

STUDENTS SPEAK: WHAT MAKES EOPS WORK

EOPS 2.0 Impact Study

Project Overview

Following up on our [2012 report](#) showing positive results for EOPS participation, this latest impact study provides an updated look at EOPS students' experiences and outcomes.

Part 1 investigated who participated in EOPS over a recent 10-year period (fall 2010 through spring 2019) and how their involvement affected their educational success.

Our 2022 research found positive impacts for program participants in terms of:

- **One-year throughput rates in transfer-level English and math**
- **Greater degree-applicable units completed in the first year**
- **Term-to-term persistence**
- **Award attainment (degree/certificate)**
- **Transfer-ready status within three years**
- **Transfer within six years**

Find details on Part 1 of the study in [EOPS Impact Study 2.0: 2010-2019 Technical Report](#).

Part 2 of the study is the focus of this brief, which delved into students' perspectives on what aspects of the program lead to educational improvements for participants through student focus groups and practitioner interviews.

Amari Williams, Katie Brohawn, Marcela Reyes, and Terrence Willett

Introduction

Ongoing research conducted by the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) shows that participation in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) can improve the success, retention, and completion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students attending California Community Colleges (CCC) (see sidebar and study page).¹

Through a significant and ongoing state investment, college-based EOPS programs provide comprehensive support to meet eligible students' academic and nonacademic needs to facilitate their ability to obtain job skills, earn occupational certificates and associate degrees, and/or achieve university transfer. Flexible in its approach, colleges leverage their EOPS funding to offer academic, career, and personal counseling; financial resources; and services "over and above" traditional campus supports (CCC EOPS Association, 2022).

To better understand how students themselves experience the program and what EOPS does to support their educational journey, **The RP Group conducted a series of focus groups, engaging students from a cohort of colleges showing greater success serving EOPS participants.**² These conversations explored participants'...

- Background, educational history, and academic goals
- Experience with EOPS application and eligibility requirements
- Familiarity with EOPS and reasons for participating
- Perspectives on EOPS strengths and opportunities for improvement

¹ <https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleType/ArticleView/articleId/157>

² See Methodology in sidebar on p. 2.



This brief offers those leading and supporting EOPS across the California Community Colleges insights into what works for participants – centering students’ experiences, highlighting effective practices, and offering considerations for program improvements.

Focus Group Highlights

Evidence from student focus groups underscore **EOPS as a key source of holistic support in navigating both the systemic barriers and personal challenges** that participants encounter in pursuit of their academic goals. Students described experiencing EOPS programs that are grounded in personal connection, serve as strong advocates for students’ needs, and demonstrate deep commitment to students’ success – guiding principles for supporting some of the most underrepresented and disadvantaged groups involved in California’s higher education systems.

Student Say EOPS Programs Are Accessible

Students reported little variation across colleges in the requirements to join and maintain participation in EOPS. Requirements to join EOPS generally include:

- Demonstrated financial need determined via:
 - Submission of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or CA Dream Act Application, or
 - Other means of qualifying for the California College Promise Grant
- Submission of electronic or paper program application
- Registration in 12 or more units beyond the enrollment census date
- Prior completion of no more than 40-70 transferable college units (varied by college)

In addition to these requirements, a part of the EOPS application process included some manner of determining whether a student was educationally disadvantaged or could otherwise benefit from participation in the program. Colleges maintained a degree of flexibility in making this determination but common considerations included: students’ basic skills math and English

Methodology

The RP Group engaged 20 students from five colleges to participate in focus groups. We selected colleges based on higher-than-average performance across several success indicators as well as through conversations with the California Community Colleges EOPS Association (CCCEOPSA) team to ensure diversity in college geography and size.

With the help of program staff on each campus, we invited all active EOPS students. We then scheduled interested students for a one-hour online focus group (conducted via Zoom), holding a separate session for each college.

During the focus groups, we asked students 11 questions on a variety of topics regarding their respective EOPS program experiences. Participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card for their participation.

placement (before the implementation of AB 705),³ high school completion status (whether the student had graduated from high school) and first generation college student status. While most students met all of the above criteria for acceptance, some students felt that demonstrating an educational disadvantage was a key factor in being accepted because they were not able to qualify for the California College Promise Grant or otherwise demonstrate a need for financial assistance. One first-generation student shared:

My chemistry professor [was familiar with EOPS]. I applied...but because of my tax bracket or income I didn't qualify by a small amount. But my chemistry professor [shared my story] and I was accepted.

Students likewise reported little variation in the requirements to maintain eligibility once accepted into EOPS. Generally, students were expected to:

- Register in 12 or more units each semester
- Maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 2.0
- Attend at least three counseling check-in appointments each semester

Students did not report significant challenges with maintaining eligibility once accepted. The EOPS GPA requirement mirrored their colleges' overall GPA expectations for remaining in good academic standing, something broadly communicated during orientation, counseling sessions, etc. The supportive culture of the program was consistently geared toward meeting students where they were and providing them with extensive support to help them maintain eligibility during challenging times. Two students shared:

It's happened to me where I can't do 12 units, but I still needed help, and they worked with me.

When I realized what I wanted to do for a living and I wanted to be more hands-on, I just made it a point to make my three appointments specifically with my academic counselor every time and she was even more willing to meet with me again if I wanted. It wasn't a limit...but I had to communicate.

Unlike other support programs focused on a specific student demographic such as Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS) or Guardian Scholars for former foster youth, EOPS programs are open to any eligible student who wishes to participate. EOPS students may also have disabilities, be former foster youth, veterans, or members of other special populations. Most focus group participants reported intentions to transfer; however, students' intended academic pathway (transfer, career-technical education, etc.) did not impact acceptance into EOPS. In fact, one of the benefits of EOPS participation students noted was the support they received with clarifying their educational goals.

³ <https://assessment.cccco.edu/ab-705-implementation>

Students Recommend Improving Program Outreach

No student in the focus groups reported having any significant familiarity with the array of services and resources available through EOPS prior to joining. Third parties (e.g., peers, faculty) tended to heavily influence students' decisions to apply more than direct outreach from the program. Many focus group participants described learning about EOPS by "happenstance" – either a faculty member specifically directed them to the resource, or they learned of the program via word of mouth. One student explained:

I started working for the CalWORKs office, and then as we're going through ... our presentations and what programs are offered, EOPS came up. My supervisor... explained to me ... what it was and [asked] if I would be interested.

Students were **emphatic about the need for greater publicity and awareness of the benefits of EOPS**. As one student shared:

I think a lot of people don't even know what EOPS stands for or offers ... so I think maybe we need to do more outreach and inform students that aren't yet a part of [the college] so that they can be informed of the resources ... that they may qualify for.

Cross-Program Collaboration

At the same time, coordination between EOPS and the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids ([CalWORKs](#)) offices emerged as a bright spot in terms of student referrals to the program. Students who are eligible for CalWORKs are often also able to access EOPS services, including its Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) program; both CalWORKs and CARE support students receiving public assistance in transitioning to financial self-sufficiency.

Students across all five colleges consistently reported that the partnership between these two programs expanded their perception of their support networks. Students shared that the co-location of these services and recommendations from CalWORKs program staff to tap EOPS supports encouraged their interest and application. Two students explained:

If you are in EOPS, CalWORKs, or CARE ... because most of the people that are there are kind of working together ... because they're in the same office. They communicate with each other ... the staff and faculty ... and then they help us students to make it easier.

I'm also low income and a single mom. And so, everything I needed was in that office: CalWORKs, CARE ... Everything is in the EOPS office.

Student Value EOPS' Holistic Approach

When asked about the supports their particular program made available and the ways in which EOPS fostered students' success, focus group participants reported **ease of access to counselors, priority registration, and the availability of book and meal vouchers as most helpful**. Across all the participating colleges, students recognized those services as key benefits available specifically for EOPS participants. Other program services available varied by college, such as access to free learning supplies, guided university tours, free printing services, and laptops available for loan each semester. Students shared that these resources helped ease many of the practical barriers to them completing academic goals.

When asked about the most impactful, less tangible resources EOPS offered that helped students clarify their goals and overcome more personal challenges, three elements emerged: transformative student-counselor relationships, affirmation of the first-generation student experience, and a shared community of success.

Transformative Student-Counselor Relationships

Participants across all five focus groups identified the relationship with their EOPS counselor as instrumental to developing a sense of connection and surety. The support provided by **EOPS counselors extended far beyond routine academic advising and educational planning services**. Students felt heard and valued; they also felt encouraged to tackle the unique challenges of navigating the community college environment and equipped to self-advocate for getting their needs met. Two EOPS students explained:

It's more personal than just general counseling, and I feel that they have your back. If anything, you feel comfortable and safe.

I believe that our EOPS program is so successful because of ... the way the counselors treat students and because they're so dedicated to their job.... You go in there ... and you end up leaving with great information [on] ... how to do things on your own, how to ... look for help, and it just opens doors.

Affirmation of First-Generation Students' Experiences

By and large, focus group participants identified as first-generation college students. It was not uncommon for participants to have one or both parents with less than a high school level of education. For these students, **EOPS often filled a motivational gap left by familial networks** that either lacked the experience necessary to offer support or specifically discouraged the pursuit of higher education due to cultural or gender expectations. As two students shared:

Just going to EOPS has really, really made a big impact to me. I'm a first-generation student.... I can't really talk to my parents about signing college applications because they haven't seen these documents before.

[My parents] just assume that “Oh, he’s doing good ... in school,” so they don’t bother to check in or check up on me.... With the EOPS counselors ... it’s a requirement to meet up.... If you don’t meet with them, they call you and say, “Hey, what’s up?”

A Shared Community of Success

EOPS’ counseling approach **combined with the largely first-generation, transfer-bound population served by the program reinforced a strong sense of belonging and comradery** among students. The students frequently recognized their EOPS office as a space where they could go for reliable, relatable support from staff and peers. Two students described the program’s powerful impact on their determination to stay the course toward their goals:

I would say that they’re really helpful and bring a sense of community and ... because of me being a single mother and being a first-generation student ... I feel lonely in a way.... So, that sense of community is so important to me because at least I know ... I can go somewhere, and someone can listen to what I’m saying and ... genuinely cares and doesn’t think of me as just ... a number.

It’s the community that brings you this sense of belonging to the college.... So, sometimes I think about it, still to this day, that if I hadn’t gotten into college and met EOPS, I would have been lost, and I probably wouldn’t have continued being in college [because] I wouldn’t think that I was worth it.

Conclusion

EOPS programs offer critical resources and support for some of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged students within the California Community Colleges. For the largely first-generation population the program serves, EOPS holds essential space on campuses where students with shared experiences can find one another, establish community, and acquire the social capital necessary to navigate the unique challenges of being the first in their families to pursue a college education.

While the resources and services available through EOPS vary by college, all programs tend to offer a set of core supports. Yet, EOPS students overwhelmingly recognize counseling as *the* essential aspect of the program. The impacts of EOPS on student success largely rest on the incredible effort that EOPS counselors and staff make to build trust and strike a delicate balance as advocate, coach, and caseworker. For many students, the relationship with their counselor and the ease of accessing both personal and academic counseling services within EOPS make the difference between persisting from one semester to the next or withdrawing from school.

While EOPS enjoys a degree of name recognition due in part to its long history of success, many students are unfamiliar with the particulars of the program. There is a working understanding among many students that it may be easier to gain access to a counselor as an EOPS student. That aside, the limited capacity of EOPS offices to conduct outreach means that the program

relies heavily on reputation, word of mouth, and individual champions within the faculty to encourage students to apply.

There exists an area of opportunity for EOPS to grow its capacity to reach and engage students who would undoubtedly excel in the holistic, nurturing environment the program provides. Partnerships and cross-collaboration with other college programs (e.g., CalWorks and Promise) offer an asset on which to build. Ultimately, connecting more students to EOPS can be a difference-maker for equitable student outcomes and improved mobility for generations to come.

For More Information...

See the [EOPS Study Webpage](#).

REFERENCES

CCCEOPSA. (2022). *Our Mission*. <https://www.ccceopsa.org/our-mission>