College Fluency Capacity Building

Insights from a Northeastern Community College

Deirdre Harkins
Elmira Jangjou
Melissa Blankstein
jean amaral

October 15, 2024

ITHAKA S+R

Ithaka S+R provides research and strategic guidance to help the academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, demographic, and technological change. Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.

Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) is part of the City University of New York (CUNY), awarding associate degrees in more than 50 fields and ranked #5 among community colleges nationwide in granting associate degrees to minority students, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education. BMCC is a diverse teaching and learning community committed to advancing equity and the intellectual and personal growth of students. Working to strengthen a culture of care inside and outside the classroom, the faculty and staff of BMCC share a passion for learning with students from around the world, and strive to increase degree completion, successful transfer, career achievement and service and leadership within the BMCC community, New York City, and beyond. Visit: http://www.bmcc.cuny.

***

We are interested in disseminating this brief as widely as possible. Please contact us with any questions about using the report: research@ithaka.org.

Introduction

Navigating the landscape of higher education takes more than just attending classes, passing, and graduating. It requires a set of skills known as "college fluency." Our research team defines college fluency as "the knowledge and corresponding set of abilities that enable students and staff to effectively locate and use relevant college services, programs, and resources, which can help students successfully engage with and self-advocate within the culture and bureaucracy of higher education institutions to achieve their goals."[1] Libraries play a pivotal role in helping fluency flourish, training their employees and other faculty and staff members across their institution to adapt to the needs of students in an ever-changing world.[2] As students and staff grapple with challenges beyond the syllabus, with issues such as employee turnover rates, food insecurity, and the challenges of hybrid work and study, the need for college fluency becomes even more evident.

To further examine and develop impactful strategies for unmet needs related to college fluency, the Borough of Manhattan Community College Library (BMCC) and Ithaka S+R have partnered on the College Fluency Capacity Building initiative with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).[3] Looking specifically at the development of college fluency services in community colleges across the US, this initiative takes a deep dive into the nuances of this programming toward increasing librarians' own college fluency and that of their students. To do this, BMCC and Ithaka S+R are publishing a series of case studies to further understand how institutions are currently addressing college fluency needs and to learn how to enhance the abilities of academic librarians and library workers to help their students successfully navigate institutional resources and services.

---

[1] Melissa Blankstein and Jean Amaral, "College Fluency Capacity Building," *Ithaka S+R*, December 8, 2022, https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/college-fluency-capacity-building/.

[2] Christine Wolf-Eisenberg, "The Case for Academic Libraries and 'College Fluency'," *Ithaka S+R*, February 11, 2020, https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/the-case-for-academic-libraries-and-college-fluency/.

[3] For more information on our project [RE-252364-OLS-22] visit: "What Is College Fluency? – College Fluency Capacity Building," OpenLab BMCC CUNY, accessed January 26, 2024, https://openlab.bmcc.cuny.edu/college-fluency/what-is-college-fluency/.

The second case study in this series looks at a small northeastern community college that has been developing college fluency programs with both their library and non-library faculty and staff. The college fluency initiatives are still in their early stages, with a primary focus on the library. Other more traditional programs at this college that also contribute to college fluency are primarily non-library related, highlighting just how much of a campus-wide effort it takes to promote greater college fluency.

Key Takeaways

- Recognize that all students, faculty, and staff have different levels of understanding higher education culture and systems, as socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural factors can influence different understanding of college concepts, terminology, and technology. Acknowledging diverse student backgrounds is crucial for college fluency and ensuring equitable access.
- Implement continuously updated and accessible resources, such as regularly updated FAQ pages and LibGuides and extended orientation sessions, to provide students with the tools to navigate enrollment and bureaucratic processes, fostering a greater sense of agency and promoting self-advocacy throughout their higher education journey.
- Implement proactive outreach initiatives, such as sending reminders and offering help before and during the semester, to continuously address student concerns and questions.
- Facilitate students' peer-to-peer interactions by providing opportunities, for instance through student ambassador programs, to develop networks that help students thrive in their academic and personal lives.
- Encourage staff to be approachable in student spaces to foster informal, supportive interactions.
- Adopt a multifaceted approach to measuring success beyond quantitative metrics. Include qualitative indicators such as student feedback and student definitions of success to assess the impact and effectiveness of programs.

About the College

Institutional Characteristics

To investigate the factors that facilitate faculty, staff, and student development of college fluency, we are currently conducting a series of qualitative case studies about existing formalized sources of support. The northeastern community college that will be discussed in this report was selected based on the proactive outreach by one of their librarians to our public call for participants for case studies, who then provided insights into the development and impact of their FAQ page on library services. The college prefers to remain anonymous and will be referred to hereafter as "the college." This mid-size public institution has two locations. In fall 2022, this community college had an enrollment of over 4,000 undergraduate students. The majority of students (75 percent) were enrolled part-time. Approximately 60 percent of students are women, 45 percent are Hispanic, 40 percent are White, 5 percent are Black or African American, 2 percent are Asian, and 2 percent are two or more races. Roughly 30 percent of students were enrolled exclusively in distance education, while 40 percent were engaged in some form of distance education. Additionally, this college had over 300 full-time staff members,[4] including five full-time librarians and one part-time librarian.

We mainly explored one library initiative, the FAQ page, aimed at promoting college fluency. However, the interviewees mentioned other formalized non-library methods that assisted students in navigating college as well.

Library's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Page

The library's FAQ page, prominently featured on the library homepage and within its databases, is a resource created to answer questions that are commonly asked by students and designed to support them in navigating various aspects of campus life. It covers a broad range of topics including students' curricular (e.g., research assistance and tutoring) and non-curricular needs (e.g., accessing basic needs resources). Constantly accessible, the FAQ page empowers students to independently find

---

[4] Demographic information sourced from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2022 data, accessed June 11, 2024.

answers to their questions, particularly when the library and other campus services are unavailable. The page also enhances efficiency for all stakeholders, including faculty and staff, by providing URL links for frequently asked questions and facilitating up-to-date information sharing. Overall, the FAQ page is a key tool in promoting student self-sufficiency and college fluency. While library-based FAQ resources are commonly offered by colleges and universities, like LaGuardia Community College Library's institution-wide FAQ, many do not provide non-curricular information alongside curricular questions—making this FAQ page a unique college fluency resource.[5]

Non-Library Services

The interviewees based outside the library also underscored several non-library college programs that contribute uniquely to fostering students' college fluency. While offered by most colleges and universities, the following initiatives underscore the potential areas where libraries can engage in collaborative partnerships to strengthen institutional college fluency:

- **Orientation and onboarding.** Extended orientation, weeks of welcome, one-stop student center, first year seminar, and resource fair.
- **Advising.** Advising center, academic centers, student workshops with academic coaching and student life, a student experience project, educational opportunity and Federal TRIO programs (TRIO), and progress reports.[6]
- **Digital tools and communication.** Early alert app, college website, and newsletters
- **Student engagement.** Student ambassadors program and student government.

---

[5] "Frequently Asked Questions & Handouts," LaGuardia Community College Library, https://library.laguardia.edu/help/faq/.

[6] "Federal TRIO programs are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds." More information about TRIO programs is available at https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html.

ITHAKA S+R

Methods

In order to acquire comprehensive insights into effective models and obstacles in supporting students navigating college, we conducted interviews with 10 members of the college. These interviews delved into the models initiated and led by the library, challenges and opportunities the interviewees encountered, other campus services dedicated to college fluency, and how measures of success or impact are assessed. We used snowball sampling to identify potential interviewees, with a librarian liaison providing needed contact information. BMCC and Ithaka S+R conducted the interviews virtually via Webex and Zoom and recorded the sessions with the interviewees' consent. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour. Subsequently, a member of the research team cleaned interview transcripts automatically generated by the web meeting software using the session recordings. Two analysts worked collaboratively to analyze the interview transcripts, undertaking a comprehensive open-coding process to create a thematic codebook. Subsequently, they conducted a thematic analysis using NVivo to analyze interview transcripts and report case study findings.

Sample Characteristics

The IRB-approved study involved 10 participants who represented a wide range of roles, including library and non-library faculty and staff and students. Interviewees' work experience at this institution ranged from a few months to 11 years. Our sample predominantly represents staff members who have been at this community college longer than five years, offering insights grounded in years of practice and institutional familiarity.

Fostering College Fluency: "Help students help themselves"

On the journey to improve college fluency, this northeastern community college has focused on enhancing student support through strategic staff-student connections, relationship building, student autonomy, and inclusivity. Staff members play a critical role in demystifying the college experience for students by assisting with enrollment processes, clarifying bureaucratic complexities, and offering tailored support. By leveraging resources such as the library's FAQ page, the college strives to make information accessible and comprehensible. The college also aims to build relationships through departmental collaboration and students' peer-to-peer interactions to further create a supportive network. The college prioritizes empowering students to advocate for themselves and navigate their educational journeys independently. Additionally, fostering an inclusive environment that addresses students' diverse needs is fundamental to the college's mission, with a goal of ensuring that students feel supported and equipped to succeed.

Connect within Student Spaces

A pivotal goal of staff at this college is to connect with students and help them navigate the complexities of college life. Staff members connect with students to provide crucial support by assisting with overwhelming enrollment processes, clarifying complex bureaucracies, and creating coherent student roadmaps, especially for incoming students and "vulnerable" summer students, who often take only one course and tend to receive little attention from college services during this semester. One of the interviewees described their approach to supporting students:

> I feel like we do use a lot of terminology. That's like, what are you talking about? And so that was kind of the mindset I went into when I created the content, was how can I make these complex ideas or just funky terms sound easy to understand for a brand new student, who likely has zero experience in any of this stuff. And

even if they do have experience with it, they may never have learned what some of these things were. So explaining more in detail, like, the difference between an add-drop or a withdrawal, or, you know, little things like that, that again, we throw the words around but forget that students don't necessarily know what all that means.

> "We throw the words around but forget that students don't necessarily know what all that means."

By simplifying higher education terminology and sharing information effectively through the library's FAQ page, extended orientation sessions, and explanatory videos, staff try to make the college experience more understandable and accessible for students. Tailored support is a cornerstone of the staff-student connection, with staff members closely overseeing students' progress and addressing individual needs. Librarians play a key role in this process, including in their responsibilities to guide students to both academic and non-curricular resources, respond to various inquiries, and follow up on student questions. Their consistent presence in student spaces, including during welcome weeks and orientation sessions, ensures that students feel supported and connected to essential resources, whether academic, technological, or administrative. One of the librarians explained how their "reference interview skills" are helpful to figure out students' needs and refer them accordingly:

> We've sort of trained to ask a million questions. And so when a student just comes in and if they say, like, "I want to register for classes," usually, I don't just like point them there. I usually ask a couple of questions before I point them, because it might not be that they even need to go to the registration area. They might just need to go talk to a faculty [member]; ... I usually don't take anything the student says at face value. I mean, not in a bad way. But, you know, a lot of them don't know, you know, they're using a term that isn't what we would use.

Building strong staff-student relationships is essential for fostering a supportive learning environment. A student interviewee reported having positive interactions with staff, especially at the library, feeling

comfortable and guided in seeking help and resources: "These are librarians I know by name, who I know would definitely help." According to one of the student affairs staff members, those in student-facing roles naturally build stronger connections with students and other student-facing staff and "are the ones that are able to help and assist more and more willing to assist." By proactively seeking out student spaces and being approachable, staff can ensure that help-seeking is less formal and more accessible. One approach, as another interviewee shared, is "just walk to them where they are, and then try and ask them a little bit about their life, because, who knows who is asking them anything about their life. So, and just try to have them have a familiar face."

Build Relationships

Another central goal of the institution's college fluency work is to build relationships to help students navigate college life more effectively. This involves both formal and informal interventions aimed at creating a supportive network for students. A key strategy in this endeavor is departmental collaboration. The library has undertaken several collaborative efforts with faculty and staff in other departments, including in student life and the tutoring center. One of the librarians shared how they try to "educate [the] departments about what [the library] can do for students" to support their success.

These kinds of conversations can help provide students with a cohesive support system, making it easier for them to manage the complexities of college life. The connections between staff enables them to "know enough people that [they] feel comfortable making contact with … to give the students the help they need."

An equally important strategy is to encourage student-to-student relationship building. Interviewees emphasized actively promoting network building and facilitating peer-to-peer interactions to help students develop a sense of community. One effective method was having the student ambassador program provide assistance whenever possible. For more complex issues, these ambassadors direct students to the appropriate campus resources and help them make appointments, ensuring they receive the necessary support. This student ambassador program was funded through the CARES Act, which provided emergency relief to educational institutions during the pandemic. In spite of "statistically

significant" evidence from the college's Student Experience Survey demonstrating the program's positive impact, it has been discontinued due to current budget constraints. Peer interactions are invaluable as they allow students to learn from each other's experiences and challenges. Recognizing this, the college is continually seeking to create more opportunities for students to connect and build relationships. One of the student affairs staff members that we interviewed elaborated on these attempts:

> We also have a lot of workshops and events, to draw students into, to try and develop a better sense of community, a greater level of participation in the life of the college itself. Because the more the students are connected to each other and connected to the college, the more likely they are to stick with it, persist, see that what they're doing here is connected to their lives [as] a whole.

These findings underscore the critical role of student-to-student relationship building in fostering a sense of community and providing opportunities to enhance students' college fluency, potentially leading to higher rates of student persistence. Peer interactions, facilitated through programs such as the student ambassador initiative, provide vital support by allowing students to navigate challenges together and connect with necessary campus resources. The discontinuation of the student ambassador program highlights how such impactful initiatives can be shuttered due to budget constraints, despite clear evidence of their effectiveness. Therefore, it is critical for colleges to prioritize institutional strategies for supporting peer support mechanisms to improve student engagement and persistence.

> "The more the students are connected to each other and connected to the college, the more likely they are to stick with it, persist, see that what they're doing here is connected to their lives [as] a whole."

Promote Student Autonomy and Self-Advocacy

Interviewees discussed their efforts to empower students to take charge of their educational journeys by implementing a variety of strategies aimed at providing students with the tools and confidence needed to navigate college life independently. Librarians play a pivotal role in this process by managing and updating LibGuides, overseeing the FAQ page, and incorporating feedback gathered from online service points (e.g., Springshare) and in-person questions to ensure that the resources remain relevant and helpful.[7] By keeping these guides and FAQ current, librarians help students find the information they need at any time, fostering a sense of self-reliance. One of the librarians elaborated on the primary goal of the FAQ page:

> There're a couple goals, right? So, one of them is to help students help themselves. Right now, we're not open on the weekends period. There's no online services. There's no physical services. So, from four o'clock Friday to eight o'clock Monday morning, they're on their own. So a lot of times when people are doing work on or even looking for things in the college, it's on the weekends... part of the idea is that they will help themselves and, we do get to see the little numbers of how many times they've been used. So, people are using them, which is good.

Be Inclusive

Some interviewees expressed that many students attending community colleges fall into "gaps in the bureaucracy that prevent them from succeeding." College fluency can help to combat this phenomenon, but to ensure college fluency success, it's essential to foster opportunities for student inclusivity.

To this effect, it is vital for the college to implement a variety of programs with the specific intention of supporting vulnerable and struggling

---

[7] LibGuides are content management platforms used by libraries. For more information about LibGuides: https://www.springshare.com/libguides/. Springshare, the provider of LibGuides, is a software company offering cloud-based solutions for libraries, including tools for content management, reference services, event scheduling, and data analytics, widely used to enhance library operations and user engagement.

students. College and federal educational opportunity programs offer personalized academic assistance, as well as mental health resources. The college-led educational opportunity program provides personalized support to help students strengthen their academic skills and find post-college opportunities. This support is modeled from Federal TRIO programs that are present in universities across the country to further promote a sense of belonging and to enhance the overall academic experience. As one interviewee put it, "The idea here was, if we could provide the same level of funding for other students, and basically throw support at them and make it hard for them not to succeed then, and if we can increase the persistence and retention, we'll have a lot more students coming out into the workforce, with the qualifications that are needed."

Additionally, interviewees highlighted that effective diversity training for staff was and continues to be crucial. With a focus on cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity, staff have become increasingly aware of how to respond to the varying needs of their students. When working with a large number of students who do not speak English as their first language, it is important for the college to offer support services to assist. The institution's AI generated chatbot, for instance, is not as effective when students ask questions in other languages. Additionally, the terminology used on campus can also create barriers. One interviewee described this as "middle-class language" and that her goal was to minimize some of the confusion around this kind of language:

> The mindset I went into when I created the content, was how can I make these complex ideas or just funky terms sound easy to understand for a brand new student, who likely has zero experience in any of this stuff. And even if they do have experience with it, they may never have learned what some of these things were...Because again, people often use that middle class language, that higher ed language. And by the time it trickles down to the student, they're just like, what?

"People often use that middle class language, that higher ed language. And by the time it trickles down to the student, they're just like, what?"

A constant theme that emerged in the interviews was students' varying levels of technological literacy and access. Many college staff members incorrectly assume that every student has access to a laptop, or Wi-Fi, or that they know how to operate a computer. During the pandemic the college tried to provide laptops to any students who needed them. However, it was clear that technology fluency was also something that the college was struggling with for both the younger and older students. One interviewee explained:

> There's also technological fluency in terms of just sort of understanding, it's funny, because there seems to have been a peak here, now that everything is touch screen, when we ask them to work on regular programs on a desktop, there's a real, like, they don't understand how files and menus… And there's a real shift in getting, moving from a digital touch screen phone fluency to a software academic business, for instance, technological fluency. There is a real gap there.

Challenges Disrupting Success: "I should never have to tell a student, 'We can't do that for you here'"

This institution faced a variety of challenges that have affected the efficacy of its college fluency programs. While not all of the college fluency programs are run by the same departments on campus, it was clear that most interviewees have experienced similar obstacles, including in finding ways to effectively engage students, supporting students dealing with personal challenges at home, managing the impact of COVID-19, and navigating departmental divides on campus. In this section we highlight the impact of these challenges on the success of the institution's college fluency programs as well as on its community members.

Effectively Engaging Students

Engaging students can be considerably difficult in a community college setting in comparison to the residential campus setting found at many four-year colleges and universities. At community colleges, students are more likely to live off campus and commute, and since the pandemic began, many activities have shifted to primarily online. This makes it difficult to effectively engage students, who may have other responsibilities at home or long commutes. And while cell phones and email may make it easier to contact students, it also means that fewer students come onto campus to ask questions. It became clear through the interviews that while there are resources available online for students, they may not know what is available or what to even look for, essentially making the resources useless.

To help mitigate some of these challenges, the college sends out a weekly newsletter to help keep students aware of events on both campuses, as well as provide consistent updates via text and email. There is also an FAQ section on the college library's website that is continuously updated to address common questions that students may have on things like research, tutoring services, or where to find a microwave on campus. However, a common complaint from students is, "No one ever told me this." As a result, faculty members are now required to go over some of these communication channels on the first day of classes and to ensure these resources are made available in the syllabi.

Moreover, several barriers, such as inconsistent posting of hours, multiple names for the same buildings, and dependency on direct assistance during pre-college education, hinder the promotion of self-advocacy. Similar to what we found in our study of Sinclair Community College, staff offices are often closed when students seek help, or they are sent to the wrong place on campus when trying to solve a problem. These barriers highlight the need for continued efforts to simplify access to resources and support students in developing the skills necessary to advocate for themselves effectively.[8]

---

[8] Elmira Jangjou, Deirdre Harkins, Melissa Blankstein, and jean amaral, "Navigating Higher Education: Insights from the College Fluency Initiatives at Sinclair Community College," *Ithaka S+R*, May 22, 2024, https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.320822.

One interviewee expressed how much they hate bouncing students from one location on campus to another: "Because the very last thing I ever want to do is send a student away, and they're faced with a locked door, because there's no one there. That's the absolute last thing I want to do, because now they don't want to come back to me, right? Now they don't want to come back to me."

Some library interviewees explained that bounce back occurs when there are not enough computers and students are sent around campus to find one available. Additionally, students and faculty become frustrated when staff members do not have the same understanding of processes and rules, or the same answers to questions, causing the bounce back in the first place. The frustration around this issue is understandable, as it may seem to the students that their questions will not be answered, or they may not be able to find help. As one interviewee explained:

> We've failed the point of need that could've handed that student to the right place at the right moment. And now the domino effect occurs for too many of our students. Not for everybody, certainly. There are students who are like, yup, they can come back on Thursday to talk to that person, or you know, but for too many of our students, that simple thing, this office was closed. That simple thing starts the domino effect.

Challenges at home also affect student engagement. One interviewee mentioned that it is common for families to assume that students who recently graduated from high school and who now are no longer in school from 7am-3pm, can watch their younger siblings in their "free time." However, simply because they spend fewer hours in class, it does not mean they have more free time for more household commitments. These students may also struggle to fully engage in extracurricular activities on campus.

Additionally, some interviewees explained that another difficulty in effectively engaging students relates to students' worries or concerns beyond their academics. To support these students, the school has started offering more resources such as mental health support and food support. To help students locate key resources related to food and mental health, there are now mental health counselors on campus and assistance for signing up for SNAP benefits.

Impacts of the Pandemic

COVID-19 impacted many components of higher education, exacerbating existing challenges and creating new ones. This includes lost connections on campus and an increased staff turnover rate. As one employee explained,

> Ever since the pandemic we've been very short staffed. We did lose, like, seven part-time library support staff. I feel like we're all taking on more roles. But, in the same sense, because students aren't coming to the college, they're still, they still prefer online classes, and they need support. We really have to do more and more outreach, not only to the students, but to staff and faculty members on campus, along with some of the ramifications of, you know, being locked down in the pandemic, many people retired.

Essentially, since the pandemic began students and staff alike are less inclined to come onto campus, causing a higher workload for staff who do. Additionally, establishing new connections amongst fellow staff members became increasingly difficult as turnover increased. As one interviewee described, "I feel the departments are very much siloed, and the pandemic has, in a sense, made it worse."

Beyond faculty and staff turnover, interviewees also described how the college's attempts to make things easier for students during COVID were not always successful:

> Wi-Fi zones were put in the parking lots outside the college buildings, which is a wonderful gesture at trying to help students connect, but it's not an adequate one. You know, if you don't have a laptop, being told that you can sit in your car and do your English paper in the parking lot isn't a whole lot of help. And the fact that there are, you know, endless numbers of computer labs on campus, but you couldn't go into it because of the pandemic, it just excluded so many students. And I think we probably lost a lot of those students at that time and trying to get them to come back is a huge, huge challenge. Particularly a lot of our students, through the pandemic found that there were a lot more demands on them work-wise and... the ability to take classes online facilitated that scheduling. But, there was, again, a larger equity gap in online classes than there is in face-to-face classes.

However, despite these additional challenges, students recognized the college's efforts to support them. As one expressed, "The support system was there, the school made efforts to email us, give us weekly updates, COVID updates as well, making sure we were getting tested and staying safe. But also to know how to navigate being in school while in COVID, they definitely were consistent and communicated well with that."

Another interviewee explained that their team helped provide laptops to students who did not have them during the pandemic, and that with federal funding they were able to wipe away a lot of the tuition balances that students had on their accounts: "So that the pressure to work more hours, not to pay for tuition, was minimized because, you know, here's $700 that will take care of that outstanding balance that potentially, it may not have covered or something like that."

Departmental Divide

While both student and academic affairs share the same goal of student success, their collaboration is not always straightforward. In fact, some interviewees described how a departmental divide interferes with opportunities for collaboration. A relatively new employee acknowledged the power of cross-departmental collaboration, and explained their take on the divide between the two departments:

> And ultimately, we all want the same thing. We want our students to succeed, to complete whatever goal they came here for, and when we're able to work together and share information and resources with each other, it empowers everybody to be able to at least offer some help to students, even if it's just, 'Well, I don't really know, but I know this other person who knows a lot of stuff, and I'm going to go ask them and let's see what they have to say.'

Alongside this departmental divide there is a generally high staff turnover rate at the college. One interviewee explained that "People are not in positions long enough to be able to answer questions and be able to help students." To combat this, both academic affairs and student affairs started a project to further integrate the student experience and reimagine the way services were provided. The library was involved in this effort; however, it was seen more as a standalone center to help guide

students, rather than solely offering academic support. Library staff work alongside the academic centers to ensure their knowledge of the issues students are dealing with, as well as to stay informed about events on campus. As one interviewee explained, "It's a way for us to put ourselves out there and just let students know that we are here, we are available physically and remotely, and again to kind of immerse ourselves to the extent that we can in some of those processes that are going on."

Understanding the Path to Success: "Success is different for everybody."

The northeastern college in this case study demonstrates a dedicated approach to supporting student success through holistic strategies, emphasizing both curricular and non-curricular needs. Key initiatives, such as the library's FAQ page and extended orientation sessions, underscore the institution's dedication to consistent student support from admission to graduation. Specialized support services, including robust library services and centralized student resource hubs, further enhance accessibility and guidance for students navigating curricular and non-curricular challenges. The college also aims to focus on defining success through qualitative measures, ensuring that student well-being and academic achievement remain central to its mission.

Constant Commitment to Supporting Students

The staff at this northeastern community college articulated their unwavering commitment to continuously supporting their students' needs through a holistic approach. They emphasized the importance of addressing both curricular and non-curricular requirements to ensure comprehensive student success. For instance, the extended orientation program, starting from the invitation to orientation and continuing through mid-semester, provides ongoing guidance. "We can't just have one orientation on one day, we understand that, right? So, we break it apart into, we've got a morning one, evening one, a Tuesday one, a Thursday one, too. So there's a great deal of awareness and attempting to broaden our services and broaden our accessibility in as many ways as we possibly can," explained one of the interviewees.

Staff members' personal experiences and challenges during their own college journeys further enhance their commitment to student support.

These experiences foster empathy and advocacy, driving staff to go above and beyond in helping students. One interviewee, who is directly involved in the college's orientation programs, described how their own college experience has impacted their work:

> It took me 14 years to get from, you know, starting out as a freshman to finishing my master's degree. … I had moving situations, roommate issues, mental health issues. Yeah, family issues, deaths in the family, marriage, kids, moving across the country. You know. All that stuff happened, and I still had to figure out how to be a student too. And so that's another reason why I pushed the advocacy piece, because my life is gonna happen, and some semesters are gonna be great. And others are going to be very tough because you can't control everything that pops up. …. encouraging them to, like I said [referring to orientation 2.0 plans], find your person. So, if that happens, or when that happens more likely, when you have somebody that can help connect you to either directly to the service, or directly to a person that can help you navigate those services.

> "Family issues, deaths in the family, marriage, kids, moving across the country. You know. All that stuff happened, and I still had to figure out how to be a student too."

The college provides a range of basic needs support, including a food pantry, mental health counseling, assistance with SNAP applications, a clothing closet, and referrals to housing and childcare services. These resources are designed to ensure that students have access to essential services that support their overall well-being. One interviewee highlighted the importance of personalized assistance in connecting students to these services: "It's really nice to have those options, because rather than just, 'okay. Go call this number,' it's nice to be able to refer them to a person who can … walk them through the steps." This approach underscores the college's commitment to providing tailored support that addresses both academic and non-academic needs.

Another notable initiative in this commitment is a student experience project. Recognizing that bureaucratic gaps, such as those between admissions and financial aid, often hinder student success, the college

strategically implemented this project to ensure a seamless transition between various support services. This initiative focused on facilitating effective hand-offs between staff members, ensuring that students are consistently guided through processes like registration and financial aid. Despite that components of the project were discontinued under a new provost, the project findings continue to resonate with some interviewees. The approach underscores the importance of having dedicated personnel available to assist students promptly, thereby addressing their needs in real-time and preventing delays that could impede their academic progress. One of the librarians highlighted the importance of prompt support:

> If we don't hit it at the moment they need it, the risk is so much higher than for four-year residentials. The four-year residentials can come back tomorrow, come back in the morning, right after lunch. Our students can't do that. So, the minute we miss the need, we've automatically created this massive hill for them.

"The minute we miss the need, we've automatically created this massive hill for them."

The library also serves as a central hub for constant support, providing an accessible source of information. Librarians are experts in responding to student inquiries, whether via phone, chat, or in person, and they play a critical role in answering college fluency questions across campuses. The library's computer labs draw students in, allowing librarians to assist with both curricular and non-curricular needs. Resources like the FAQ page and LibGuides offer academic and non-academic information that benefits both students and staff. These resources are particularly helpful for incoming and first-generation students with low college fluency, providing essential information during weekends and other times when the college might be closed. One of the librarians we interviewed highlighted the library's critical role:

> So, we really try to cover, just cover a gamut of questions that students ask. I think, you know, one of the reasons is, the library is one of the buildings that is open during the day and at night. Where other campus offices are closed after 5:00, the library is still open. So, oftentimes we do see students coming in after work or coming

in for an evening class and they will want to know like, who is, who are the business faculty advisors that I need to talk to? Who are, where do I go for information about financial aid, scholarships, things like that? And I think that we catch a lot of questions for the fact that we have our chat open and the FAQ are open at night.

Specialized Library Support

The success of community college students often hinges on specialized support and contributions from various departments, each addressing different aspects of promoting college fluency. According to a librarian interviewee, "At our institution, a lot of, you know, the college fluency stuff is … not exactly like a formal unified program. We have a lot of different departments doing, like, different aspects of it." In this section, we shed light on the efforts of the library in boosting students' college fluency.

The library serves as a cornerstone of student support, functioning as a resource center for connection. Library staff strive to understand and address students' needs, providing tailored support, connecting and, in most cases, walking them to relevant resources. By leveraging the FAQ page and maintaining an updated repository of information, the library staff not only assist students directly but also provide other staff members with a source of information to help students navigate multiple campuses. A librarian interviewee described,

> It also makes it easier for our library support staff to ask, you know, just again, put that question in the FAQs. If a student comes in and says, "I need to warm up my food for lunch." And you can type in, where are the eating areas on the [X] campus, even though you don't work on that campus. So it's very useful for our two, dual campus, you know, our two campus situation.

The FAQ page can also be used to inform the college on the types of information students are routinely seeking answers to, or potential barriers to college fluency across campus. This information is important not only for the library, but the college as a whole, and disseminating these findings to other departments about common student concerns and needs may help in combating bureaucratic barriers students may be facing. One of the librarians outlined a potential benefit of the FAQ page in taking the temperature on student needs:

I can certainly see the FAQ being used as a basis for, using it as data elsewhere across the college, letting people know the types of questions that students are asking, the types of questions that we are handling, particularly, you know, it could be part of the Achieving the Dream work, as we start to look at what areas, where are the pinch points that students are experiencing and what can we do to help alleviate them? If we're getting an inordinate amount of questions about students not being able to contact enrollment services or something like that, I think that's important data that we could share with other parts of the college, and kind of help guide some of the work that's going on elsewhere.

Building Connections Between Departments

Collaboration across departments is vital, and this is particularly evident during events like welcome week, orientations, and resource fairs, where various departments contribute to preparing welcome bags and sharing resource information. Librarians often collaborate with other departments to disseminate information about library resources, enhancing the overall support network for students. One of the student affairs staff members detailed Student Life's collaborative efforts with other departments to organize the welcome week events, highlighting it as a crucial first step in helping students navigate college:

> So that's like our main like navigation, like, area, like "this is where you would go," and we also asked different offices to provide information on their location and the services that they provide, and we put those into a Weeks of Welcome bag that we hand out to all students that walk by us. So, that's kind of our initial trying to get them introduced to the campus, kind of aside from their orientation and to make sure they have any important resources that they might need. We hand that to them on their first day. So that's kind of like, the main way that we start.

Centralized support systems can also play a significant role in supporting students with their college fluency and presents further opportunities for building connections beyond the library. Interviewees shared how it is more effective to direct students to specific centers or experts rather than individual staff members in many cases. According to an interviewee,

> I know people in the offices, but I, because I know the way we patchwork schedules and all of that, I hesitate to tell a student, you need to talk to this specific person, unless there is literally just that person.

This approach ensures that students receive accurate and consistent information, even when particular staff members are unavailable. For example, one-stop student centers and centralized student services buildings provide a streamlined approach, allowing students to access multiple services in one location.

As several interviewees mentioned, departments like academic advising and academic centers also play a crucial role in helping students navigate college by engaging incoming students with in-depth academic planning meetings. This initial support helps ensure that students are well prepared before they transition to more faculty-centered advising within their specific degree or major pathways. A few interviewees, including librarians, also talked about referring students to these departments, if needed. Some other resources, such as educational opportunity and TRIO programs, specifically target vulnerable and struggling students, offering tailored support to help them navigate college life from the early days of college. These programs address students' holistic needs, facilitate connections to essential services, and foster a sense of community and belonging. One interviewee involved in one of these programs shed light on how the initiative supports student navigation of college services:

> [The students] do their orientation, and immediately we have our coaches meet with them. I'd say, okay, it's wonderful that you're coming to the college. Delighted you're here. Now, I want to sit down and have a meeting with you and talk about what success looks like for you, how much time are you able to set aside each week, so that you can do the academic work that's necessary for you to succeed and the classes you've got? And if that's not realistic, let's try and manage things so that you have some level of success. And seeing from discussing with students, then passing them to advisors, who will help them relate that decision to come to college, so what you actually want to do with it. So, having them, look at some resources that will tap into what their strengths are and what their ambitions are.

The efforts of these departments to engage with students and help them navigate college have the potential to greatly improve students' college fluency by equipping them with the skills to effectively find and use campus resources to address both curricular and non-curricular needs. Moreover, these efforts can strengthen cross-departmental collaboration, particularly with the library, to foster stronger institutional connections that enhance holistic student support and success.

Defining and Measuring Success

The majority of interviewees at this northeastern community college believe that understanding and measuring success requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond quantitative metrics. Tracking the number of student participants and the longevity of their engagement provides insights into the sustained impact of various programs. According to the interviewees, high requests for welcome bags and increased engagement once students become familiar with resources can serve as indicators of successful interventions. However, measuring program success requires more than quantitative metrics; it includes qualitative measures and documentation. Key qualitative indicators of success can encompass academic planning participation, student connections with advisors, and maintaining effective transitions to different departments and offices. This college recognizes the diversity of student objectives and adapts its success measures accordingly. The significance of student voices and experiences, and their definitions of success, is paramount. One of the interviewees elaborated on how they define success and value student experiences:

> I'm always the annoying qualitative person who was, like, but did we ask the students? What do the students have to say? We've got, you know, they did one through five, they sat on this generic survey we send out, like, but what else? Like, I want to read the words that they have to say, I want to hear what they have to say about their experience. Cause, if we're going to be effective, we need to know from their experience, from their perspective, because we can make assumptions all we want and interpretations based on our one-off meetings with the students. But until we can appropriately document it, the other powers that be often don't hear, you don't hear the qualitative, they hear the quantitative.

Positive feedback from students about receiving timely responses to their questions underscores the importance of support systems and direct interactions. A student interviewee indicated how they received support at college from other departments, such as the career center, which prepared them to navigate life after graduation, especially in their last year:

> They help in that sense of like, helping students sort of like, introduce them into the real world in terms of jobs, you know, because you can do the classes. You can sign up for the classes, and do the work and ace them, but it's just like, what's the purpose behind that? How are you going to tie that into your career and jobs, and the Career Services definitely have resources that have helped me specifically with that.

They further described how they "felt the support in the library" and having "little talks" with the librarians assured them they "would really help if [they] needed something." According to one of the librarians, the library webpage has reduced the inefficiencies of students bouncing around different resources, reflecting a tailored approach to meeting student needs. Moreover, other staff members often compliment the librarians' efforts, highlighting the collaborative nature of student support:

> I mean, our library staff is awesome. Like, they're great people, and I love that they work right below me. Sometimes I'll just go on a walk down there and we'll chat for some time. They're really good people. They really care about their students. And so, I think that they'd be willing to do and try different things out to better our students' lives and improve our success rates and whatever success means for the students. It's not just graduation or grades or transferring. Success is different for everybody. So, yeah, they're good at connecting with people.

Interviewees also described how the library's FAQ page has been helpful in assisting students' college fluency. One of the librarians in charge of this page shed light on how they measure success with "quantitative methods," such as recording the number of people looking at the FAQ, typing in questions, and clicking on them, for internal use only:

[The FAQ page users will] actually go there. And you can see they've started to search whatever. And then they'll instead like, they won't finish and they will, cause they'll find an FAQ that actually answers the question. So I like seeing that, because I'm like, okay good. That means that, like, we're actually doing something.

Despite these successes, there are areas in need of improvement. For instance, faculty and staff could use the FAQ page more effectively. As one example, rather than cutting and pasting text from the FAQ page, faculty and staff can ensure that the information remains up-to-date and accurate if they instead use URLs, as any updates to the linked content are automatically reflected on the page. Another area that needs improvement is collecting additional information on the effectiveness of the FAQ page. While the page's utilization data is available, its actual usage and effectiveness remain uncertain. According to one librarian interviewee:

All we're getting is like, okay, so, like, 2,000 people have looked at this question. That's great. But like, hopefully, they found the information that they needed. What did they do with that information? Hopefully they were successful in using it … we haven't done any sort of like, formal survey or anything, and we don't capture who's actually using them it's more just like, okay, I can see the little redirects. And I can see we know that, like, a lot of people are using certain questions. But that would be interesting. I would like to know [who], but I don't know how to do that without, like, conducting with an actual formal like, user survey or something.

These examples illustrate how continuous refinement and responsiveness to both qualitative and quantitative feedback are crucial for the ongoing success of the college's interventions. In other words, defining and measuring the success and effectiveness of these programs is an ongoing endeavor that requires diligent attention to various metrics and student experiences.

Conclusion

Navigating college and accessing resources that address holistic needs is crucial for students as it lays the foundation for their academic and personal success. Academic libraries are already one of the primary sources of curricular information, and these libraries often also provide students with a diverse range of non-curricular information about services provided by different campus units and contribute to enhancing students' overall college fluency. Conducting this case study assisted us in developing a deeper understanding of what approaches current adopters of college fluency are employing to improve students' navigational skills and what the future of service provision for other institutions might resemble. We believe that a broad set of audiences will be able to use and benefit from the findings of this project.

To that end, it is important for faculty and staff in different roles to support their own and each other's college fluency to create shared institutional knowledge and a multifaceted support system for students. We look forward to combining these findings with our additional case studies and sharing strategies to help even more institutions expand their ability to support their faculty, staff, and students' college fluency toward student and institutional success.

As we continue into the next phase of the project, we will share a comprehensive list of recommendations from each case study, as well as provide a direct comparison between each institutions' practices.