

Latinx Student Input on Experiences at Evergreen Valley College: Overview of 2024 Focus Group Findings

Executive Summary

In April 2024, Dr. Victor G. Garza, in collaboration with EVC staff, conducted four exploratory focus groups with 30 Latinx students at Evergreen Valley College (EVC) to better understand their experiences. These discussions captured students' reflections on their impressions of EVC, the environments and resources that support their academic success, the challenges they face, and opportunities for growth. The findings highlight both the strengths of EVC's programs and services, as well as areas where additional support and accessibility could further enhance student engagement and outcomes.

Key Insights

- Impressions of EVC:
 - Students reported learning about Evergreen Valley College (EVC) primarily through family, high school teachers and counselors, college fairs, outreach events, and early exposure through dual enrollment or campus visits. Key factors influencing enrollment included affordability, EVC's strong reputation as a feeder school to California State Universities (CSUs), and unique program offerings, such as translation and interpretation, that are uncommon at nearby colleges. Students also valued EVC's location and flexibility, which allowed them to balance education with work and family responsibilities, and described the college as a supportive and accessible pathway into higher education.
- Motivation and Family Aspirations:
 - Students described strong personal motivation to succeed academically, often to serve as role models for siblings, support their families, or fulfill first-generation aspirations. This drive underlies their persistence despite financial, academic, and personal barriers. Students also noted that contemporary resources and outreach at EVC, such as recruiters visiting high schools and accessible financial aid support, help families feel welcomed and capable of affording college.
- Sources of Support for Student Success:
 - Support Programs and Organizations:
 - Students identified several critical support programs essential to their success. The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) and Disabled Student Programs & Services (DSP) provided accountability and resources like digital textbooks and quiet test environments. Basic needs programs, such as the FRESH Market, helped alleviate food insecurity.
 - Programs like Umoja, ASPIRE, OASISS, and Enlace created a sense of community, with students particularly valuing the counseling support offered by Enlace. OASISS also provided book vouchers, immigrant and undocumented student support, DACA workshops, and legal aid assistance.
 - Counseling and Emotional Support:
 - Counselors in these programs were crucial for academic planning and personal challenges, while emotional support from family and friends

helped students navigate academic responsibilities alongside work and family obligations.

- Faculty and Staff Support:
 - Engaged and caring faculty/staff played an important role in supporting student learning, particularly by sharing opportunities such as events and services offered. Supportive faculty were particularly valued, especially those who understood the unique challenges faced by Latinx students. Students felt understood and seen.
 - Additional resources included the library, general counseling services, and admission staff, and tutoring all contributing to a supportive environment.
- Financial Support:
 - Financial security is paramount; students expressed the need for and appreciation of alleviating financial burdens through fee waivers, financial support from lending programs, and accessible financial aid processes and assistance.

Student Challenges Identified

- Resource Accessibility/ Study Spaces:
 - Students reported issues with expensive textbooks, limited course availability, and accessibility for online students. Specifically, online students struggled to participate in in-person events like career fairs, and library hours were inadequate for those attempting to study late or on Fridays (students found themselves studying outside of the library after it closed).
 - *“There’s times where I’m even studying in the library starting at, like, twelve noon. But then I’m on campus until 11 p.m. or 10 p.m. because I have an essay that I have to do. And it’s, like, there have been times where I’m literally at 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. sitting in those chairs outside because the library closes...they should be open a little bit longer because students should be able to study longer.”*
- Course Availability:
 - Students reported difficulties completing required courses, particularly those with lab components that conflicted with work schedules or were only offered in person.
 - Limited course offerings, especially during summer or when courses were canceled, sometimes delayed progress toward their degrees and made it challenging for student parents and online learners to stay on track.
- Inconsistent Counseling:
 - Counseling quality varied, with many students finding in-person support more beneficial than online counseling. Variations in guidance overall led to confusion and conflicting recommendations. While some counselors were supportive, others hindered progress by providing inconsistent information.
- Technical Support:
 - Students faced challenges accessing tech support for tools like Google Slides, particularly if they're unfamiliar with the technology. (Support should focus on helping students navigate these tools, distinct from general IT assistance.)
 - *“People like me that are struggling with technology...I needed to use Google Slides and I did not know how to do that...I’m a person that*

cannot just learn from a computer...I need that guidance where I can meet with someone like, 'Hey this is how you get this done.' "

- Balancing Responsibilities:
 - Students regularly encountered the challenge of managing academic responsibilities alongside work and family commitments, often leading to sleep deprivation and stress. Finding childcare support was particularly challenging.
- Financial Aid/Scholarships:
 - Students reported confusion about available financial support, including eligibility, timelines, and required documentation, particularly parental information, which students/parents may not be open to sharing. Students described fear around completing FAFSA (given required parental information). Lack of in-person guidance sometimes hindered timely submissions, and students noted that workshops or direct support could help reduce confusion and ensure successful completion.
 - *"They're scared to put in the info because they require your parents' social security..."*
 - *"I remember the time I did it [applied for FAFSA]...I thought, 'Maybe I don't want to do FAFSA because then more stuff will pop up for my parents, and this is gonna lead to a worse path for them...'"*
 - *"If it wasn't because I went through the process with my children...I probably would not have known that I, myself, can apply for FAFSA too."*
- Visibility of Opportunities:
 - Some students felt that opportunities/events for engagement and resources were not adequately marketed, especially for online students.
- Inclusion and Sense of Belonging in Support Programs:
 - Some students described feeling "out of place" in campus programs and organizations, particularly those who were mixed-race, multicultural, or uncertain whether they belonged in programs such as Aspire or Enlace. These feelings sometimes prevented students from seeking support, even when they were eligible.
 - *"I'm not in ASPIRE or in the Enlace program even though both of my parents never graduated from college, just because I feel out of place...I just kind of feel like nobody ever tells me, 'Oh, you should sign up for ASPIRE.'"*
- Mental Health Issues:
 - Students reported experiencing anxiety, stress, and depression, often related to trying to balance academic obligations, work, family and financial responsibilities, and feelings of isolation. Challenges were sometimes exacerbated by the transition to online learning and the impacts of the pandemic.

Recommendations

- In-Depth Resource Orientation:
 - Faculty, particularly those teaching introductory courses, can inform students about available resources, services, and activities at the start of the semester and/or throughout.
- Childcare Services:
 - Develop short-term, on-campus childcare or supervised drop-off options (e.g., 1–2 hours) for student parents to enable focused study time. Current study spaces

that allow children present remain insufficient, as students must still actively supervise their children, limiting their ability to study effectively.

- *"I know they did a little room for studying...It's a space where you can bring your kid but you are there...it's not ideal if you have to study and you still have to watch your kid. So maybe having a couple of hours of childcare...I remember at the onset they had the child development center where students were actually studying child development, that degree, and they also had the kids there. Or at least a place where I can drop off my kid for maybe two hours so I can study...so at least a couple hours of study time will be nice."*

- Expanded Mental Health Resources:
 - Increase mental health resources by organizing regular workshops focused on stress management, mindfulness, and resilience. These workshops can help students develop coping strategies and improve their overall emotional well-being.
- Enhanced Technical Support and Training:
 - Enhance technical support by providing workshops/drop-in sessions to assist students in using online tools and unfamiliar technologies, such as Google Slides, which are essential for coursework. Consider implementing student-led sessions to promote peer learning and support.
- Library Accessibility and Resources:
 - Expanding library operating hours to better accommodate students' study schedules (early morning, late nights, Fridays), especially during peak times like finals week. Ongoing access to essential resources such as e-textbooks (books that are up-to-date) and rental programs can help alleviate financial burdens on students.
- Counseling Support:
 - Counselors can schedule regular check-ins for all students to promote accountability and ensure consistent support. Attention can be given to language needs/translation to help students feel welcomed, as well as an understanding of diverse learning styles and needs. Students value clarity regarding their academic pathways, including their progress toward completing a degree or transferring, as it serves as encouragement in their educational journey.
- Improved Visibility of Opportunities:
 - Develop a comprehensive communication strategy to promote available resources, programs, and events (information on organizations/events can be difficult to find online). Utilize social media, newsletters, and direct outreach (text messages) to inform students effectively and ensure they are aware of opportunities for engagement.
- Implementation of Feedback Mechanisms:
 - Create regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys or focus groups, allowing students to voice their concerns and suggest improvements related to support services. This feedback can help tailor services to better meet student needs.
- Community Engagement Initiatives:
 - Encourage initiatives that foster school spirit and community engagement, such as social events, workshops, and collaborative projects. Consider selling school gear (sweaters).
- Support Programs:
 - Ensure consistency and accessibility in programs like EOPS, DSP, Enlace, Basic Needs, etc., to improve student success and address food insecurity and financial

burdens. Actively promote these resources to ensure they are widely known and utilized by students.

- Improved Financial Aid Support:
 - Provide in-person assistance with financial aid applications to simplify and clarify the process for students. Offer personalized counseling sessions to guide them through the application process and related documentation. Schedule regular workshops on financial aid topics during evenings or weekends to accommodate diverse student needs. Live online sessions with small groups can also be offered, allowing students to walk through the application process interactively.
- *Student Advice*: Students emphasized the importance of attending college for personal goals, utilizing campus resources, proactively engaging with instructors, and seeking support when needed.

Conclusion

The insights gathered from focus groups with Latinx students at EVC underscore the need for a comprehensive support system that addresses their unique challenges, which many other students may also face. By addressing these students' challenges, EVC can enhance the educational experiences of not only Latinx students but all students on campus, fostering a more inclusive and supportive college environment. EVC has the opportunity to cultivate a community where every student feels valued and empowered to thrive academically and personally.

Latinx Student Input on Experiences at Evergreen Valley College: Overview of 2024 Focus Group Findings

Full Report

In April 2024, Dr. Victor G. Garza held a series of exploratory focus groups with 30 Latinx students at Evergreen Valley College (EVC) to better understand their experiences and perspectives. The focus groups were facilitated with the support of EVC staff who helped coordinate participation and create a welcoming environment for students to share openly.

This document synthesizes the insights shared by students across four focus groups, capturing their reflections on multiple aspects of college life. Participants discussed their impressions of EVC, the environments and resources that support their success, the challenges they encounter, and opportunities for growth to better meet student needs. The students represented a diverse mix of academic levels, enrollment types (online and in-person), and life circumstances, including first-generation college students and student parents.

The focus groups were semi-structured, allowing participants to share detailed experiences and examples while guiding discussion around key topics such as academic support, campus resources, counseling, and social engagement. While the findings reflect the experiences of the participants and may not represent all EVC students, they provide valuable insights to inform programs, policies, and strategies aimed at supporting Latinx students' success.

Centering the voices of Latinx students highlights both the strengths of EVC's current supports and the areas where additional resources or changes could enhance equity, engagement, and student well-being.

Impressions of EVC

Students learned about Evergreen Valley College (EVC) from various sources, including siblings, parents who attended, high school teachers, and outreach events at their high schools. There were students who enrolled in dual courses at EVC while attending high school or participated in night school, which influenced their decision. Students were also particularly drawn to EVC's affordability and the cost of courses in comparison to other higher education institutions (included shared information they found helpful through their high schools). The college's strong reputation, especially as a feeder school into California State Universities (CSUs), also stood out. Additionally, EVC offers unique programs, such as translation and interpretation, that are not available at nearby colleges. Students considered the college's location, valuing its proximity to home and work to ensure they could support their families - be it children, partners, parents and/or siblings.

How Students Learned About EVC

- Family and peer networks (siblings, parents, friends who attended or were attending EVC)
 - *"My brother actually comes here right now, so we're able to go together... and it was closer [than other colleges]."*
- High school teachers (recommended), counselors, and programs (e.g., AVID)
- Outreach efforts, campus tours, and high school visits
 - *"When I was in high school, I had a tour here and I fell in love with the campus."*
- Independent research during high school on colleges

Academic Pathways and Early College Exposure

- Enrollment in dual enrollment or night school courses at EVC while in high school
- Deciding to attend a college on quarter vs. semester system influenced some students' decisions
- Some students turned to EVC after struggling academically during COVID, attending continuation schools, or feeling uncertain about postsecondary options

Affordability and Accessibility

- Affordable/lower cost compared to four-year and state universities
 - *"Because it's not [high cost], I can continue my education."*
- Students noted that affordability and information on colleges/EVC was particularly helpful when shared in high school

Programs, Reputation, and Transfer Opportunities

- Strong reputation as a "feeder school" into CSUs
- Unique academic offerings not available at nearby colleges (e.g., Translation and Interpretation)
- Perception that instructors are caring and invested in student success
- EVC counselors were described as helpful in laying out postsecondary plans

Location, Commute, and Family Responsibilities

- Proximity to home, work, and family was a key factor

- Students emphasized the need to balance school with caregiving and employment responsibilities
 - *"...convenient for picking up my sister and helping my parents out."*

Reconsidering Four-Year Institutions

- Some students initially attended a four-year college but transferred to EVC after a poor fit
 - *"I thought it [evergreen] was a good in between space to figure out what I really wanted. And to look through campuses that I actually wanted to go to instead of hopping campus to campus and being in another one that I didn't like."*

Sources of Support and Environments for Success

Students greatly value the variety of programs and resources offered on campus that contribute to their academic success. Notably, the EOPS program helps hold students accountable through regular check-ins ('set meetings' they are asked to schedule), ensuring they stay on track. Many also find the DSP beneficial for accessing vital resources, such as digital textbooks for audio playback, the ability to record lectures for later review, and taking exams in private offices to minimize classroom distractions.

In addition to EOPS and DSP, programs like FYE, Umoja-AFFIRM, ASPIRE+PLUS, OASISS, Enlace, and FRESH Market provide critical support and foster a sense of community among students. The library plays a crucial role as well, offering computers, a book lending program, and quiet study spaces that can be hard to find at home. Emotional and motivational support from family, peers, and teachers remains central to student success. Many students also rely on virtual connections with friends for studying and completing homework, further enhancing their educational environment. However, students often face challenges, such as balancing school and work responsibilities, which can impact their academic performance. Together, these elements combine to create an environment conducive to student success.

Institutional Programs and Resources

- **EOPS:** Provides accountability through scheduled check-ins and mentoring support.
 - *"EOPS, I really like how they have you do your 'meetings' [i.e., regular check-ins]. You need three meetings with them in order to stay on track. I really like that sense of accountability."*
- **DSP (Disability Support Programs):** Offers lecture note takers, digital textbooks with audio playback, recorded lectures, and private testing rooms. Staff provide follow-ups and tutoring referrals.
 - *"The first time I came to college, I struggled because I have a learning disability and I also have ADHD...this time, I was able to touch base with the people in DSP and get my books, digital books of all my textbooks...And then also being able to record our lectures in class is just amazing...If I did have questions, I can go back and just listen to it and take better notes... And they allow us to take all of our tests, quizzes, and finals in an office instead of in the classroom...I tried doing that a few times thinking, 'Oh, I could do it,' and then once I'm in the class and you're hearing just directly pulling up papers and people getting up and people dropping their pens or something, you know, I'm just all over the place...And they always touch base with you from the department...if you need any help with tutoring or anything...that's really helped me out a lot."*

- **Cultural/Identity Programs and Other Student Organizations:** Umoja-AFFIRM, ASPIRE+PLUS, OASISS (book vouchers, immigrant/undocumented student support, DACA workshops, legal aid), Enlace, and FRESH Market provide resources, community, mentorship, culturally relevant programming, and foster a sense of belonging. Honors Society and other organizations - support accountability and GPA maintenance.
 - *"I take courses with Enlace. It's really informed me more about the Latino community, especially the English course...It definitely feels like more of a community in those classes because everyone comes from the same place, and the instructors seem a bit more relatable and nicer. Not in that other professors aren't, but like a lot more attentive in a way."*
- **Basic Needs Support:** FRESH Market distributes food, helps with EBT forms, offers showers, and ensures students have access to essentials.
 - *"...somewhere to sleep at night without having to worry...something to eat and a clean environment to work in."*
- **Health and Well-Being Resources:** Campus health centers, wellness centers ("Nest"), outdoor areas, gardens, and amenities like massage chairs support students' physical and emotional well-being, providing spaces to relax and recharge.
- **High School to College Transition / Accessibility Awareness:** Students often learn about campus programs (such as Enlace) through family, friends, faculty, or emails, highlighting the importance of awareness and accessibility of resources.

Academic and Tutoring Support

- **Tutoring Centers:** Offer math and English tutoring, critical for students who need additional academic support.
- **First Stop Center:** Centralized support for students, navigating resources, and receiving guidance.
- **Counseling and Mentorship:** Accessible and consistent guidance from counselors and academic mentors helps students plan courses, stay on track, explore transfer pathways, and navigate financial and academic resources.
- **Financial Support and Guidance:** Financial advisors help students navigate tuition, and other expenses, allowing them to focus on academic success. Fee waivers during COVID helped students continue studies.
 - *"I enrolled during the pandemic...a financial (aid) advisor, he really guided me in a way because as a high schooler myself, I thought college is just money, money, money, money, and just wanted to make sure [he could afford it]. And [a different] counselor, both of them...answered every question. I used to call them like five times a week just to make sure everything was right, and they got answers."*
- **Workplace Support:** Work-study programs and supportive workplace environments integrate school and employment. Bosses and coworkers sometimes allow flexible schedules or provide reminders to complete schoolwork.
 - *"My boss helps me study...if I have an exam or I have homework too, she reminds me...Because we have two hours of prep time. She's like, 'Okay, you can use one hour to do homework and then the other hour you could prepare for your day'...I think my work environment is very helpful and very supportive."*
 - *"I did work-study with the theater department, and so I was part of the play and we're trying to get a club started. So being a part of the school and trying to be a part of the social life at school has really motivated and inspired me because with the theater we went to other colleges. We visited Stanford to see some of their plays and I was like you can be in school and you can do this. It was really inspiring."*

- **Engaged and Supportive Instructors:** Interactive tools like Canvas and structured, timely feedback (e.g., consistent grading) help students stay engaged, track progress, and understand where they stand academically.
 - *"The items aren't graded until the end of the semester, which makes it very difficult... being able to see all my work graded right away has really, really helped a lot... that's one thing that has helped me, just being able to understand where I'm at."*
 - *"She has videos [on Canvas], and then she asks questions during [the videos]. And so, for a person who has ADHD, that's like really important to be able to go, 'Okay, wait, I don't have to start the whole entire module all over again'...It really works out where she just stops the video and has you answer the question. So if I do need to go back, I'm only going back maybe thirty seconds or forty seconds and then going over what she needs to and answering the questions and then going into it. After that, it automatically self grades itself. I'm automatically able to see my progress of me doing something...it is actually there."*

Family, Peer, and Mentor Support

- **Family Support:** Emotional encouragement (even if parents did not attend college), guidance, childcare, and occasional financial help. For some participants, their own children were a source of motivation, reinforcing study habits and persistence.
 - *"I have kids that I want to show that we can...I'm also showing them, you know, study habits...They can model it by looking at mommy's reading, we have to read. Mommy's studying, we have to study. Mommy's getting a degree, we have to get a degree. So being the role model, that keeps me going."*
- **Mentor and Peer Networks:** Academic support, motivation, and guidance. Students study virtually with friends, exchange tips, and provide mutual motivation.
 - *"My siblings and my friends...I met... doing work study. And, like, we have a Discord, and we have nights where we're just on video call and we're all doing our homework or during finals, like, if we're stressed out, like, let's do this...And so that, that really helps."*
- **Upward Mobility:** Students' personal ambition and desire to support family motivate their academic persistence.
 - *"Another thing that keeps me moving towards this [degree]...basically realizing that you're gonna be your parents' retirement plan...we have to be the ones to keep going and support them when they get old."*

Campus Spaces for Studying and Community

- **Library:** Offers computers, book and textbook lending, and quiet study areas; also serve as a place to relax.
- **Student Services Areas:** Open late, clean, and peaceful, providing space to complete assignments and study.
- **Program Staff / Faculty:** Share resources in class and encourage students to use them (e.g., Enlace).
- **Clubs and Organizations:** scholarship programs, clubs (e.g., Art club) and student associations provide mentorship, project guidance, and community engagement.
 - *"...The art club and the advisor on campus, has really helped me to, like I'm an art major, so that's really helped me prepare for that sort of career...She's always willing to, like, double-check my work and help me out with things that are going on and fill us in on resources. So that's a really safe place for me."*

Learning About Resources

Students access resources through websites, apps, emails, texts, newsletters, social media, faculty, staff, counselors, peers, and on-campus events. Tabling, booths, and culturally relevant programming (like Enlace) help students feel welcomed and informed. Clear, direct communication is essential, as newsletters may go unread, online students may face barriers, and some information is difficult to locate.

- **Multiple communication channels:** Websites, apps, emails, texts, information boards, social media - direct messages from instructors are most effective.
- **Staff, counselors, and faculty sharing resources:** Share resources in class, in-class announcements, scholarships, events, recommend clubs, and academic opportunities.
- **Peers, friends, and family connections:** Support students in navigating resources. Friends or family working on campus help students learn about programs and opportunities.
- **On-campus events and tabling:** Sign-ups, interactive booths, and cultural programming (e.g., hot chocolate/conchas at Enlace, music) make information engaging and welcoming.

Contributions to Academic Success

Academic success at EVC is shaped by personal motivation, self-drive, and resilience, combined with support from family, peers, and institutional resources. Students are inspired by pride in their achievements, long-term goals, and the desire to serve as role models for siblings, children, or extended family. Emotional well-being, financial stability, supportive instructors, and guidance from mentors help students focus on learning, while challenges such as course cancellations, delayed grading, and competing responsibilities highlight the importance of persistence and personal agency.

Personal Motivation and Ambition

- Pride in accomplishments and long-term goals; striving for upward mobility. Setting their own routine helped them stay organized and be successful with work/school.
 - *"...I don't like working where I'm at right now...Seeing the future, like, I don't have to be here forever. I could go do something better and more fun. That's really, like, motivating. Like, if I go to class right now...I'm one step closer to being where I want to be."*
- Desire to serve as a role model for siblings, children, or family.
 - *"I have a younger brother and he isn't really sure what he wants to do with his life. And I do think that education is important, like, for myself and then also just to give him, like, a, you know, something to - a role model to aspire to...This is the same kind of boat where, like, our parents didn't, you know, they didn't go to college. They don't have a lot of education."*
- Breaking cycles of limited education or financial hardship.
 - *"I don't want to be part of that statistic. I want to break the cycle...I'm gonna get a degree and make a career out of it. I don't wanna just be part of that statistic where, like, I'm just working, and working, and working, and then you get to a certain rank, and that's it - you're done. Because out there, you know, school is important."*

Financial and Practical Support

- Financial stability allows focus on academics.

- *"If we have someone supporting us, we can do better at school...Emotional well-being. If we're worried about what's happening with our kids or with the house or with the work, you're not in it...And financial stability. If we don't have to worry about, I have to pay for my classes, I have to pay for parking, I have to do all of these things - it's a load that prevent you from focusing on studying...If, you know, I can say, I wanna go to school, but if I don't have the means to even support my family at home, why am I going to school? We go back to the family. Mexican or Latinx, sometimes we put more importance on work than studying because we need the money. We need to support our family."*

Engaged and Supportive Instructors

- Instructors who are approachable, supportive, attentive, and enthusiastic—and who treat students as capable adults rather than “kids”—create respectful learning environments that build motivation, confidence, and academic persistence, particularly for students with learning challenges.
 - *"[Instructor] really cared about her students and she always led me in and gave me support...When I took her class again another semester, she recognized me and it really made me feel like the teachers here really recognize their students. So it kind of, like, pushed me forward to finish her class and I ended up doing a lot better."*
 - *"[He] just really has a passion for teaching...he's really communicative and a really great teacher in general. He's like an emotional support system as a teacher, and he's very organized. He responds to emails very quickly. He thoroughly explains every single module. That's something that is a huge factor in what's bringing me towards success. Because when I actually enjoy a class or like I get to meet teachers like that, that brings some joy and it makes me feel like going to school, learning, and getting an education is worth it."*
- Instructors being accommodating and responsive, particularly in understanding learning differences (e.g., IEPs, 504s) and supporting requests for extensions or additional help. When this understanding is absent, students may feel judged or anxious about seeking support. Some report feeling “dumb” for needing extra help, and even when they communicate their needs in advance, being called on in class can increase anxiety.
- Instructors and tutors who understand learning differences and provide appropriate accommodations help build confidence and encourage academic persistence. Without this support, especially in foundational courses, students may hesitate to enroll in higher-level classes.
 - *"I think that sometimes stops you from being able to take higher level classes, because you're like well, I can't do it and I'm not gonna have the support."*
 - *"[Some instructors] They're so passionate about this [their course]. I'm gonna put in the same amount of effort...if you have someone there who is putting in the work to teach you what they wanna teach you."*

Emotional Well-Being, Health, and Supportive Settings

- Students benefit from environments where they feel respected, supported, and included, reducing anxiety about seeking help. They particularly appreciate programs that address basic needs without the stigma of requesting assistance, which helps them feel more integrated into the campus community.
 - *"...We come from, sometimes, families or communities where reaching out kind of puts like this target on your back...like they're needy...It eases that when you come into a community college; you've come in here and you're like, 'Well, they're here to*

help me and they wanna help me'...So it just makes you feel as part of the community, and it makes you feel like as an extension of your home, the way that people care."

- Stability at home, work-life balance, and access to health resources (health center, massage chairs) support focus and persistence.
- Feeling respected, supported, and included reduces anxiety about seeking help.

Challenges to Academic Success

Despite strong motivation and access to supportive programs, students face persistent structural, logistical, and personal challenges that can impede academic progress. Key barriers include balancing school with work and family responsibilities, limited course availability, inconsistent counseling experiences, gaps in timely feedback and instructional continuity, and difficulties accessing resources, particularly for students with learning challenges, online, and ESL students. These barriers often compound, increasing stress, delaying degree completion, and requiring students to rely heavily on personal resilience and self-advocacy.

Balancing School, Work, and Family Responsibilities

- Students frequently have to balance coursework alongside employment and caregiving responsibilities, often at the expense of sleep and well-being.
 - *"A lot of times, I find myself doing homework when everyone's asleep...the quiet time of my house...That being said, I don't sleep...I'll probably sleep maybe two to three hours a night and then maybe take a nap in the afternoon for an hour or so. And I know it's not sustainable, but it's just how it has to happen in order for me to be able to get my homework done... and all the other responsibilities that we have."*
- Family health responsibilities can further complicate students' ability to stay on track academically.
 - *"And one of my challenges here has been my mom being hospitalized and me having to take care of her in the mornings and trying to help her."*

Course Availability, Scheduling, and Cancellations

- Limited availability of required courses, especially those with lab components, creates barriers for working students, parents, and online learners. Courses are sometimes canceled or not offered every semester, delaying academic progress and forcing students to enroll at multiple institutions.
 - *"...some classes not being offered every single semester...it delayed things even longer. And so, I ended up deciding last semester to take classes at [BayArea College] as well as taking them here to be able to try to get all those classes in as quickly as possible to finish by the spring. That was successful, which was awesome. But, I think that, it just would have been a little easier if I could just get everything done here rather than having to go to multiple locations."*
- Students who rely on online coursework or have rigid work schedules face additional constraints.
 - *"I do everything online because of my work schedule...The bio class...you need to do a lab, and I personally won't be able to make it. So that's honestly the biggest challenge; I've been holding off until the very last because I don't know what else to*

do for that part. But just taking courses that are required to be on-site will be the next biggest challenge to finish off my degree.”

Counseling Access and Inconsistent Guidance

- Students described varied experiences with counseling. While some counselors provided encouragement and clarity, others gave inconsistent or incorrect information, which led to confusion or delayed progress. Many students preferred in-person counseling over virtual appointments that were more personal and/or relatable.
 - *“Some counselors give wrong information. I think that was something that set me back...because I knew what I wanted, and I spoke to two different counselors here, and they either didn't give me the full information or they gave me the wrong information, and I ended up taking classes that I didn't even need [to transfer].*
 - *“...important for a counselor to feel personal and that you're not just, like, a number on a chart...just going through, like, ticking off boxes.*

Limited Access to Tutoring and Study Support

- Students reported limited access to tutoring during evening hours and on Fridays, despite studying late on campus. This gap was especially challenging for students balancing coursework with work and family responsibilities.
 - *“The tutoring center closes earlier than the library...people are here until 7, but they still chose to not hire tutors until 7 p.m...I just wish that there were more tutoring hours in general. I think there's not even tutoring on Fridays.*
 - *“There's times where I'm even studying in the library starting at, like, twelve noon. But then I'm on campus until 11 p.m. or 10 p.m. because I have an essay that I have to do. And it's, like, there have been times where I'm literally at 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. sitting in those chairs outside because the library closes...they should be open a little bit longer because students should be able to study longer.”*

Delayed Feedback and Grading Practices

- Students also described delays in grading that made it difficult to monitor their academic progress throughout the semester. Receiving feedback only at the end limited opportunities to adjust study strategies or seek support earlier.
 - *“The items aren't graded until the end of the semester, which makes it very difficult... being able to see all my work graded right away has really, really helped a lot... that's one thing that has helped me, just being able to understand where I'm at.”*

Resource Accessibility and Financial Barriers

- Students reported challenges accessing affordable textbooks, required materials, and online programs. While vouchers and emergency funds were helpful, limitations restricted how and where they could be used.
 - *“...it has to only be textbooks that you can use that money on. Only recently, they had changed it so you could buy goggles for science classes, but you can't buy other science materials. Or if I'm taking an art class, they have the art supplies there, but I can't use my money from vouchers.”*

- *“...they don’t have the books at the bookstore, where you can use the vouchers, or they don’t have, specifically, resources outside of using it at the ABC bookstore [Can’t use vouchers outside of the bookstore].”*
- *“I’m taking a physics class and they want you to use a program online, which you have to pay like a subscription for... You have to buy a [new] book that gives you a code... because if you buy a used book the the code is already used... But if you don’t buy the book then you have to pay like a \$100 to do homework for the whole semester. And it’s like 30% of your grade.”*
- *“Even when I do get the vouchers, like, it’s only good enough for maybe one textbook.”*
- Students also described issues when required materials were unavailable.
 - *“Last semester, half the English class did not pass because the book was out of stock and the teacher refused to print out the papers...or even download and share them on Canvas.”*
- Students reported confusion about available financial support, including eligibility, timelines, and required documentation, particularly parental information, which some students or parents may be reluctant to share. Students described fear around completing FAFSA.
 - *“They’re scared to put in the info because they require your parents’ social security...”*
 - *“I remember the time I did it [applied for FAFSA]...I thought, ‘Maybe I don’t want to do FAFSA because then more stuff will pop up for my parents, and this is gonna lead to a worse path for them...’ ”*
 - *“If it wasn’t because I went through the process with my children...I probably would not have known that I, myself, can apply for FAFSA too.”*

Communication and Visibility of Opportunities

- Students emphasized that information about resources and opportunities is not always communicated effectively, especially for online students. Newsletters are often missed, and in-person events may be inaccessible.
 - ***“Students may not always read newsletters...however, if the information is sent through direct email, it is more likely to be read.”***

Mental Health and Emotional Strain

- Students reported anxiety, stress, depression, and burnout related to academic pressure, financial strain, family responsibilities, and isolation, particularly during periods of online learning (during Covid).
- Limited access to bilingual or culturally responsive counseling impacts students’ experiences.

Navigating College Systems and Transitions

- Students, particularly those transitioning from high school or returning after time away, described confusion around registration timelines, waitlists, and course sequencing.
 - *“I wish there was a better way to go about learning how to register and knowing the dates of when certain classes open up and the time to register.”*

Growth Areas & Opportunities for Improvement

While students expressed appreciation for available support, they identified several areas where improvements could enhance access, inclusion, and overall student experience. Growth areas centered on the affordability of course materials, visibility and inclusivity of programs, access to study spaces and childcare, navigation of systems and technology, and the availability of bilingual and culturally responsive resources. These gaps disproportionately affected online students, ESL students, student parents, and those unfamiliar with institutional systems.

Affordability of Course Materials and Supplies

- Students described financial barriers related to textbooks, course supplies, and limited voucher flexibility. Challenges included expensive textbooks, vouchers restricted to the on-campus bookstore or specific items, unavailable or outdated materials, and the need to purchase new textbooks solely to access online homework platforms. Costs varied by major, with students in programs such as art facing additional supply expenses.
- **Recommendation:** Expand voucher usability, ensure availability of updated course materials, and provide rental or e-textbook options to reduce financial burden.

Access to Study Spaces and Campus Facilities

- Students emphasized the need for extended library hours and additional study spaces, noting that current closures forced some students to study outside the library late at night. Limitations were particularly challenging for students without quiet or stable study environments at home.
- **Recommendation:** Extend library and tutoring center hours (including Fridays and evenings) to accommodate student study schedules, particularly during peak periods like finals week.

Visibility and Communication of Opportunities

- Students reported that programs, events, and resources were often difficult to find or communicated too late, especially for online students. Career fairs, clubs, scholarships, and support programs were not always clearly advertised, and newsletters were often overlooked or inaccessible. Students suggested that instructors, particularly those teaching entry-level or general education courses, could play a stronger role in sharing opportunities at the beginning of the semester.
- **Recommendation:** Develop a comprehensive communication strategy that uses social media, direct emails, newsletters, and in-class announcements to ensure all students, including online learners, are aware of opportunities for engagement and resources. Ensure posters and information boards are up to date.
 - *"...Clean that board up in the cafeteria. It's super busy and a lot of the things are old. But you can't take down anything [as a student]... We have to put up flyers for, like, art clubs, like I mean, no one's gonna see it because it's so cluttered, but it's all stuff from, like, two or three years ago... And I think they should put dates on stuff."*

Inclusion and Sense of Belonging in Support Programs

- Some students described feeling "out of place" in campus programs and organizations, particularly those who were mixed-race, multicultural, or unsure whether they belonged in programs such as Aspire or Enlace. These feelings sometimes prevented students from seeking support, even when they were eligible.

- *"I'm not in ASPIRE or in the Enlace program even though both of my parents never graduated from college, just because I feel out of place...I just kind of feel like nobody ever tells me, 'Oh, you should sign up for ASPIRE.' "*
- *"I did go to [X program] before...I just felt like I wasn't really welcomed...I came in to ask questions and she was just like, 'Oh, like who are you asking for?'"*
- **Recommendation:** Provide proactive outreach and clearer messaging about programs and eligibility to reduce barriers and foster belonging.

Navigation of Systems and Technology

- Students, particularly ESL students, older students, and those less familiar with technology, reported difficulty navigating the student portal, understanding deadlines, and using required software such as Canvas, Google Docs, and Google Slides. Many were unaware of available technical support or found access unclear or appointment-based.
 - *"ESL students...they're the ones having the most difficult time...it's all online, which already a lot of people have a tough time with, especially because we have a lot of older students. And then it's all in English, so having that problem...of course, you know, there's programs they can go to get help. But if you're an ESL student...you would have to do research to know about those, and that's already kinda hard - navigating a website where it's all in English."*
 - *"People like me that are struggling with technology...I needed to use Google Slides and I did not know how to do that...I'm a person that cannot just learn from a computer...I need that guidance where I can meet with someone like, 'Hey this is how you get this done.' "*
 - *"I was actually having trouble with my Canvas app...five days without Canvas until I finally got support... I was on the phone...for two hours [with IT]...She guided me through everything...Until finally, she tells me, 'But if you go to the library, there's an IT person'... Going with IT...not even two minutes - got it done...the simplest thing...I think there should be more resources out there to teach people like me that are not aware, not like high-tech, with technology [tech-savy]."*
- **Recommendation:** Provide enhanced technical support, workshops, or drop-in sessions for commonly used software. Consider peer-led sessions for additional guidance.

Need for Bilingual and Multilingual Support

- Students identified gaps in bilingual and multilingual services, particularly in counseling and financial aid. While students appreciated Vietnamese-speaking counselors, Spanish-speaking students noted limited access to counselors and advisors who spoke their language, both in person and online.
 - *"I was helping out an ESL student who speaks Spanish and we went to the counseling office and they didn't have any counselors who speak Spanish. But they had a lot who speak Vietnamese, which is really good. We have a lot of Vietnamese ESL speakers, but we also have a lot of Spanish ESL students."*
- **Recommendation:** Expand bilingual/multilingual staffing across counseling, financial aid, and academic support services to ensure accessibility for all students.

Childcare and Support for Student Parents

- Student parents expressed a strong need for childcare options that would allow them to attend classes or complete coursework without distraction. Current spaces where parents bring children are not substitutes for proper childcare support.
 - *“I know they did a little room for studying...It’s a space where you can bring your kid but you are there...it’s not ideal if you have to study and you still have to watch your kid. So maybe having a couple of hours of childcare...I remember at the onset they had the child development center where students were actually studying child development, that degree, and they also had the kids there. Or at least a place where I can drop off my kid for maybe two hours so I can study...so at least a couple hours of study time will be nice.”*
- **Recommendation:** Establish on-campus childcare facilities or supervised study spaces for student parents.

Financial Aid Support

- Students reported that lack of in-person guidance on FAFSA and financial aid sometimes hindered timely submissions. Workshops or direct support were suggested as ways to reduce confusion and ensure successful completion.
- **Recommendation:** Provide in-person and personalized support for financial aid applications, including counseling, live/in-person small-group online walkthroughs, and workshops (evenings/weekends) to simplify the process. This structured, interactive support model could also be applied to other areas, such as technology, course registration, and academic advising.

Student Engagement, Belonging, and Campus Life

- Students noted limited school spirit, inactive student clubs, and a lack of social events that foster connection. Some suggested that branded merchandise (e.g., hoodies), cultural events beyond heritage months, and more visible student activities could strengthen campus identity and belonging.
- **Recommendation:** Increase campus programming, social events, and culturally inclusive activities throughout the year to enhance engagement and a sense of community.

Conclusion

The findings from the focus groups with Latinx students at Evergreen Valley College highlight both the strengths of existing programs and services as well as areas where additional support could enhance student success and engagement. Students benefit from supportive instructors, accessible resources, and community programs, yet challenges related to course availability, counseling consistency, financial barriers, and sense of belonging remain. Addressing these challenges through targeted strategies, such as expanded mental health resources, enhanced technical and bilingual support, improved communication of opportunities, and accessible childcare, can foster a more equitable and inclusive environment. By acting on these insights, EVC has the opportunity to strengthen student outcomes, promote belonging for all learners, and ensure that every student is empowered to thrive academically, personally, and professionally.

Appendix

Focus Group Questions

- Opening questions: Please share with us your name, preferred pronouns, and something you love to do in your free time.
- Transition Question: Think back to when you first heard about Evergreen Valley College.
 - What was your first impression?
- Question 1: What type of home environment/support do you have to help you succeed in your educational goals?
 - Follow up question: What are some key offices, departments, or people on campus that convey messages of encouragement and support for you to help you succeed?
- Question 2: What do you believe contributes to the academic success of students?
- Question 3: What challenges have you experienced that have impacted your academics?
- Question 4: What is the most important factor that is keeping you moving toward success at this college?
- Ending question: Please explain why earning a degree or certificate, or transferring is important to you.
- Ending question: What advice would you give to EVC to improve the Latinx student experience on campus? How can the college best support you as a student?