



# Research Brief

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## Focus group Findings: Guided Pathways Collaborative Validation Study

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### Introduction

A focus group study was conducted with Santa Monica College students to gain feedback on ideas designed to make college easier to navigate, strengthen support, build community and belonging, and help students succeed. Students were asked to provide feedback on several proposed strategies intended to strengthen student connection and support. These ideas included creating a Summer Bridge and orientation experience, embedding support and relationship-building into gateway courses, developing a centralized digital hub for student resources and information, and supporting faculty in better understanding and responding to student needs.

### Methodology and Participants

Twenty students from Santa Monica College participated in a two-hour long focus group held on Zoom in May, 2026.

### Findings: Themes

The focus group was recorded and transcribed, and the results were coded and analyzed. Several themes emerged from the analysis, which were organized according to the four ideas that were presented to better support students' sense of belonging:

1. Summer Bridge and Orientation Support
2. Gateway Classes that Build Community
3. One Central Place for Student Information
4. Helping Students Better Support faculty

## Idea 1: Summer Bridge and Orientation Support

Overall, participants were **highly supportive of a summer bridge/orientation program**. The discussion reflected broad agreement that structured transition support helps students feel:

- More confident
- More connected
- Less overwhelmed
- Better prepared academically and socially

### In-Person Orientation and Campus Tours Were Seen as Highly Valuable

Many participants emphasized that physically seeing the campus and learning where resources are located would help reduce confusion and anxiety for new students. Students felt that **in-person experiences feel more impactful and welcoming** than online-only orientations.

Participants described:

- Learning where offices, classrooms, and resources are located
- Meeting counselors connected to their major
- Becoming familiar with campus before the first week of classes
- Feeling less overwhelmed during transition

*“Physical tours at USC made it easier to remember where resources were located.”* Speaker 13

### Peer Navigators and Peer Mentorship Were Strongly Supported

This was one of the strongest themes throughout the discussion.

Participants thought peer navigators were **helpful because it helped them build community and friendships, it helped them navigate confusing systems, it helped them understand the SMC campus culture, and overall helped them feel supported**. They also viewed peer navigators as less intimidating and more relatable than formal staff. Participants liked the idea of:

- Being assigned a peer mentor/navigator
- Connecting with students in similar majors
- Having someone approachable to ask questions
- Receiving guidance from students with lived experience

*“Peer mentorship helped me navigate overwhelming information as a neuro-divergent student.” Speaker 16*

### **Career and Counseling Courses Were Viewed Positively**

Several participants supported including counseling courses such as Counseling 12 and Counseling 20. Participants seemed to **value these courses** because **they combine practical information with academic planning**.

Students appreciated that these courses:

- Help identify majors and career paths
- Assist with enrollment processes
- Teach how college systems work
- Provide structured guidance early on

### **Community Building Was Viewed as Important**

Students repeatedly emphasized that transition support is **not just informational, it is also social and emotional**.

Participants valued:

- Meeting other students
- Building friendships
- Feeling welcomed
- Creating support systems before classes begin

*“I like the idea of community-building activities from the summer bridge program. That could be a great way to just connect people.” Speaker 12*

## ***Main Concerns About Supports Before Starting College***

### **Time Commitment and Summer Availability**

The biggest concern from students was **accessibility and scheduling**. Students discussed working during summer, traveling abroad, planning their summer schedule in advance of these activities, and being unavailable during summer. There was concern that requiring attendance could unintentionally exclude some students.

Many students recommended:

- Offering both in-person and online options

- Advertising programs early
- Providing flexible access to materials

### **Online Students and International Students May Be Left Out**

Participants raised concerns that students who **cannot physically attend campus** may not benefit equally. This especially affected international students, remote learners, and students outside the country before the semester begins.

Students suggested:

- Virtual campus tours
- Interactive online maps
- Digital orientation materials
- Hybrid programming

*“Other universities offer immersive virtual campus tours and SMC lacks this feature.”* Speaker 3

### **Information Overload**

Some participants mentioned **orientations can feel overwhelming** because of the amount of information provided at once. Participants appreciated having PowerPoints or materials to revisit afterward. While students still valued having access to resources, there was concern that:

- Too much information may be difficult to process
- Students may forget details later

## ***What Participants Felt Was Missing***

### **Continued Support Beyond Summer**

One important theme was that **support should not stop once the semester begins**.

Participants suggested:

- Ongoing workshops during fall and spring
- Continued check-ins
- Support throughout the first year

## Better Accessibility and Simpler Communication

Students want **simplified communication**, making resources provided to students easier to navigate, and to provide individual support to students based on their unique needs.

Students explained that:

- College websites can contain too much information
- Navigating resources can feel overwhelming
- Programs should consider different access needs

## More Structured Peer Connection

While peer navigators were popular, some participants wanted more clarity on:

- How students are assigned mentors
- Whether students must initiate contact
- How peer support systems operate

This suggests students may want:

- More structured outreach
- Clear communication about how peer mentorship works

*“With Peer Navigators, are students assigned a specific person? Or is that something students have to initiate?” Speaker 5*

## Idea 2: Gateway Classes that Build Community

This discussion focused on the idea of embedding student support into first-year or “gateway” classes so that students learn not only academic content, but also how to succeed socially, personally, and professionally in college.

## Connecting Coursework to Careers Was Highly Valued

One of the strongest themes was that students **want classes to feel meaningful and connected to real career pathways**. Students felt this would make coursework feel more purposeful rather than “just taking classes for credit.”

Participants appreciated the idea of:

- Linking coursework to careers and majors
- Learning how classes apply to future goals
- Hearing about professors' professional experiences
- Building networks and internship opportunities

*“Students do not understand how courses connect to their careers.”* Speaker 5

### **Representation and Faculty Diversity Matter**

Students **valued seeing diverse faculty** and learning about faculty career journeys.

Participants suggested this:

- Helps students see themselves in professional or academic roles
- Creates a stronger sense of belonging
- Encourages motivation and aspiration

*“I really appreciate the faculty profiles for Scholar Spotlight, because seeing diversity on campus was something that really helped me see myself in those types of positions.”* Speaker 16

### **Existing Counseling and Success Courses Were Viewed as Effective**

A major recurring point was that **many of these goals are already addressed in courses** like Counseling 12, Counseling 20, Library 1, and Kinesiology 2.

Students repeatedly described these classes as valuable because they teach:

- Career exploration
- Study and time management
- Personal values and goal setting
- Research skills
- Balance and wellness

### **Faculty Support and Resource Awareness Are Important**

Participants stressed that **supportive faculty behaviors significantly impact student success**. Students also suggested that faculty who feel supported themselves may be better able to support students.

Helpful faculty behaviors included:

- Being knowledgeable about student resources
- Referring students to support services

- Showing care and understanding
- Creating welcoming classroom environments

## ***Main Concerns About the Idea of Gateway Courses***

### **Fear That Academic Content Would Be Reduced**

This was the **largest concern in the discussion**. Several participants worried that embedding too much additional material into gateway courses could:

- Take away from core academic instruction
- Reduce time available for course content
- Turn academic classes into counseling-style courses

*“I do not like the idea because it could take away from the learning academically.”* Speaker 9

### **Some Students Felt Existing Courses Already Cover These Topics**

Another **major concern was duplication**. Participants questioned whether gateway courses should include career exploration, time management, and study skills because specialized counseling courses already address these topics thoroughly.

Several students suggested:

- Encouraging enrollment in Counseling 12 or Counseling 20 instead
- Expanding awareness of those classes
- Integrating only limited support content into gateway courses

### **Unequal Access to Counseling Courses**

While counseling courses were praised, some participants pointed out structural barriers. Students **may not access valuable support courses unless they are integrated more intentionally into pathways**.

Students noted:

- Counseling 20 is more strongly promoted than Counseling 12
- Students often choose classes based on transfer/general education requirements
- Some useful courses feel “optional”

*“Counseling 12 can feel like an additional burden because students only need one counseling course for requirements.”* Speaker 3

## ***What Participants Felt Was Missing***

### **More Practical Integration Rather Than Full Course Redesign**

Rather than fully redesigning academic classes, students suggested:

- Brief integration of support content
- Referrals to campus resources
- Career examples connected naturally to coursework

This reflected a preference for support that complements academics instead of replacing them.

### **Stronger Faculty Training and Institutional Support**

Participants suggested **faculty support and student support are interconnected**. Students implied that faculty need:

- Better awareness of student onboarding experiences
- Training on student support resources
- Institutional support themselves

### **Greater Attention to Student Well-Being**

Several comments **expanded the idea of student success beyond academics**. This suggests students view college success holistically rather than purely academically.

Participants highlighted:

- Balance and wellness
- Stress management
- Sense of belonging
- Personal identity and values
- Community and mentorship

## **Idea 3: One Central Place for Student Information**

This discussion focused on reducing information overload by creating one centralized, organized location for students to access deadlines, resources, announcements, and campus information.

## Students Strongly Supported a Centralized Information System

There was broad agreement that **students currently receive information from too many disconnected sources**, creating confusion and frustration.

Participants described:

- Too many emails
- Multiple websites
- Conflicting information
- Difficulty locating important resources
- Having to dig through PDFs and webpages

Students overwhelmingly supported the idea of having:

- One consistent place for information
- Clear deadlines and updates
- Easier navigation
- Better organization of resources

### Example Insight

*“You have to go on a journey through the website to locate information, and there is conflicting information between counseling and online sources.”* Speaker 3

## Information Accuracy and Consistency Should be Prioritized

A key theme was not just centralization, but **ensuring information is up-to-date and consistent** across departments.

Students repeatedly mentioned frustration when:

- Counseling gives different answers than the website
- Policies change without communication
- Links are broken or outdated

*“Broken links and outdated webpages discourage students from continuing to seek help.”* Speaker 12

## Canvas Was Viewed as the Most Practical Central Hub

Among proposed platforms, **Canvas received the strongest support** because students already use it, they check it regularly, and it is integrated into their daily academic routines.

Participants suggested:

- A general student information Canvas shell
- Daily or weekly updates
- Internship and opportunity announcements
- Resource reminders
- Deadline notifications

### **Existing Platforms Could Be Improved Rather Than Creating Something New**

**Students generally preferred improving existing systems instead of building an entirely new app or website.** The platforms/systems they mentioned included SMC Go app, Canvas, Corsair Connect, and the SMC website

Participants suggested:

- Consolidating information into one familiar system
- Increasing visibility and usability
- Improving updates and coordination

### **Faculty Play an Important Role in Information Sharing**

Participants repeatedly emphasized that professors are key communication points for students.

Students valued when faculty:

- Introduce resources on the first day
- Include campus services in syllabi
- Require students to explore support programs
- Reinforce important information verbally

*“As we review the syllabus the first day, maybe we can also review the most important resources that we have as students.”* Speaker 13

## ***Main Concerns About Current Communication Systems***

### **Information Overload and Fragmentation**

This was the main concern throughout the discussion. Participants suggested that **students stop trying to seek help after repeated failed attempts** to locate information.

Students described being overwhelmed by:

- Constant emails

- Event announcements
- Multiple communication channels
- Too much scattered information

### **Lack of Accessibility and Ease of Navigation**

Participants emphasized the **importance of designing systems that were easy for students to navigate**. However, students repeatedly described current institutional systems as difficult to navigate.

Problems included:

- Hidden PDFs
- Broken links
- Poor website organization
- Unclear pathways to information
- Overly complex systems

### **Some Student Groups Feel Underserved**

Several participants highlighted groups that may not be fully supported by current communication systems.

These included:

- International students
- Evening students
- Working students
- Students with disabilities
- Students unfamiliar with college systems

*“Many services and events end at 5 P.M., which makes it hard for evening students to access.”* Speaker 14

## ***What Participants Felt Was Missing***

### **Better Coordination Across Departments**

Students suggested the institution itself sometimes operates in disconnected ways. Students wanted **stronger institutional collaboration so communication feels unified** rather than fragmented.

Participants described:

- Departments not communicating with one another
- Simultaneous conflicting events
- Inconsistent messaging
- Lack of coordinated calendars

### More Human and Social Reinforcement of Information

An important theme was that information alone is not enough. Students suggested they remember and trust information more when it is reinforced through:

- Professors
- Peer groups
- Programs like Black Collegians and Adelante
- Counselors
- Social interaction and community networks

*“I think the more you are connected, the more support you have, the more reminders you have, the more people you are connected to, the more opportunities you have to hear these things, I think that’s an important part of the experience.” Speaker 10*

## Idea 4: Helping Faculty Better Support Students

There was a strong student belief that **faculty support is one of the most important factors shaping student success, belonging, and persistence**. Students consistently described supportive faculty as relational, culturally aware, communicative, and proactive in connecting students to resources. At the same time, they identified major disconnects caused by inconsistent communication, lack of cultural responsiveness, uneven counseling knowledge, and assumptions about students’ backgrounds and capacities.

### Cultural Awareness and Identity-Affirming Support Are Central to Student Success

One of the strongest themes in this section was the **importance of cultural awareness among faculty and staff**. Students emphasized that feeling understood and respected culturally had a direct impact on their academic experience and sense of belonging.

Students expanded this beyond race alone, emphasizing:

- racial awareness,
- cultural awareness,

- language accessibility,
- disability access,
- understanding of low-income and working student experiences,
- support for international students.

*“Personally, what made a difference for me is the cultural awareness that exists in a very beautiful corner of the counseling department, the Black Collegians Program. I wish that some of my teachers had the same cultural awareness.”*

Speaker 18

### **Faculty Relationships and Personal Connection Increase Student Engagement**

Students repeatedly described **meaningful faculty relationships as highly impactful**. Supportive faculty were characterized as approachable, invested, communicative, and willing to mentor beyond course content.

Examples included:

- professors helping students choose courses
- connecting students with peers
- discussing graduate school and career pathways
- maintaining contact after the course ended
- sharing networking opportunities
- learning students’ personal stories

### **Building Classroom Community**

Students **strongly valued activities that helped classmates learn about one another**. They felt these activities increased peer connection, reduced isolation, encouraged collaboration, and heal support community building. Students especially appreciated when faculty participated alongside students by sharing their own stories.

Students also highlighted activities fostered community and peer connection rather than transactional classroom interactions.

- student profiles
- faculty introductions and biographies
- personal story assignments
- collaborative sharing activities
- “cultural wealth wheel” exercises

*“We each wrote a personal story and I think that really helped us connect as a class.”* Speaker 20

## **Intake Surveys and Check-In Practices**

**Students responded positively to the idea of intake surveys.** They felt that these surveys could help faculty understand student realities, make students feel a seen, and reduce barrier for asking for help. Some of the students shared that they felt more comfortable sharing personal challenges through surveys than through direct conversations.

Suggested survey topics included:

- Work schedules
- Commute times
- Educational goals
- Outside responsibilities
- Concerns or challenges
- Preferred office hour times

## ***What Participants Felt Was Missing***

### **Lack of Cultural Awareness**

Several students emphasized that faculty sometimes lack awareness of:

- International student experiences
- Language barriers
- Working student challenges
- Low-income student struggles
- Disability accommodations
- Students of color experiences

International students specifically discussed:

- Difficulty processing fast-paced English
- Challenges local language
- Additional time needed for exams
- Emotional stress from relocation and cultural adjustment

Students argued that these experiences are often invisible to faculty.

### **Students Want Faculty to Connect Them to Resources Proactively**

Students repeatedly praised faculty who actively connected them to:

- tutoring
- food resources

- campus services
- networking opportunities
- transfer and graduate school guidance
- peer support systems

*“One common theme of good teachers I’ve had is they were always promoting the resources on campus, saying 80% of students pass my class if they see tutors, or if you’re having problems go to the bodega.”* Speaker 2

Students suggested faculty should:

- know campus resources
- discuss them regularly
- explain why they matter
- integrate referrals naturally into coursework

### **Students Want More Humanized and Community-Oriented Classrooms**

Students **want classrooms to function as communities**, not just instructional spaces. They viewed these practices as especially important for first-year students who may otherwise feel isolated.

Several students described classroom practices that fostered belonging and peer connection:

- intake surveys
- personal story sharing
- student directories/profiles
- collaborative introductions
- community-building assignments

Students appreciated when faculty also participated in these activities, which reduced hierarchy and increased their trust in their professors.

## **Which Ideas Discussed Here Matter Most?**

Although participants acknowledged that all four proposed ideas were valuable, the discussion highlighted two priorities that emerged most strongly: (1) improving faculty support for students and (2) strengthening early onboarding and resource navigation for new students.

## Students Viewed Faculty Support as the Highest-Impact Investment

The strongest consensus in the discussion **centered around supporting faculty to better support students**. Participants repeatedly emphasized that faculty interactions shape the core student experience because every student engages with instructors.

Students viewed faculty support as having broad institutional reach because:

- every student interacts with faculty,
- faculty influence belonging and motivation,
- faculty serve as connectors to resources,
- classroom experiences shape retention and persistence.

*“I found go with the faculty because that’s something all students interact with, and I think that impacts the student experience the most.”* Speaker 10

## Early Navigation and Orientation Were Seen as Critical for Student Persistence

A second major priority **focused on orientation, onboarding, and helping students navigate resources** early in their college experience. Students believe the first few weeks are a critical intervention window where proactive guidance and resource connection can significantly influence persistence.

*“The resources are there, but finding them, you have to do a little digging.”*  
Speaker 19

Students emphasized:

- difficulty navigating systems independently
- lack of clear onboarding
- overwhelming first weeks
- uncertainty about where to go for help

## Access to Resources Is Not the Same as Awareness or Usability

A major underlying theme was that support services already exist, but many students either:

- do not know about them
- cannot easily find them
- do not know how to navigate them

Students **repeatedly distinguished between the presence of resources and actual accessibility**. They define accessibility not simply as offering services, but ensuring students can easily discover and use them.

## Key Takeaways from Focus Group

- 1. Students strongly valued early onboarding and transition support.**  
Participants overwhelmingly supported a Summer Bridge and orientation program that helps students feel more confident, connected, and prepared before classes begin. In-person campus tours, peer mentorship, and structured guidance were seen as especially impactful for reducing confusion and anxiety.
- 2. Peer connection and community-building were viewed as essential to student success.**  
Across all discussion areas, students emphasized that belonging, friendships, and supportive relationships are just as important as academic information.
- 3. Students want support integrated into academics — but without reducing academic rigor.**  
Participants appreciated the idea of gateway courses incorporating career exploration, wellness, and resource awareness, but many worried that too much non-academic content could take away from core instruction.
- 4. Faculty relationships have a major impact on student belonging and persistence.**  
Students consistently described supportive faculty as approachable, culturally aware, communicative, and proactive in connecting students to resources. Faculty support was ultimately viewed as the highest-impact institutional investment because every student interacts with instructors.
- 5. Students are overwhelmed by fragmented and difficult-to-navigate communication systems.**  
A major theme throughout the report was frustration with scattered information across emails, websites, PDFs, and departments. Students strongly supported creating one centralized and user-friendly information hub, with many recommending Canvas as the most practical platform.