going forward and use existing instruments to assess the success of HIPs experiences across the UWT campus.

Purpose and Belonging

While the development of purpose is critical, it does not occur in isolation. Students' ability to find meaning in their college journey is closely tied to their sense of belonging within the campus community. In addition to the common theme of a sense of purpose, many students in our study also noted that their desire to feel part of a larger community was a critical driver of their decision to leave school. In our interviews, students frequently described feeling disconnected from their campuses, citing a lack of social integration, limited campus engagement opportunities, or difficulty finding peers with similar backgrounds. These narratives paralleled themes found in the broader literature on belonging and student success.

There is a rich and growing literature regarding the relationship between students' social "sense of belonging" and student success; many institutions, including UWT, are creating programming to focus on inclusion and creating a welcoming environment for students (Lu, 2023; Pedler et al., 2022). Belonging can vary among student identities and contexts; for example, in a national study, racially and ethnically minoritized and first-generation students self-report a lower sense of belonging at 4-year schools but not at 2-year schools (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Additionally, social belonging interventions were found to be effective for students from historically marginalized student groups (Walton et al., 2023).

A sense of purpose and a sense of belonging are related. For example, in his exploration of purpose in youth, Damon (2009) states, "The closest thing to a prerequisite for a culture of purpose is a sense of community" (p. 164). While there is intuitive and anecdotal evidence, there is, however, less literature that explicitly connects the development of purpose and creating conditions to enhance belonging beyond the development of career skills. Although not documented in this study, in our regular conversations with current students about their success, we often hear a narrative that intertwines themes of purpose and belonging, including the importance of having a community based on family, identity, equity, faith, and making a difference in the world. The connection between these powerful student motivators—a sense of purpose and belonging—should be further explored. A few limited studies of sense of purpose in underrepresented college students (e.g., Sharma & De Alba, 2018) highlight the importance of identity and culture (key variables in belonging) when studying

purpose development. We note that many high-impact practices recommended for developing a sense of purpose have also been shown to improve belonging.

It is important to note that students do need clear guidance and structure from the academic institution to support success and engagement. Anecdotal reports from this study implicated student-identified challenges negotiating day-to-day college participation as barriers to student success, including an insufficient understanding of procedural elements of college life (i.e., program requirements, university technology, and class add/drop processes). This means that, in many cases, institutional changes are necessary to establish positive 'school-learning' environments. As Cayubit (2022) noted, a school learning environment can influence academic motivation and college engagement; thus, a positive school learning environment is welcoming, organized, and supportive, and such an environment can increase student motivation and, ultimately, retention and academic success. Therefore, the burden does not rest entirely on the student to find a sense of purpose; instead, one must also emphasize the imperative of the academic institution creating structures to enhance academic access, engagement, and ultimately promote student success.

Limitations and Further Research

This study was an opportunity to explore students' experiences, and by design, we stressed the depth of our inquiry over the breadth of the number of students interviewed. As practitioners with a mission to support the success of our students, we focused our study on students from our institutions—a public community college and a medium-sized public university, both non-residential. The themes from these interviews are consistent with more extensive studies (e.g., Strada Education Network et al., 2019), implying that our results likely have broader relevance to similar or even different types of institutions. Future work could explore how different campus settings influence the factors driving student persistence. More specifically, our interviewees included more younger students than our sampling frame. This was partially due to our focus on local high school graduates, consistent with the mission of the Foundation for Tacoma Students. Our campuses serve many older returning students, and in the future, it would be helpful to determine if students' experiences differ with age.

Additionally, our interviews were conducted between January and April 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Some interviews were

conducted before and some during the resulting widespread shutdowns. It is difficult to know how the events at that time could have influenced our results. The pandemic affected student well-being in ways that are still being studied. However, there are indications that a well-developed sense of purpose was correlated to resilience during this period (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022). As higher education continues to focus on the wellness needs of students in the post-pandemic era and beyond, purpose and belonging remain essential factors to develop and assess.

Implications for Practice

What makes our Student Voices initiative different from previous analyses of why students left college is the community-driven nature of this work. A collective impact backbone organization commissioned the study to unite partners to support college completion and post-graduation success across our region. Therefore, FFTS is well-positioned to disseminate the findings to practitioners and our broader community. Once the report was finalized, it was shared with UWT, TCC, and Graduate Tacoma leadership. Partner institutions organized internal launch events to share the results, field test their accuracy, and start a conversation around resulting actions. Through FFTS, we shared the results more widely through a press release and an open community event hosted by the Tacoma College Success Network, which was recorded and shared virtually. The event included a roundtable with students from UWT and TCC.

Since this release, our institutions have used Student Voices and sense of purpose as the guiding principle to shape initiatives. For example, we have received funding through the Urban Serving University Collaborative Opportunity Grant to support a cross-institution design team to conduct empathy interviews to identify barriers for historically underserved UWT and TCC students applying to Degrees of Change Internships. In addition, we sent a cross-institution team to the 2022 Association of American Colleges and Universities and IBM-sponsored Curriculum-to-Career Innovations Institute in the fall of 2022. We were the only team at the Institute to include partners from a community college and external organizations. Together, this cross-disciplinary group developed a "Purpose-Driven Pathway" to co-design curricular and co-curricular strategies to support the development of student sense of purpose through community college, transfer to a university, and beyond. Through this work, we continued to center student voices through a collaborative design thinking project,

which led to the development of a micro-internship available to first- and second-year students at UWT, and a forthcoming faculty development program. We are using measures of sense of belonging, sense of purpose, and career readiness to assess and plan these efforts.

We consider Student Voices the foundation of our shared student success strategy. By centering student voices, seeking opportunities to support the development of a sense of purpose and belonging, and partnering among colleges, universities, and community development organizations, we will help meet our community-driven goal to "help every child achieve success from cradle to college and career."

Acknowledgements

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