



Empowering Students to Navigate College

Insights from the College Fluency Initiatives at
Austin Community College

College Fluency Capacity Building Case Study Series

Elmira Jangjou
Melissa Blankstein
jean amaral





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>.



This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (RE-252364-OLS-22). The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Copyright 2025 ITHAKA. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of the license, please see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

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 courses, and graduating. It requires a set of skills known as “college fluency,” or the knowledge and a corresponding set of abilities that enable students and staff to effectively locate and use relevant college services, programs, and resources. College fluency, in short, can help students successfully engage with and self-advocate within the culture and bureaucracy of higher education institutions to achieve their goals.¹ Libraries can play a pivotal role in helping fluency flourish by training their employees, as well as collaborating with 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, such as basic needs insecurity and employee turnover rates, the need for college fluency becomes even more evident.

To further examine and develop effective strategies to foster college fluency, the Borough of Manhattan Community College Library (BMCC) and Ithaca 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 programming aimed at increasing librarians' own college fluency and that of their students. As part of this project, we are conducting case studies to investigate how institutions are currently addressing college fluency and to identify strategies to better enable academic librarians and library workers to equip their students with skills to successfully navigate institutional resources and services.

¹ Melissa Blankstein and Jean Amaral, “College Fluency Capacity Building,” *Ithaca S+R*, 8 December 2022, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/college-fluency-capacity-building/>.

² Christine Wolf-Eisenberg, “The Case for Academic Libraries and “College Fluency”,” *Ithaca S+R*, 11 February 2020, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/the-case-for-academic-libraries-and-college-fluency/>.

³ For more information on this IMLS-funded project [RE-252364-OLS-22] visit: “What Is College Fluency? – College Fluency Capacity Building,” *OpenLab at BMCC*, accessed 26 January 2024, <https://openlab.bmcc.cuny.edu/college-fluency/what-is-college-fluency/>.

The third case study in this series looks at how Austin Community College in Texas has been developing college fluency programs with both their library and non-library faculty and staff. The college libraries play a critical role in promoting college fluency across 11 campuses. Other non-library initiatives at this college that also contribute to supporting students to navigate college underscore just how much of a college-wide effort it takes to promote greater college fluency.

Key Takeaways

- Ensure faculty and staff are well-informed about available non-curricular resources to improve student support. Tools such as internal and targeted information guides, newsletters, and ongoing training sessions equip faculty and staff with the knowledge they need to assist students holistically.
- Offer continuous and accessible non-curricular information through multiple channels such as face-to-face interactions, 24/7 live chat, and information guides to engage students with diverse needs, particularly those in digital-only programs and students who do not feel comfortable seeking help in person.
- Provide students with real-time support and guidance when they reach out, rather than referring them to information available online. Use regularly updated information guides as a resource to supplement direct support and help both students and faculty navigate resources effectively.
- Consider students' life circumstances (e.g., family responsibilities and work schedules) to create a safe, welcoming environment where students with diverse backgrounds feel comfortable seeking help.
- Recognize that while virtual platforms offer flexibility, they also reduce informal staff communication and personalized student support.
- Develop campus-specific approaches to address student information needs outside of standard operating hours to compensate for staffing capacity in areas that require additional support (e.g., registration and advising).

- Pursue knowledge sharing and tighter alignment to improve interdepartmental communication, collaboration, and information sharing to reduce redundancy and enhance student support.
- Foster a culture of collective responsibility towards student-centeredness through administrative leadership, keeping in mind the unique needs and challenges of each campus’s student body.

About the College

Institutional Characteristics

Austin Community College (ACC) was selected as a case study participant based on their non-curricular LibGuides, which we refer to as “information guides” in this report. ACC, a large public institution with a student body of about 70,000, has 11 campuses throughout Central Texas. Each campus offers a variety of classes and provides libraries, learning labs, and computer labs. In fall 2022, ACC had an enrollment of 34,527 undergraduate students (19,750 women and 14,777 men). The majority of students (77 percent) were designated part-time. Forty percent of students were Hispanic, 39 percent White, 8 percent Black or African American, 7 percent Asian, 3 percent two or more races, and 1 percent unknown. One percent of students identified as US nonresidents. Roughly 36 percent of students were enrolled exclusively in distance education, while 25.6 percent were engaged in some form of distance education. Additionally, this college had 2,377 full-time staff members, including 32 full-time librarians.⁴

College Fluency at ACC

Library Services

The libraries at ACC aim to promote college fluency among key stakeholders, including students and library and non-library faculty and

⁴ Demographic information sourced from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2022 data, accessed 4 October 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/institution-profile/222992>.

staff. For instance the library's 24/7 live chat service provides students with real-time support for both academic and non-academic inquiries, ensuring continuous assistance beyond regular hours. To further facilitate student support, two head librarians created and maintain specialized information guides. These guides are tailored for different audiences to meet both curricular and non-curricular needs. The *Student Learning Success Toolbox* provides students with non-curricular support, including guidance on managing work, family, and coursework, alongside information on ACC's student support services, such as childcare and the campus food pantry.⁵ The toolbox also includes essential academic resources, such as citation guides.

For faculty and staff, the *Faculty and the Library Toolbox* also offers resources designed to assist students in navigating both academic and non-academic challenges.⁶ The password-protected *Reference Librarians' LibGuide*, is mandatory for reference librarians to use at the desk and during online chat services. This guide ensures that these librarians, faculty, and staff are well equipped with up-to-date information when assisting students in-person or virtually. Staff development is also supported through training sessions, orientations, an internal wiki, and the Reference Desk Newsletter, which keeps staff informed on college updates and community resources such as free bus passes and food security programs.

Non-Library Services

Beyond library services, non-library initiatives, such as student development courses, play a crucial role in promoting college fluency among students at ACC.⁷ A key example is the EDUC 1300 course; a transferable core course required for first-time students with fewer than 12 semester hours, equips students with personal, academic, and life skills essential for navigating the complexities of higher education. These student development courses also help students gain awareness of the various resources available to support their success, including library services.

⁵ The guide is available at: <https://researchguides.austincc.edu/studenttoolbox>.

⁶ This guide is available at:

<https://researchguides.austincc.edu/c.php?g=435111&p=2966845>.

⁷ More information about these courses is available at:

<https://instruction.austincc.edu/student-development/our-courses/>.

Methods

In order to acquire comprehensive insights into effective models and obstacles in supporting students navigating college, we conducted interviews with 11 library and non-library faculty and staff. These interviews delved into the models initiated and led by the library, challenges and opportunities 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 two librarian liaisons 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. One analyst analyzed the interview transcripts, undertaking a comprehensive open-coding process to create a thematic codebook. Subsequently, she conducted a thematic analysis using NVivo to analyze interview transcripts and report case study findings.

Sample Characteristics

The IRB-approved study involved 11 participants who represented library and non-library roles, including nine library faculty and staff members. Interviewees' work experience at this institution ranged from two to 23 years. Our sample predominantly represents staff members who have been at this community college longer than 10 years, offering insights grounded in years of practice and institutional familiarity.

Fostering College Fluency: “Meet students where they are”

Austin Community College (ACC) has a range of initiatives aimed at fostering college fluency, empowering students to navigate both non-curricular and curricular challenges. Through seamless, accessible support systems, such as the library’s information guides, ACC staff try to meet students where they are and ensure they have the resources needed to succeed. The commitment to inclusivity extends across the college, with specialized programs supporting diverse student populations, including first-generation and Spanish-speaking students. This section highlights how multiple initiatives enable faculty and staff, including librarians, to provide practical guidance and assist students in navigating the college environment.

Provide Students with Continuous, Accessible Support

“ACC tends to meet students where they are, and we tend to offer multiple ways of getting help and support, like chat, Zoom halls.”

Interviewees emphasized the importance of providing students with continuous, accessible support as a crucial mechanism for fostering college fluency and empowering students to navigate the complexities of the institution independently. ACC offers a variety of support channels to address students' diverse needs and schedules. As one librarian shared, "ACC tends to meet students where they are, and we tend to offer multiple ways of getting help and support, like chat, Zoom halls." These varied formats, which also include face-to-face support, live chat services, and information guides, enable students to access resources whenever and wherever they need them.

Library information guides, key tools in this process, aim to break down information into “digestible chunks,” allowing students to navigate and explore the available institutional and external resources more easily. One campus head librarian who maintains these guides explained one of their main goals:

Just to try to answer questions for students [who] are not going to ask us directly... You have to go to the library website in order to find these, but you also have to go to the library website to chat. Some people would rather just try to look it up themselves before they asked for help.

Information guides play a central role in ACC's strategy for continuous support. More than just reference tools, these guides are used to help students develop college fluency through direct interactions that foster independent navigation skills. Faculty librarians use these guides to actively support students by walking them through answers to navigational questions. As one librarian explained, rather than simply referring students to the information guides, the library staff uses them as part of their engagement with students, helping them find specific answers in real time. This strategy not only equips students with the information they need at the moment, but also builds their familiarity with using information guides for future inquiries. Awareness of these guides is further enhanced through handouts, flyers, and email communication, ensuring students and faculty across campus know how to access and benefit from them. Described by a librarian as "living documents," these guides are regularly updated to reflect the latest information on both non-curricular and curricular resources. As one librarian explained, this is especially important given ACC's rapid growth:

We remind [librarians] on a monthly basis, have your library check our links, check our growth, see if we need to add anything, because we know we are in a high-growth area. It needs a lot of attention, so we try to keep our librarians on top of that.

The library's live 24/7 chat service, staffed by a mix of full-time and hourly ACC librarians during operating hours and by librarians from outside ACC when closed is another valuable resource for students who seek help. Interviewees noted that the chat service not only handles curricular questions but also assists students with non-curricular issues, such as navigating overall college life. As one librarian put it, "Half of the questions pertain to libraries and half of them pertain to just ACC in general." Several librarians highlighted the service's unique ability to offer real-time support, even outside of regular operating hours. One librarian praised its responsiveness, comparing it much more favorably to chatbots—often the first point of virtual contact in other college departments' systems. This commitment to human-centered support is seen as critical for engaging

students, particularly "digital-only students," who may rely heavily on remote assistance. One non-librarian interviewee described the library's chat service as "phenomenal," emphasizing its availability during late-night hours and weekends, when other in-person support services are typically inaccessible.

In addition to the library's offerings, ACC's EDUC Development courses play a vital role in promoting college fluency. These mandatory courses for all first-time ACC students with fewer than 12 credit hours are designed to support college navigation by introducing them to the full range of available resources in their first semester. One interviewee involved in course development referred to EDUC courses as "prime Navigator courses," explaining that they include activities like a resource scavenger hunt, where students visit various departments on campus. This ensures that students not only learn about available services but also physically familiarize themselves with different college spaces. Moreover, bringing faculty and staff from different departments into the classroom has proven an effective strategy for addressing the information gap about available support systems.

Campus operations staff are deeply engaged in support students' day-to-day curricular and non-curricular needs.

One of the interviewees who is affiliated with ACC's campus operations department underscored how their efforts further reflect the importance of human interaction in fostering college fluency. Described by this interviewee as "way-finders," these staff members actively assist students in navigating the physical and social environment of the college and provide them with a safe environment on campus. As the interviewee described, "We can tell you where you can study, we can tell you where you can hang out and play a guitar. We can tell you where not to skateboard. We can tell you what's available." Whether it is making sure the facilities are running and well maintained, helping students locate classrooms, providing schedules, or offering guidance on where to find basic need resources, study spaces, or student life activities, campus operations staff are deeply engaged in supporting students' day-to-day curricular and non-curricular needs.

Enhance Faculty and Staff College Fluency to Improve Student Support

“We always say, you know, librarians never really say no; we just say, let me find out for you, and we will.”

The interviewees expressed a high level of confidence in their ability to help students navigate the available resources at ACC. Many attributed this confidence to their long-term experience in higher education. As one librarian highlighted, “We always say, you know, librarians never really say no; we just say, let me find out for you, and we will.” However, a few interviewees noted wavering confidence in their colleague’s college fluency, with one commenting,

I would like to think that every department is as proactive as the student development department, but, I mean, there are exceptions to all rules. I know that there's going to be some that are not as comfortable referring students. I know that some people focus only on their curriculum and what's happening in their classroom versus the outside of the classroom part of the student.

One of the primary tools to enhance college fluency and help faculty and staff stay informed about available resources are information guides. More specifically, a *Reference Librarian LibGuide* was created to consolidate the vast amount of resource information. As one head librarian explained, “We wanted it all in one place, where librarians could find it. ... It’s to empower them to be able to help the students that come along.” This tool functions as a central repository for information on all 11 campuses, with a dedicated page for each one. The intention behind creating this tool and requiring librarians to have it open while working with the live chat service or at the reference desk was to streamline support processes and equip all librarians, including those who work part-time, with the necessary information to help students effectively.

Beyond information guides, the library has implemented several other resources, such as an internal wiki and the *Reference Desk Newsletter*, to keep library faculty and staff, especially part-time and hourly librarians, informed. These resources are essential for bridging gaps in communication between full-time and hourly staff, ensuring everyone remains up to date with available resources. The *Reference Desk Newsletter*, for instance, includes a section on community resources that highlights services such as bus passes, food insecurity support, and childcare options. This empowers library staff to respond knowledgeably to

students' inquiries about both curricular and non-curricular needs, as one head librarian explained:

There's just a wealth of resources that ACC provides, and this is my way of bringing it to their attention. So, when they're chatting with the student, and the student happens to mention a need, or comes out and asks about that, they're aware and they know where they can go find the information for the students.

“We want to be a connector for the student, so that the students can connect to the resources that they need.”

Training and orientations for new library staff are also integral to preparing them for their roles. An interviewee explained their necessity: “We don't want to be an obstacle for the student. We want to be a connector for the student, so that the students can connect to the resources that they need.” New hires are introduced to essential resources through an orientation program, which includes the internal wiki and a password-protected information guide. One librarian stressed the importance of continuous training: “It's constantly retraining people and having reminders for them.”

Faculty also play a pivotal role in connecting students to available resources, particularly since they spend the most time directly with students. To support this, ACC's faculty development department actively works to ensure faculty are aware of the range of resources available to students. One of the interviewees explained, “When faculty are in the classroom and a student expresses, 'Oh, I couldn't get to class, my car broke down,' they know immediately where to direct that student for resources.”

The collaboration between the faculty development department and librarians also helps to keep faculty informed about both academic and non-curricular resources. For instance, the Faculty and the Library Toolbox is a great resource in this regard. Information guides usually accompany every module that the faculty development department uses to inform faculty. Moreover, librarians often provide presentations during faculty development modules, ensuring that faculty understand the services available through the library. This collaborative effort strengthens the role of faculty in fostering college fluency among students by providing them with direct access to essential resource knowledge.

Be Inclusive

ACC staff and faculty make multiple efforts to provide inclusive support to students from a variety of backgrounds. The college's open enrollment policy brings in a diverse group of students, representing a wide range of ages, racial backgrounds, and life experiences. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution, ACC serves a significant number of Hispanic students who come from a range of educational backgrounds. As one interviewee highlighted, some students have been out of school for many years and need basic technological assistance, while others have recently graduated from rigorous high schools. To accommodate this diversity, the college focuses on providing resources and guidance that help all students navigate the college environment, regardless of their prior experiences. Interviewees described the centralized library resources and information guides as important tools in simplifying the process of locating essential information and orienting students new to college life.

Other interviewees stressed the importance of considering students' backgrounds when providing support. According to a non-librarian interviewee, these considerations include “rephrasing, using their language, paraphrasing so that I can explain it in multiple ways.” This interviewee added disability into these considerations and indicated, “if they're ... coming in with a learning disability, are they neurodivergent? Like, I mean, it's just constantly looking at all of it to see where, to soften the edges for them to make things more easily digestible.”

Support for Spanish-speaking students and their families is another area where ACC demonstrates its commitment to inclusivity. For instance, the Latin American Cultural Center offers Hispanic students with community-building opportunities, which, as one librarian noted, can promote their college fluency: “If you can find your people, then you can try to navigate this better.” Another initiative involves a program for parenting students, which provides childcare and services for students with young children, many of whom are Spanish speakers with varying levels of English proficiency. One librarian described how librarians conducted a survey of Spanish-language materials in the library which resulted in the purchase of a variety of resources covering essential topics like finance, child development, politics, and government to further support these students. The library also bought some children's books in Spanish, “because if people are going to be taking care of their children on our campus, it would be nice to have some Spanish language children's books that they

could come use and read to the children.” These efforts are vital for ensuring that students, regardless of language barriers, can access resources that support both their academic and life goals.

Whether through targeted resources, inclusive communication strategies, or family-centered programs, the college’s initiatives help students from diverse backgrounds navigate the complexities of higher education more effectively.

ACC’s Parent and Family Engagement initiative,⁸ a program for first-generation families, further demonstrates a holistic approach to supporting students. The college recognizes that many first-generation students and their families face a “literacy gap” when it comes to understanding the language and processes of higher education. To address this, ACC launched “a program designed to help close the gap on behalf of the families, so that they can then help students understand how to navigate the bureaucracy better.” The program’s website, which also has options in Spanish, has guides on college terms. They also offer workshops for families and students on navigating college and resources, such as one called “How College Works.” According to an interviewee affiliated with these workshops, “it’s all about just explaining college, like, college knowledge is no dumb question.” Therefore, the goal is to “close the knowledge gap for first-generation families, so that [these families] can then close it even more so for their students.” The workshops are offered both in person and virtually in various times during the school year to accommodate families’ complex lives:

The way a community college works ... a lot of our families can't take off an entire day of work to come to orientation. They may not be able to [and] their student may not be starting the traditional 16-week semester. We have a revolving door. They can come and join any time, so we have parents coming any time. So, our workshops represent that ... anytime you need the knowledge ... we're here to serve.

These varied efforts by ACC faculty and staff demonstrate a comprehensive approach to supporting students holistically and inclusively. Whether through targeted resources, inclusive communication strategies, or family-centered programs, the college’s initiatives help students from diverse backgrounds navigate the complexities of higher education more effectively.

⁸ For more information visit: <https://www.austincc.edu/parents-families/>

Barriers to Success: “Everybody's very siloed”

At ACC, faculty and staff face several barriers in promoting college fluency and providing holistic support to students. While many librarians find information guides flexible and user-friendly, a few noted specific challenges such as occasional errors, limits on who can edit the guides, and the time and effort required to learn how to use them—especially for hourly staff and adjunct faculty. In addition to these challenges, our interviews revealed three major barriers to fostering college fluency overall: working in silos, struggling with balancing virtual and physical presence, and limited capacity to better support students. These interconnected challenges contribute to multiple inefficiencies, such as communication breakdowns between departments, difficulties in adapting to hybrid educational models, and insufficient resources to support the diverse needs of students.

Working in Silos

Working in silos—a challenge many ACC faculty and staff members face—often impedes collaboration and hampers efforts to effectively support students. A number of interviewees expressed concerns about how silos limit communication and coordination among different departments, leading to duplicated efforts and inefficiencies. One library leader underscored this issue: “I feel like each department knows what their department does really well, but ... everybody's very siloed.” This segmentation often results in duplicative work, where, as this interviewee noted, “two offices are working on something similar, but they're not connecting to each other.”

Librarians, in particular, frequently identified these overlaps and uncovered resources being developed independently across multiple departments. As one librarian described, siloing and duplicated services can impede librarians’ efforts to connect students to appropriate support:

That makes it more difficult for a department like ours to point students to the right place, because sometimes it's, “oh, well, wait

a minute. ... there'[re] three separate departments that operate under three separate umbrellas for you to try to make sense of as a student.” And so, yeah, the siloing, I would think to me, is very difficult, that's our biggest challenge.

Additionally, the lack of communication between departments prevents recognition of any changes and contributions made by other departments. For instance, one librarian explained that without being informed of procedural or operational changes made by different departments, it becomes challenging to assist students with specific inquiries: “They [another department] change how they do things all the time, and they don't necessarily let anybody know that their system has changed, so it would be a mistake for me to try to help the student.” Another librarian shared that while the library consistently seeks opportunities for collaboration, other departments often are not aware of the services the library provides: “Sometimes people work in silos and things just, great things are happening, but I don't think it's sometimes well-coordinated... sometimes they don't even realize what we do.” The challenge is particularly evident with faculty: “They just are in their own little world and it's really hard to get them to respond to our open houses or our emails.”

Some interviewees also described a disconnect between departments and student and academic affairs. One librarian pointed out that student development groups, while committed to meeting students' diverse needs, are not connected to the resources provided by student affairs, “because they're on the instructional side of the house, they're similar to [the library].” This, in turn, limits the ability of student-facing departments to offer comprehensive support to students, as they lack access to the full range of available services. A non-librarian interviewee, who believes there is room for more collaboration between student and academic affairs, indicated:

I really don't think we're tapping into the faculty members enough. There are some faculty members that are really good at it, just really good, but I think that we need to do more brainstorming across departments on how are all of these department faculty members getting [non-curricular] resources out there to their students. ... And nowadays, faculty are just being called on ..., to help find housing, to help find transportation. It's a much bigger role than it was 23 years ago when I came on board, and I had to worry about—I didn't even know what student affairs was. ... There

needs to be more collaboration between student affairs and the instructional side... to learn how our faculty [are] getting these resources out there and still covering all of the curriculum and the content that they need to cover, you know, in their set, 50 minutes of class time, or whatever. So, to me, that's the biggest collaboration that needs to happen is between student affairs and instruction and kind of merging what they have to offer in getting it into the classrooms.

Several interviewees attributed the challenges of siloing to ACC's large size and multiple campuses which exacerbate the difficulties of communication and coordination. One interviewee reflected, "Sometimes it's hard to remember that it is supposed to be just one college... someone at Riverside has no idea what's going on, and same for them." This lack of cohesion across campuses further complicates efforts to unify services and support structures. Finally, a non-librarian interviewee underscored how these silos directly impact student success, "slow[ing] down the success of students" because of poor communication between offices about changes in responsibilities and services. The lack of clarity around which departments are responsible for particular services leaves students—and the staff trying to support them—struggling to navigate administrative structures.

Disconnect Between Virtual and Physical Presence

Interviewees also described the ongoing challenge of navigating the interplay between physical and digital modalities of the college experience. Interviewees frequently spoke about the "bifurcated" nature of higher education, where both physical campuses and virtual platforms coexist, each offering distinct advantages but also posing difficulties for staff and students alike. One librarian described how physical campus interactions often foster valuable informal communication among faculty and staff. This personal interaction and informal communication—happening in the "in-between moments" rather than structured meetings—played a crucial role in keeping staff informed about changes, such as student population shifts and resource availability. However, such interactions were notably absent in virtual settings, such as Zoom meetings.

Moreover, the virtual experience, while offering flexibility, presented challenges in ensuring students received adequate support. Interviewees highlighted that virtual chat services, though an accessible way to encounter “digital-only” students, could sometimes leave students without the personalized assistance they might need. One librarian described the challenge of guiding students through virtual channels, expressing concern about whether students were able to navigate the resources they were referred to, given the lack of face-to-face interaction. Another interviewee also emphasized that ACC’s optional online orientation, a form of orientation that became more prevalent during the pandemic, failed to adequately prepare students for the college experience. The lack of a comprehensive, in-person orientation was a missed opportunity to equip students with essential knowledge about available resources prior to the start of their academic journey. As one interviewee noted, a “solid orientation” could help students better engage with resources such as the library early on for timely support.

Another recurrent theme was the difficulty students faced in obtaining support, especially from services that were automated or only available online. The library’s 24/7 chat staffed by real individuals was frequently praised, while automated chat services offered by other departments were criticized for failing to provide the personalized assistance that many students and even faculty and staff needed. A non-librarian interviewee described how “things are becoming very automated, like, hey, click here to get help, but it's difficult to find just like an individual.” Another interviewee noted that some online departmental services could become overwhelming for students less familiar with digital platforms:

[Students] can go online. So, but I will tell you that, for our first-time students online is pretty overwhelming unless you're just totally techno, you know, a techno kid, and you're used to just doing everything online, but if you're like, nontraditional like me, you want to see a person.

Interviewees also pointed out logistical challenges such as inconsistent staff presence in offices and certain departments switching to Zoom-based services during specific days of the week and/or times of day. For many students, especially those without reliable transportation, this posed significant barriers to accessing in-person services. According to an interviewee,

As institutions continue to adapt to hybrid models of education, finding ways to integrate these elements effectively will be crucial for supporting all students.

If they show up here on a Friday afternoon, after 12 o'clock, student services is closed. They're told to go home and get on this Zoom. Or they are told to schedule an appointment on another campus or to go to another campus. For some families, that's a very difficult thing. Because, you know, we're 17 miles to the next campus. You have to go into Austin, so if they don't have transportation, they don't have fuel money. There'[re] all kinds of reasons why it would be not a good thing for them to have to go to another campus. That's the biggest problem that I see is that not all services are offered at all times when the college is open.

In sum, the challenge of balancing virtual and in-person education is multifaceted, involving not only technological solutions but also the preservation of personalized, human interactions that many students and staff rely on. As institutions continue to adapt to hybrid models of education, finding ways to integrate these elements effectively will be crucial for supporting all students.

Limited Capacity to Better Support Students

Interviewees highlighted several capacity-related challenges that hinder their ability to fully support students. These range from limitations in staffing to the uneven distribution of services across campuses. Interviewees also described the difficulty in keeping up with staff changes, due to promotions and turnovers, and how these types of changes can result in the loss of established relationships. As one librarian put it: "We make a really good connection, really good relationship... and then that person either gets promoted or they leave the college. And so, then it's, you know, you're starting all over again." Similarly, interviewees felt that they also do not have the capacity to keep up with the overwhelming number of new programs and initiatives being introduced, many of which have short timelines.

The institution's multi-campus structure adds another layer of complexity to these capacity issues. Interviewees noted that the lack of Welcome Centers at some campuses results in uneven service delivery. Students at campuses without Welcome Centers face additional burdens in accessing support, often having to travel long distances to receive services available at more central locations. As one interviewee observed,

There's not exactly representation of each campus's needs in a formal way, it doesn't feel like. So, I think a lot of things kind of get very centralized. A lot of the problems get kind of centralized, which is not sometimes helpful, because if all the students are told that they have to go to one campus to get all these resources, it's not very equitable. Especially if where they live is 30 minutes to an hour away, and I do think that does happen a lot. So ... I do feel like each campus needs to work together as one college, but also with understanding that they are serving the population in smaller areas.

The limited hours of operation of many student services further strain the capacity of the library and other departments with extended hours. Librarians frequently encounter students seeking help with issues beyond the scope of library services, such as financial aid or advising, during times when other departments are closed (e.g., during inter-session breaks). As one librarian explained, this is particularly difficult for students who are balancing school with other obligations:

Only about 20 percent of our students are full time. But yet, most of our student services are only like 8 to 5 Monday through Friday. And so, we've got 80 percent of our students, more or less, who are more than likely not available during the 8 to 5 time period. Or at least not every day. And so, it just makes it very, very difficult for those of us who are open later. And so, the problem, then, of course, becomes that you become the counselor, advisor, financial aid person for all these, you know, you're trying to help them and point them to the right resources.

Nearly all interviewees highlighted that registering for classes was one of the most significant college fluency challenges for students. Many students turn to the library for help navigating the registration process, particularly when they encounter problems on their own. Interviewees described students' frustration with registration, "because there is no clear 'what to do first,' because there are all these questions that have to be asked first." The process is overwhelming, especially because students are expected to complete the registration process independently: "Advisors also no longer register students... They just don't have the time." The shortage of advisors further exacerbates these challenges; interviewees described how this leads to students often waiting for long periods to receive guidance, contributing to delays in their academic

progress. Moreover, when advisors leave or are promoted to supervisory roles, students are forced to start over with new advisors, disrupting continuity.

Interviewees also expressed concern over instances where students are bounced between departments due to the lack of available staff. An interviewee shared, “sometimes what they are told in the Welcome Center is, ‘Sorry, we have no time for you today. We [have to] make you an appointment for a different day.’” This lack of capacity to address students' needs in a timely manner contributes to student frustration and can negatively impact their academic success.

There are also notable challenges in ensuring that instructional faculty, particularly adjunct faculty, stay informed about available resources, such as information guides. A faculty member noted: “I think there's different levels of bureaucracy and different levels of college fluency, and different levels of to what extent the faculty share those resources with their students.” The interviewee added, “probably 50 percent of our adjuncts didn't know about [the Faculty and the Library Toolbox] that the library services offered.” To address this, this faculty member suggested that department chairs should play a more proactive role in bringing this information to faculty meetings and ensuring adjuncts have access to the information sources.

Understanding the Path to Success: “We hear our students and the questions they’re asking”

At ACC, fostering college fluency involves a holistic approach to student success that emphasizes addressing non-curricular needs like food, childcare, and transportation.

At ACC, fostering college fluency involves a holistic approach to student success that emphasizes addressing non-curricular needs like food, childcare, and transportation. Staff, including librarians, aim to build trusting relationships with students, while new leadership has sparked efforts to break down departmental silos, encouraging greater collaboration and shared responsibility. Several cross-campus partnerships, such as joint efforts between libraries and student services, contribute to improving access to resources and fostering deeper student engagement. The college is also working toward defining success through both quantitative and qualitative measures to ensure services meet their intended goals.

Holistic Student Support

The interviewees described how they provide holistic support to students by addressing their non-curricular needs and accommodating their life circumstances. A recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of building trust and identifying and responding to student needs. A librarian shared how spending time at the reference desk fosters direct connections with students, which allows the library to remain responsive to students' evolving needs: “We like that connection. We want to keep that interaction with students... we hear our students and the questions they’re asking.” This face-to-face interaction helps staff stay attuned to what students need and allows them to update resources, like information guides, based on real-time feedback. Another librarian spoke to the importance of personally walking students to resources as a way to build trust and ease anxiety, demonstrating a commitment to going the extra mile to support students through potentially overwhelming processes. These personalized approaches help create a welcoming environment

where they feel safe to seek help, as one non-librarian staff member explained:

Whether it's a faculty member or student affairs individual, or a librarian, they have to trust them enough to be able to be vulnerable to express that they have a need, right? ... It takes a lot for that student to be vulnerable and to trust the person they're with to share, like, I've dropped the ball and I need help and then for that person, whoever they decide to share that with, they need to be armed and ready at that moment in time with the information on how to help them, because if they don't have it at that moment in time the student might be like, 'Oh, forget it,' and never come back and then we never bring it up again.

The interviewees also acknowledged the importance of considering students' lives beyond the classroom, recognizing that many students face complex life circumstances that may hinder their academic success. A holistic understanding of student needs is central to the support offered, as staff endeavor to connect students with appropriate resources. For instance, one librarian highlighted their efforts to offer sessions on money management, while other staff pointed to the integration of non-curricular support into the curriculum, such as teaching Maslow's hierarchy of needs through their student development courses.⁹ One of the interviewees underscored the importance of faculty and staff being aware of non-curricular needs and helping students to access support:

I think that comfort that students get from their professor or just someone who represents the college, to just sit there with them to do it, I think brings them a sense of calmness and a sense of connection that, like, hey, hey, look, my professor really cares about me just being able to get a bus pass.

⁹ Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50 (4): 430-437.

ACC offers food pantries, free bus passes, and other forms of basic needs support, and librarians are at the forefront to help disseminate information about these services.

A consistent theme throughout the interviews was the range of basic needs resources available at the college, with staff actively working to address issues such as food insecurity, transportation, and childcare. ACC offers food pantries, free bus passes, and other forms of basic needs support, and librarians are at the forefront to help disseminate information about these services through tools such as information guides and relevant newsletters.

One librarian explained the importance of being prepared for all kinds of student needs, whether related to hunger, childcare, or even academic supplies: “Whenever that comes up, if we don’t already have a plan and a procedure about it, we will create one right then, so that we’re able to jump in and get these people what they need.” This proactive approach is further demonstrated by the establishment of the library’s supply pantries, which have expanded to all campuses. These pantries provide students with essential school supplies, reducing the stress and anxiety that may arise from the lack of access to basic items like ScanTrons or colored pencils. Another interviewee also noted how librarians’ various efforts to support students holistically, such as providing free feminine hygiene products, is the evidence of librarians being “above and beyond advocates for students.” Moreover, one of the librarians mentioned their donations to support students with food insecurity:

All of us here at the campus, we chip in money to our student life department, because we have food insecurities in our town. So we have kids here that are hungry, and they need to eat. So, we try to make sure that there's food downstairs available for them, because who can sit through a class on an empty stomach? We do what we can to help our kids in any form and fashion.

Recognizing that students have diverse needs, interviewees discussed the importance of adapting services to accommodate students’ preferences and life circumstances. For instance, short informational videos have been incorporated into their Student Learning Success Toolbox, as librarians noticed that students prefer watching videos over reading written descriptions. This adaptation is part of a broader effort to meet students where they are, using the formats and platforms that resonate most with them. This flexibility extends to course offerings as well: the Student Development department has updated the format of its courses based on student feedback, offering asynchronous versions of courses to accommodate students’ schedules. This responsiveness reflects a deep

understanding of the demands placed on students, many of whom juggle work, family responsibilities, and academic commitments.

Moreover, interdepartmental efforts between campus operations and the library have focused on creating a safe environment that enhances students' ability to access the resources they need to succeed. For example, one campus operations staff member highlighted "join[ing] forces with the library" to extend their hours, recognizing the unique challenges faced by student schedules in their rural community:

Our campus was the only one that was closing at five pm. In a rural community that is not good, because people don't get into our town until like six o'clock. So, we really fought to be open until eight o'clock, like all the other libraries in the district... our role would be more of the tools and the environment that they need for success.

Administrative Support for Collective Responsibility

Most interviewees are hopeful about the recent administrative support their college is providing, particularly in fostering a collective responsibility for supporting students. This optimism is mainly linked to the leadership of the new chancellor, whose emphasis on collaboration and student-centeredness has initiated cultural shifts within the institution. While many interviewees noted the challenges of siloing among departments, they expressed excitement about the potential for increased collaboration under new leadership. One librarian highlighted the significance of these changes: "We are looking at a lot of changes coming within our structure and with collaborating with other departments. That was not an easy thing to do before, and now we can, and we're really looking forward to that."

The interviewees also emphasized the chancellor's commitment to student-centered goals. One librarian shared their excitement about the chancellor's target of achieving a "70 percent [degree] completion rate within five years," acknowledging the importance of college fluency in achieving this goal: "One of the first things we have to do is provide those resources in a way that's actually accessible for all of our students. We're all kind of working towards that same goal right now." This shift towards collective responsibility involves staff working collaboratively towards these shared objectives, which represents a significant cultural shift at

ACC. According to the interviewee, the chancellor has encouraged a "ground-up approach" in which frontline staff—those who engage with students daily—will inform leadership about the needs and changes required to enhance student success:

Our current chancellor has already promised to kind of flatten our bureaucracy and flatten the structure, because he sees it as being a very top-down approach, which, at the end result is those people every day are not meeting with the students. They're not interacting with our students. So, they don't have an idea of what students need other than the surveys that we do. But not everything is necessarily found through surveys.

However, not all interviewees felt fully supported by their administration. One non-librarian interviewee expressed frustration over leadership's lack of responsiveness to specific campus needs, noting that "the challenges that we encounter are not from the community or not from the students or staff and faculty. It's actually from the administration that doesn't understand that each campus has a different culture and demographic." This statement highlights the necessity of fostering effective communication strategies between the leadership and other employees, who observe student needs first hand, and further emphasizing the importance of a ground-up approach to support students more effectively.

Collaborative Efforts

Librarians' efforts to align their work with broader student services offered by the institution highlight the flexibility and responsiveness of library staff in adapting to the evolving needs of the student body.

While siloing is a significant challenge at ACC, several collaborative efforts among departments demonstrate the potential for cross-campus partnerships to support student success. For instance, librarians talked about taking proactive steps to engage with other areas of the college, including student services. One librarian described how they are regularly asked to contribute to workshops on various student services topics such as money management, study skills, and childcare: "We do get involved because they ask us to come and help and share what resources we have on those topics." This collaboration underscores the role of librarians in facilitating students' overall success, even when some topics extend beyond strictly academic content. Librarians' efforts to align their work with broader student services offered by the institution highlight the flexibility and responsiveness of library staff in adapting to the evolving needs of the student body.

Librarians at ACC are also involved in broader institutional initiatives, such as the college's Transform Ed project, which focuses on reimagining the future of teaching and learning. This cross-departmental collaboration illustrates how librarian expertise can extend beyond traditional library roles. By proactively conducting research to inform the Transform Ed initiative, librarians contribute to college-wide discussions on topics such as artificial intelligence (AI) in education, tailoring their work to the specific needs of different academic disciplines. A librarian explained how they use library resources like information guides to consolidate research findings and share best practices across departments, bridging the knowledge gap between various areas of the institution:

We ... proactively did research for, on behalf of the Transform Ed groups that we're working across all of our curriculum, to put together kind of the best practices and different standards and different areas. There are some areas, of course, where looking at the future of teaching and learning and using AI and technology is very much, it's already something being discussed. And then, you have other workforce areas, like welding, for instance, where they're like, "Yeah, we're still gonna need to weld. So, it's not such a big thing." ... One of the things our librarians were able to do through those LibGuides was to demonstrate how there's such a difference in the literature. So, faculty in English have been involved in AI and what that means for them for years, whereas faculty in other areas, are not so much.

It is important to note that collaboration appears to be more successful in smaller campus environments, where staff are more familiar with each other and can build stronger interpersonal connections. When we asked how they receive information about resources on campus, one of the librarians said: "We're all in the same building. So, we see each other a lot. So, you get to know everyone in the building pretty well and what they do." Another librarian explained how the size of their campus facilitated better communication among departments, particularly during peak times such as the first week of classes and highlighted the value of personalized support:

I think that, especially at this campus, we have pretty good communication with the other departments. And so, a lot of times, especially the first week of classes and stuff when students are having trouble navigating, I think there's really good

communication between the different departments, and just in the library in general to be prepared that students are going to need a little bit of help, and we really do encourage taking the students to the person that they need to talk to. And it's a pretty small campus, so it's really easy to do, but it feels like the students really appreciate that.

Despite the prevailing challenge of working in silos, these examples highlight how collaborative efforts at ACC, both formal and informal, are making a positive impact on student support services. While larger campuses may struggle with building these connections, smaller campuses can provide a model for how strong communication and personal relationships between departments can foster a more seamless student experience. As new leadership continues to prioritize collaboration, there is potential for these successful practices to be scaled across the institution.

Defining and Measuring Success

The interviewees described the multiple approaches they take to understand and measure the success of their services and programs. Success across these initiatives is measured through a combination of quantitative metrics, qualitative feedback, and the ability of these services to meet the needs of specific target audiences, such as first-generation families and students in need of guidance in navigating college systems. For example, the success of information guides is often viewed in terms of their effectiveness as tools for organizing information, which enables librarians to quickly respond to student inquiries. Usage metrics also play a central role in measuring the success of these information guides—librarians track clicks and notice patterns of increased usage when the resource is advertised, updated, or shared by faculty members. One librarian explained, "we can tell that the students are actively using those links... whenever we update major sections of things like the Student Success Toolbox... we see, 'Oh, there's a little spike in the use of that particular LibGuide.'" This demonstrates that success is also gauged by the extent to which students are aware of resources and independently utilize them.

Another significant measure of success is the informal positive feedback received from faculty and librarians. One interviewee highlighted how feedback on the *Reference Desk Newsletter* signals success: "I get a lot of feedback from librarians about that, they appreciate the information and how it's nice... they're all stored in a Google folder so that you can go look at past issues." This qualitative feedback complements usage statistics, offering a broader understanding of the impact of these services.

In the context of the library's role in the EDUC 1300 course, success is defined by the personal connections between students and librarians, as well as the ways in which the course facilitates student navigation of college resources. One librarian explained, "I think I would define success... is to find some sort of comfort in navigation in terms of where everything is." According to this interviewee, the high attendance rates for EDUC 1300 further illustrate its success, especially in embedding information literacy within a broader student success framework.

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 one more case study focused on a college where the library is interested in providing non-curricular information support to their students but does not presently have

formalized roles or models in place. We will share strategies to help even more institutions expand their ability to support their faculty, staff, and students' college fluency toward student and institutional success.