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## Student Readiness of Colleges: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

Using the framework of belonging, this qualitative study explores how one upper Midwestern college engages in student-readiness and explores the disconnects that create barriers to student-readiness. The study investigates 'student readiness' broadly through the literature and more specifically by narrowing efforts to a detailed examination of one college by conducting interviews, observations, and collecting artifacts. The results of the study revealed that the college addressed student readiness differently depending on perspectives of staff/faculty, administration, and students. Three themes emerged after coding and examination of the data: supports, community and disconnect.

**Keywords:** student readiness, post-secondary, perspectives, disconnect, support, community

## Introduction

Colleges often focus on the concept of preparing students for college, or making them 'college ready.' In this case study (Yin, 2018) we take the opposite perspective, asking what colleges do to make themselves 'student ready,' including meeting the needs of students academically, social-emotionally, and financially. These supports are critical for increasing a student's sense of well-being and belonging on campus, which increases persistence towards academic goals and

matriculation. The study explores how one college located in a large suburb of an industrial city in a Midwestern state works to support students and the disconnects that create barriers to being 'student ready.' We conclude by offering recommendations for increasing student supports, increasing a sense of belonging, building community, and reducing disconnects.

## Literature Review

The field of education has seen an increased focus on ensuring that students are college and career ready (Conley, 2014). Conley (2008, 2010, 2013, 2014) has written extensively on college and career readiness, and asserts that being college ready means ensuring students took rigorous courses and met specific metrics on standardized tests. Conley (2008) identified analysis, interpretation, precision and accuracy, problem solving, and reasoning as essential cognitive and metacognitive skills for college students. He noted that while writing is a skill closely associated with college success, students must have knowledge of the big ideas of each content area. Additionally, students must have



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academic self-management behavior, including time management, effective study skills, and persistence (Conley, 2014). Lastly, contextual skills such as how to navigate college choice, admissions, and financial aid and knowledge are necessary to navigate institutional systems during the first year.

The historic and recent framing of college and career readiness focuses on the characteristics and experiences of students rather than on the role of colleges supporting and including students. The literature review examines academic, social-emotional, and financial supports related to increased student sense of well-being and belonging on campus.

Framing this discussion are the ideas of the purpose of education, readiness, and belonging. In this discussion, the term “faculty” means the academic staff (teachers, instructors, professors, lecturers) of a higher education institution, while staff refers to all non-academic staff that may provide services other than teaching to students.

Making colleges student ready requires colleges cultivate a sense of belonging as a critical context for helping students navigate the social, academic, and cultural changes they experience. bell hooks (2009) described belonging as a connectedness to a place that resonates with your own history and cultural values. For a college to promote this sense of belonging, it needs to cultivate a sense of identity that students can connect with that reflects shared values and beliefs. hooks (2009) suggested that these values are

embedded in the shared history, rituals, and stories about the community and become part of the place.

“College readiness” typically focuses on academic rigor, executive functioning, and adequate financial resources (Tierney & Duncheon, 2015). For students, readiness includes additional factors such as parental support, emotional intelligence, and financial management. It is also important to recognize that the college years are when students are developing their own identity, and this identity is shaped and connected to their communities. Being a student-ready college requires “defining success as student learning” (McNair et al., 2016, p. 89) and providing academic and financial supports, but also the social-emotional supports students need to feel they belong on campus and to persist.

An important component of being student-ready is fostering a sense of belonging on campus. Research findings show how feelings of academic and social belonging, as well as commitment to the college and intention to obtain a college degree, drive student persistence (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Hausmann, et al. (2007) systematically studied students’ sense of belonging and student persistence, finding that race, gender, SAT scores, or financial difficulty were not related to sense of belonging, but peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty, and peer support were related. Students who reported more academic integration experienced an increase in sense of belonging over time (Hausmann et

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al., 2007). A sense of belonging is dependent on the integration of social and academic experiences, which is promoted through supports provided to students.

### Academic Supports

Academic supports have variously been defined as advising, tutoring, mentoring, and interaction with faculty (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garcia, 2019; Hausman et al., 2007; Jacobson, 2020; Moreno, 2019; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Tinto, 2003). Opportunities to discuss, work with, and engage in learning with peers in the classroom (Baleria, 2019; Brewer et al., 2018; Elffers, 2012; Engle & Tinto, 2008) and flexibility with assignments and due dates (Schademan & Thompson, 2016) have also been defined as academic supports. Learning communities have also been identified as a form of academic support (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These academic supports are provided through both formal structures, such as academic advising and faculty office hours, and informal structures such as peer relationships in class and programs of study.

### Social-Emotional Supports

Social-emotional supports play a significant role in students' sense of well-being and belonging on campus. Social-emotional supports include, but are not limited to counseling services (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garcia et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019; Turkpour & Mehdinezhed, 2016), opportunities for peer interaction on campus (Baleria, 2019; Brooms, 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2003), and belonging to student clubs and organizations

(Brooms, 2018; Elliot et al., 2016; Garcia et al. 2019). Participation in extracurricular activities can be a central part of students' identity development as members of the school community. Research indicates that organizations, philosophies, and practices that supported student identities contribute to a sense of well-being and belonging (Brooms, 2018; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009), as do the creation of a campus community (Baleria, 2019; Elffers et al., 2012; Elliot et al., 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2003). It is important for college students to feel they belong to a community and are supported academically, socially, and emotionally to identify with the college and persist until graduation.

### Financial Supports

Financial supports for students have long been viewed as providing funding for college, particularly for low-income or first-generation college students, in the form of loans, scholarships, work-study, or grants. Research suggests that students are more likely to enroll in and successfully complete college if they have knowledge of college systems, specifically knowledge about financial aid (Cunningham, et al., 2007; De La Rosa, 2006; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn et al., 2003; Perna, 2006). Colleges must be ready to provide students with information about the admissions process and financial aid. While this information is the most critical aspect of college knowledge (Conley, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McNair et al., 2016; Moreno, 2019; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009), other researchers have identified additional financial supports.

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McNair et al. (2016) argued that financial support for students needs to go beyond paying for tuition and should also include transportation, childcare, legal services, tax preparation services, nutrition services, and health services. Savitz-Romer et al. (2009) also argued for full-service higher education institutions that provide this broader range of financial services.

### Disconnects

While colleges offer many services to support students, it is clear that there are challenges to providing and accessing the identified supports. Colleges may not be organizationally or culturally ready due to the belief that students should be college ready (McNair et al., 2016), and college faculty and students may have different concepts of support and responsibility (Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Zerquera et al., 2018). Faculty behavior played a significant role in student learning, with more experienced and full-time faculty engaging in practices most productive for student learning than part-time or less experienced faculty (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019). Students may not have knowledge of available supports or may not be willing to use provided supports (Garcia et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

As research has shifted from focusing on college-readiness to student-readiness, it has indicated that colleges should be prepared to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students. Doing so increases a student's

sense of belonging and well-being, allowing students to identify with the college and persist until graduation. Using the framework of belonging, this case study explores how one Midwestern college engages in student-readiness and explores the disconnects that create barriers to student-readiness.

### Methodology

The faculty, staff, administration, and students of Midwest College were the focus of this research. Midwest College was selected as the research site because it reflects the growing population of students at community colleges and regional institutions. The research team consisted of five graduate students and one faculty member from the University of Michigan-Dearborn College of Education and Health and Human Services.

### Case setting

The college is located in a large suburb of a major midwestern city, which is predominantly African American, while the suburb is predominantly White. The local community has a large immigrant population with a high percentage of the college age population speaking English as a second language. The student population of 12,333 students (2019-2020) is 57% White (with a majority Arab-American), 16% Black or African American, 2% Hispanic or Latino, and 3% Asian. Fifty-six percent of the students are female and 44% male, with 65% of students attending part-time. Sixty-two percent of the population speaks English as a first language. Twenty-nine percent speak Arabic, 2%

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Spanish, and 1.5% Polish as their first languages. The average age of students enrolled is 24 years of age<sup>1</sup>. Of the faculty, 176 are full-time and 489 are adjunct.

Midwest College is a community college that recently transitioned into a four-year institution. Dual enrollment high school students (16%), transfer students (4%), traditional first-time college students (21%) as well as returning adult students (57%) attend Midwest College. As a commuter school, Midwest College does not offer on campus housing. Sports, student clubs, theater, student council, co-op, and internship placement opportunities are available.

### Data Collection

The research team conducted interviews, observations, and collected artifacts on Midwest College's Main Campus and North Campus from February 2020 to March 2020. The research team made seven visits to campus to make observations and conduct informal interviews. Visits were conducted both during the middle of the day and in the evening and on multiple days of the week spread over a one month period at the beginning of the winter semester. In addition, formal interviews were conducted with seven students, three faculty, and seven staff including administrators. To coordinate data collection, a data log was created to track individual team member data collection

activity. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews lasted from ten minutes to over an hour. Twelve full-time and part-time faculty members from a variety of programs were initially emailed an invitation for an interview with 10 additional faculty contacted at a later date. Three faculty members responded to the invitation. Of those three interviews, two were conducted over the telephone and one was conducted in person. Interviews with students were "person on the street interviews," with researchers interviewing students in non-academic settings in groups ranging from two to four students. All interviews were semi-structured and focused on broad themes identified by the research team prior to interviews around issues of challenges, supports, networks, and resources in transitioning to college. Guiding questions for student interviews are located in the Appendix. Interviews were left open-ended with the intention of adjusting questions to reflect the different positions held by the participants. The research team often discovered opportunities to collect artifacts during interviews. Notes were taken during the interviews on paper or in audio format and transferred to a field-notes template after the conclusion of each interview.

### Data Analysis

All data was examined collectively and coded using a two-cycle process (Saldana, 2016). The first review of data used the elemental method of initial coding to obtain first impressions of the data and highlighted commonly observed ideas and characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> Data was retrieved from the college website and citations are not being shared to maintain college anonymity.

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This process identified three distinct voices or perceptions of the data: student, staff/administration and faculty. This became important as we triangulated the data and began to look for common codes across the type of participants.

The methods used for second-cycle coding were focused, axial, and pattern. We began second-cycle coding with the focused coding method by examining the frequency of codes identified in the first cycle. The team then used axial coding to group frequent codes and narrow the number of codes by grouping similar codes. The codes identified in the first and second cycle of coding were added to a code book. Three themes were identified through first and second cycle coding: *Disconnect*, *Community*, and *Support*.

The team continuously triangulated data as it was collected and examined. For example, data collected from a student interview and a staff interview regarding the student food pantry were triangulated with collected artifacts. Interviewees were asked if they had additional information they wanted to provide, opening up dialogue opportunities. Summaries were provided to participants as a form of member checking.

### Findings

Data analysis resulted in the identification of three themes:

*Support*, the ways that the faculty and staff at Midwest College sought to meet the needs of the students,

*Community*, the desire and efforts to develop a sense of togetherness among the student body, and

*Disconnect*, the evidence that students were often not aware or did not take advantage of support and efforts to build community.

### Support

Everyone interviewed referenced efforts of the college to provide support in a variety of ways. There was a specific focus on support from faculty and staff. Students referenced faculty members who provided academic support and social-emotional support by making sure they understood course content, and facilitating social interactions and friendships in class that made the campus feel inclusive. Students were also appreciative of the support of Midwest College's counseling staff as indicated in staff evaluation comments: "Dr. Brown<sup>2</sup> was very interested in helping me succeed in my program course" and "Dr. Brown was very empathetic, kind, knowledgeable, and provided great assistance and encouragement."

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.



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The college provided several academic supports, including a writing center and a learning lab. When asked what efforts to support students academically she was most proud of, Dr. Jones, an administrator, stated:

*The way we get students who test into developmental classes and transition them into regular classes. I'm also proud of our Accelerated Learning Program for struggling students. Not identified as 'special' in the regular course and stay for an extra hour for additional support. I am also proud of our creative efforts in supporting the students.*

Dr. Jones's perspective is aligned with research that states schools that are student-ready no longer view students as at-risk but view them as at-promise (Burke & Burke, 2005).

When an institution sees ways to help students grow and progress, rather than ways to label, they develop supports to help students gain strategies and knowledge so they are more prepared to manage their own learning (Conley, 2008).

The college also worked to provide social-emotional support. Flyers advertising mental health services, community groups, and student organizations were distributed around campus in common spaces. The

Higher Learning Commission recognized Midwest College's institutional commitment to providing these supports in the 2019 accreditation review:

*This website provides students, faculty, and staff with a list of Allies who can assist them during difficult times in addition to resources related to housing, food pantries, shelters, and human services that could assist them during these difficult times... (p. 10).*



**"This data suggests that various stakeholders see intentional systems to provide social-emotional supports as critical to student success."**

The importance of providing social-emotional support was referenced by faculty, staff, and students. This data suggests that various stakeholders see intentional systems to provide social-emotional supports as critical to student success. The emphasis placed on student support systems throughout the accreditation review report indicates an institutional commitment to

funding support programs moving forward.

In addition to academic and social-emotional support, Midwest College worked to meet the financial and basic needs of students. In an acknowledgment that financial aid is one of the most likely barriers for low-income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008), the financial aid office held regular FAFSA sessions. Counselors worked to help students navigate the institutional financial aid procedures.

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Roughly two-thirds of the college's students receive federal aid, with a majority of students receiving Pell Grants. Providing support also included helping students meet basic needs like food security and housing. All of the participants mentioned the importance of the food pantry. A student worker at the food pantry said the pantry often "can't keep up with the demand" from students. Students were more likely to be food insecure if they received financial aid, were first-generation college students, lived off-campus or identified as a racial minority (El Zein, et al., 2019). The presence of the food pantry lessens anxiety in students who do not need to wonder where their next meal will come from.

Most references regarding support provided by the college focused on meeting students' basic needs, crisis care for mental health or emotional needs, or academic support. While there was talk about community, there was little evidence that any of the formal support was focused on developing a sense of belonging or an identity as a member of the Midwest College community.

### Theme of Community

Midwest College serves a diverse student population, matriculating through the institution at various stages of their academic and personal lives. Midwest College is a commuter school with no residential housing, presenting challenges to community building. An additional complication to community

building is the high percentage of courses taught by part-time faculty who are not consistently on campus. The interviews with two full-time faculty revealed that they teach five to six course sections per semester and are on campus daily. Being present on campus full-time means that they are more available to meet with students and more likely to sponsor organizations on campus, an important component of establishing community and building relationships. The large number of part-time faculty also means that faculty are more transient, meaning students are less likely to have the same faculty member twice, preventing students from creating a relationship with faculty that is central to building community.

Despite these realities, efforts to develop a sense of community are ongoing. Faculty and staff who were interviewed consistently mentioned a desire to develop a sense of campus community. Full-time faculty members expressed a desire to build personal and academic relationships with their students. One professor shared, "I try to to learn about students' personal lives and challenges. I want to see each student as a human being and convey that I care about them as individuals." They stressed the importance of individualizing the learning experience and providing the academic and social-emotional support students need. Efforts to convey to students that they are cared about as individuals within the larger campus community were discussed by faculty and staff members, but were not as clearly articulated by the part-time faculty

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and staff. Students also shared that fellow students worked to ensure the college was a supportive community. In response to a question about seeking help with classwork, a student replied, “You can ask another student. There is always someone around who is willing to help.” The supportiveness of the students was emphasized when a student approached a researcher sitting at a table during a campus observation, introduced herself, asked what year she was in and offered to help.

There are also non-academic facets that build communities, such as Midwest College’s offering of a variety of clubs, organizations, and intramural and school sponsored athletic teams. Staff identified between thirty and thirty-five clubs with what they believed was a high degree of participation. The college requires clubs, which are driven by student interest and not organized by the college, to have at least 10 members, but with only 30 clubs, this equates to a minimum of 300 active students out of a student body of 13,000. A staff member talked about the college’s athletic program as a source of community as well, but in 2019 there were only 91 students involved in sports teams sponsored by the college out of 13,000 students. While sports and clubs can be an important source of community and belonging, none of the eight students interviewed referred to these clubs or sports.

The data highlighting the theme of *Community* demonstrates the desire of Midwest College stakeholders to improve their campus culture

and the overall sense of community, but our research shows that there is a disconnect in the current beliefs of community between part-time and full-time faculty, staff, and students. While there is evidence of effort by the college to develop a supportive atmosphere on the campus, there is also evidence that the students are not actively participating in the formal organizations sponsored by the college.

### Theme of Disconnect

While the researchers found evidence of academic, social-emotional, and financial supports for students at Midwest College, support appears to be primarily academic. Interviews with faculty and staff revealed differing philosophies relating to the amount of support the students needed. For example, where one faculty member viewed support through active engagement with their students in their learning and getting to know them as individuals; other faculty members thought students were too coddled, saying “We do a lot of hand holding here,” and would be better served by letting them figure out things on their own. Interviews revealed a difference among the perspectives of part-time or full-time faculty. Part-time faculty were less flexible with providing additional supports, while full-time faculty saw providing this support as a key component of their teaching responsibilities.

Counseling staff also mentioned that some faculty are more approachable and supportive of students who request accommodations

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through the office of disability services. Feedback from a survey of a student who received academic support echoes this counselor's input, "She provided great feedback and recommended me with professors that I should take and also helped me schedule my next semester's classes." Counseling staff also described some students as being too dependent on their parents and staff. As evidenced by this quote from a staff member, some staff members rely on a traditional teaching style versus a teaching style that is grounded in developing a relationship between the faculty member and student:

*Faculty generally have traditional approaches and views to teaching and do not attempt to learn about students personally. They teach in their lane and do not leave their box although the student population of the college is stunningly under educated.*

A student's level of connection with school faculty and staff varied and was dependent on each relationship. Students felt positive about the connections with faculty and staff. This is evidenced in how students describe their relationship with some of their favorite faculty, as well as by the student surveys that provided the Assisted Learning Services department with student feedback. When asked about their connections to faculty, students cited the positive and negative aspects, for example, "I love my psych teacher. My CIS teacher knows his content but he is not engaged with us." There are

also divergent perspectives among the faculty and staff at Midwest College. Dr. Jones stated, "We are trying to dispel myths among the faculty. One of the myths we were able to debunk was that there was a disproportionate number of Midwest College students with reading difficulties. Our research proved this was not the case and we were able to share this data with the Midwest College faculty."

In addition to differences of perception among faculty and students about what supports should be provided, there also appeared to be a disconnect between the support programs provided and their utilization by students. During our observations, there were very few students at the Writing Center and Learning Lab. While most students were aware of supports on campus, some students had a limited understanding of where to go for academic or financial support. This disconnect is evident in an interview with a student activities manager, who stated students were "not really" aware of the supports on campus. Ms. Noble attributed this disconnect to communication barriers, noting that the student population at Midwest College is very diverse with different preferred modes of communication, the college has a split campus, and high school students who were enrolled in the Early College program. The two campuses are not within walking distance of each other, making transportation difficult, and some students were not aware that some services are provided on the other campus.

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In an effort to reduce communication barriers with students, Midwest College recently created a Student Activities Instagram account, which has 300 followers, representing less than 3% of the student population. Despite a concerted effort from the staff and administration of Midwest College to support students and develop a sense of community on campus, there was little evidence this effort was recognized by students. No researcher observed students wearing Midwest College shirts, hats, coats or other items with the college logo, and no student referred to themselves by the name of the college mascot during our time on campus. This would suggest that the students may not feel a shared sense of identity, history, values, and purpose as members of the college community. This may be exacerbated by the large age range of students attending the college. While there is evidence that the college has invested time and resources into creating a sense of community, there is also evidence that many students do not feel a strong sense of connection to the college. Given the transient nature of the student population this is understandable, but given the importance of belonging to student success identified by Tinto (1987), the disconnect between the efforts of the college and the student body is an issue to be noted.

### Discussion

In this study, it became clear through our data collected and literature that colleges that are student ready (a) work continuously to

provide a wide variety of supports and services for students, (b) develop effective systems to identify and address any disconnects within the organizational structures, especially how they may impact student success, as defined by the attainment of a degree or certificate, and (c) make a concerted effort to strengthen the students' sense of community. Midwest College offered services intended to support students, such as financial aid guidance and resources, FAFSA nights, a writing center, and a food pantry. In addition, full time faculty talked about the importance of grounding academic and social-emotional support in personal relationships. These supports are consistent with academic supports (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garcia, 2019; Hausman et al., 2007; Jacobson, 2020; Moreno, 2019; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Tinto, 2003) and financial supports (Cunningham et al., 2007; De La Rosa, 2006; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn et al., 2003; Perna, 2006) described in the literature.

This finding of social and emotional supports leading to a feeling of community is consistent with the literature of how one feels a sense of belonging in a community (hooks, 2009). Consistent academic advising and counseling for students led to a feeling of trust in the institution; students wanted to feel that the institution cared about them as individuals. The literature suggests that student clubs and organizations foster a sense of belonging (Brooms, 2018; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). However, the effort put in by the institution, or lack thereof, to include students in clubs, groups, or cohorts of any kind was

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recognized by students and directly contributed to whether students felt a sense of belonging or not, as evidenced by our interviews.

We also found that while some students were familiar with these supports there was a disconnect and many students often did not know of these services and did not access them. This disconnect is consistent with the disconnects identified in the literature (Garcia et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Many faculty and students shared that services were often not used by students who came to campus for class and then left when class was over. In addition, part-time faculty who also came to campus just to teach one or two classes also did not invest as much time building supportive relationships with students. The findings of this study are important because they highlight the ways that disconnects undermine colleges' efforts to be student ready. Midwest College had several systems in place to provide supports for students. Most of these support systems were academic in nature. They also provided systems that support the development of students' college knowledge and there were efforts to address the students basic needs and create community. However, many of these systems were not accessed by students because of the disconnects evidenced on campus. Our research can assist post-secondary institutions in increasing the number of students who obtain degrees or certificates by considering how to best support students by carefully

considering the themes of support and community, and finding solutions to disconnects that impact students. We believe that efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging on campus is a constructive way to address the observed disconnects.

### Recommendations

In order for colleges to adequately prepare to support their students, we recommend they perform a review of all supports currently offered, including academic, financial, mental health, social-emotional, and learning and study skills. This recommendation was based on the disconnect between supports offered by the college and supports students had knowledge of and used. Colleges need to view incoming applicants as whole people, not just as students, and provide support in all areas that will help a student succeed. Furthermore, colleges should provide opportunities for personalized advising. For example, financial support such as scholarships can help students pay for tuition, classes, books, and fees; however, many students lack financial management skills needed to manage money from scholarships and loans. Financial advising would help students meet their financial obligations and determine if they need to work in addition to school. This is especially important for first generation college students, who may not have assistance in navigating financial aid, classes, and degree paths. Evidence to support this recommendation was found in student interviews, when students acknowledged the supports provided by the

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institution but admitted to a lack of knowledge in how to navigate the process and take advantage of the supports. It is also recommended that the college focus on multiple avenues of communication for students to learn about opportunities and programs for support. Using faculty, social clubs, peer advisors, and social media in addition to traditional communication methods could increase awareness and participation in these support programs. Evidence for this recommendation was based on interviews with students that revealed a lack of awareness of supports offered by the college.

Lastly, the issue of disconnect between what is offered by the college and what is known and used by students could be addressed by focusing on cultivating students' sense of belonging. This is most effectively done by focusing on personal relationships. This is evidenced in the comments by students who felt a connection with an individual faculty member, staff, or fellow student. Building and maintaining these relationships takes time and energy, and colleges need to prioritize this work. Interviews with faculty and staff suggested that full-time faculty had a greater willingness to build and maintain relationships with students.

### Conclusion

Additional questions arose during our research that could be addressed in future data collection and research, such as how


different groups at these institutions would define student readiness. How do different stakeholders (faculty, students, administration) define a successful student at their institution? Why are full-time faculty perceived as more supportive than part-time faculty? Would implementing a faculty mentoring program support part-time faculty in building relationships with students? Are the supports provided by the institution accessible and sufficient for students? Do students feel supported and set up for success by the institution? What are opportunities for growth and improvement among institutions to ensure they are ready to support their students within the community, lift their voices, and use feedback to continually grow and change with the incoming student population? Based on the observation of a lack of campus identity, further research could be conducted relating to the role of branding, school pride, shared history, and a sense of belonging among students as a way to facilitate addressing disconnects. Our research into student readiness presented multiple paths for future research to support students, post-secondary institutions, and even the concepts of readiness and success in a post-secondary academic career.

The study did not include alumni, students who dropped or transferred out of the college, students who were not on campus at the time of visits, or any specific targeting of distinct departments or areas of the college. Furthermore, during the twelve weeks of our research, both the institution of the researchers and the college we were studying

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closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, faculty, and administration had to transition to working remotely, and thus had limited accessibility. Researchers were no longer able to travel to campus to collect more data and possibly follow up with participants previously interviewed. Additionally, because of the time frame and focus of our study, we chose only to examine one post-secondary institution, instead of collecting data from many institutions. This narrowed our population, and did not allow for the comparison of data and noticing of trends between different institutions.

The findings of this study are important because they contribute to the success of post-secondary institutions, and on a larger scale, and success of students and our education system as a whole. Colleges know and are investing in providing support to incoming students, focusing primarily on financial and academic supports. We found that a sense of belonging on campus was as, if not more, important than these technical supports. This is especially true for a commuter campus like Midwest College that serves primarily first generation college students. We found that students who had a sense of belonging were more likely to access existing supports and that faculty who were more connected to the campus worked harder to build supporting relationships that cultivate a sense of belonging. We hope our research can assist post-secondary institutions in considering how to best support their students by carefully considering the themes of support

and community, and finding solutions to disconnects that impact students within the organization. 

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### APPENDIX

#### STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Hello, I am \_\_\_\_\_, a graduate student at University of Michigan-Dearborn, and I am conducting a qualitative research study for a class. We are asking the question, "What do colleges do to make themselves student ready?" Do you have a few minutes to talk about what it's been like starting here as a student?

You can remain anonymous if you wish, and if you decide you don't want me to include your thoughts I will not use them.

What was your experience in your transitioning to college? Or what's it been like starting here as a student? What challenges have you experienced since you've been a student at this institution? What has gone well in coming to school here?

What advice would you have for a new student?

What university provided supports/resources have you found here? How aware are you of these supports and resources offered on campus? What is your access to these resources? Are you aware of [these other resources] that are offered here?

What informal networks of support have you found here? How did you find these networks?

If I were to transfer to this institution and I was struggling with \_\_\_\_\_ where would I go? How would I get support?

What are your goals/plans for (after) college?

If they freeze - tailor to 'next semester', 'over the summer', 'next year'

What role has the university played in reaching those goals?