

CommunityBridge: A Website for First-Generation and Underrepresented Student Success

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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Institutions of higher education are working to be more inclusive of underrepresented groups, including first-generation and low-income college students. Broadly, data show a significant population of diverse students are now entering higher education, but completion rates are comparatively lower than entry rates. To combat this, we need to evaluate ways to support first-generation, low-income, and transfer students so they complete college. The CommunityBridge website was created to help support underrepresented first-generation Oregon State University students. The website focuses on easing the transition for first-generation students entering higher education by providing crucial non-profit and university resources into one accessible webpage. By consolidating sources of information that aids in the success of new students while simultaneously connecting them to the Corvallis community. This project's website can be referenced via the provided link, (www.Community-Bridge.org).

Key words: *Student Success, Historically Underrepresented groups, First-generation College Students, Transfer Students, Low-income Students*

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Introduction

NASPA, the association of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, argues that first-generation college student success should be of paramount importance to institutions as they strategically plan for the future. They say: “Shifting populations entering higher education, continual increases in first-generation college student enrollment, debate surrounding rising tuition and costs, and genuine desires for a rise in graduation rates and a better prepared workforce has positioned the experiences of first-generation college students as a renewed focus across postsecondary education” (Discover Programs, 2020). Beyond any diversity or performance metrics, there are real world, tangible benefits for ensuring the success of these students.

Oregon State University is a public land-grant research university in Corvallis, Oregon, committed to its research, and serving as only one of two land-, sea-, space- and sun-grant universities. Oregon State University stands out for its commitment to research and innovation. According to Oregon State University’s website, “Adapting to today’s challenges, we continue to deliver innovative, high-quality programs and courses. We put the safety and success of our community as our top priority” (Oregon State University, 2019). Due to OSU’s demonstrated commitment to their students, there are existing programs and resources that aid in students’ educational journeys.

While OSU has a commitment to supporting first-generation college students on-campus, students struggle to find resources off campus in the community, which is what led to the Community Bridge project. This paper documents the creation of the Community Bridge project, exploring the barriers that hinder help seeking among first-generation college students (first-generation college students being those first within their families to pursue a higher educational

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degree). As well, this project documents the underutilization of services, and supports a culturally tailored outreach initiative that promotes self-reliance.

Oregon State University needs to incorporate a more robust culture of care. Cavanagh (2021) defines a culture of care as, “a theory that says schools and workplaces should put more importance on relationships than curriculum when determining their institutional purpose” (How to Cultivate Section, para. 2). CommunityBridge does so in providing centralized information to first-generation student populations; caring for students who are searching for new communities.

The three primary goals of CommunityBridge are to:

1. Centralize available resources and deliver them in an accessible format.
2. Aid in the success of students while simultaneously connecting them to communities within the city and university.
3. Grow the sense of value and community belonging for underrepresented, first-generation student demographics at OSU.

Kinzie et al. (2008) found that, in addition to developing a culture of care, validation—an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by faculty and other agents of socialization in and out of the classroom— also fosters student success, particularly for historically underserved students.

Purpose of Project

Through my own personal educational journey as a transfer, first-generation, Mexicana undergraduate student, I found it difficult to locate a community after entering OSU. Not only was it hard finding a community, but I also struggled to find the right answers to my questions about available resources. While working two jobs throughout most of my academic career to offset additional costs associated with higher education, it was a daunting, oftentimes unrealistic expectation that I would spend my limited time searching through campus programs scattered

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around OSU. I had wished for there to be a single website link available for any first-generation students looking to make connections while serving as a platform that directly showed me helpful resources.

While working on the testimonials portion of CommunityBridge, first-generation students expressed to me (off camera) that they thought OSU was not concerned with their unique experiences. I resonated with this sentiment. Another common experience encountered by first-generation students was the feeling of being alienated and not properly prepared for the college experience. I experienced this myself for a short duration of time until my younger sister followed in my footsteps and began attending OSU, when I felt comforted by the presence of family.

In addition to having familial support, my undergraduate experience completely shifted as I began to more confidently immerse myself into OSU's Ethnic Studies program. I entered a program where there was a profound level of support from the department's professors and faculty members. During my Ethnic Studies coursework I found my first mentors and helpful resources that positively impacted my educational journey for the better. I encountered an authentic culture of care in a department that put importance on relationship building with their students, while also being shown how to navigate the often-obscured resources within college. This experience let me see that other first-generation students may not find the hidden knowledge until they befriend a mentor or someone who knows how to traverse through higher academia.

St. John et al. (2010) defines underrepresented students as students from families with low incomes, those who were first-generation college students, and students from minority racial/ethnic groups. The authors assert: "underrepresented students are often at risk of dropping

out unless campuses provide academic support and development programs that support persistence and retention”. These students need direct referral to these supporting programs, even before they come across any perceived barrier. Additionally, Nuñez (2011) says, “underrepresented students in public research universities more often encounter non-welcoming campus climates than do their majority peers”. This is often the first time these students are separated from strong kinship ties; they may visibly see they are a minority within their predominantly white institutions (PWI’s). Predominantly white institution (PWI) are institutions of higher learning in which the white demographic of students accounts for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Lomotey, 2010, p. 524). Kinzie et al. (2007) have found that historically underrepresented students are not able to take full advantage of learning opportunities, especially at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). In response to a need for proper foundations for first-generation students at PWIs, questions arise such as what are we missing as educators? What are the factors preventing these student groups from graduating? Can we better support our first-generation and transfer college students? What methods will be most dependable and successful? To answer some of these questions while providing support to OSU's first-generation students, the CommunityBridge project was brought forth as a compilation of resources for students.

First-generation students may not have the experience or knowledge that is required to easily navigate systems of higher education, such as how to access support resources like financial assistance programs and educational tutoring. Underrepresented and first-generation students often do not have the same access to social capital and knowledge related to navigating higher education that traditional college students possess. McClenaghan (2000) informs social capital to be a term used to describe how one is positioned in society in terms of the totality of actual and potential resources individuals can mobilize through membership in organizations and

social networks. Havlik et al. (2020) assess, “In addition to a sense of otherness or outsider status in regard to their FGC [First-generation college] status, many had overlapping concerns of being socioeconomically disadvantaged” (p. 126). Socioeconomic status is an example of a barrier for first-generation students. Other barriers include never being exposed to the inner workings of the navigation of higher academia, limited representation within classrooms, difficulties asking for help, struggles to find an immediate comforting campus community and not seeing varying cultural representation of their identities within institutional walls.

Existing OSU Campus Resources

Currently, OSU presents its campus programs and resources in a linear, alphabetized list. The Student Resources list can be referenced at, (<https://experience.oregonstate.edu/resources>). Students are expected to use the search function to find a resource by its name or filter by the location and type of resource that they are seeking. Then students can contact departments and offices directly for questions regarding services. Though helpful in providing students with a list of resources, details are missing. There is a need for the centralization of specialized services for underrepresented first-generation and first-generation transfer students' differing needs. Students possess unique experiences that require a different display of programs to target their engagement. From my own experience, it can be difficult to seek help. I would have been more receptive towards asking for help if the university had understood my cultural context from the start of my OSU experience. I am a part of a cultural background where family means everything. The strong emphasis on family relates to the ideology of Familism; an ideology that puts immense importance and priority on family (Ovinks, 2017, p. 162). Therefore, it can be a bit of a culture shock when you enter an institution where you feel your culture and values are not

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exhibited throughout campus. An innovative display of resources would further engage and connect first-generation students to a thoughtful, community-centered, and simplified pathway to access available resources.

The one current OSU resource aimed at first-generation student success resides in the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP). The EOP program provides support for students who have traditionally been denied equal access to higher education. Their approach is unique, as they pair students with mentors from similar backgrounds who understand the experiences of the students while showing them how to successfully navigate the university. A gap that I encountered within my undergraduate degree at OSU was the lack of attention to EOP, which houses the only directed webpage for first-generation students, under their *First!* website tab.

If I would have been introduced to EOP as a first-generation transfer college student, and immediately directed to their program opportunities at OSU's START program, I would have felt a greater sense of community on campus sooner than I did. I, unfortunately, did not hear of the instrumental work EOP does until the last term of my undergraduate experience.

We are not getting efficient mileage out of our existing support resources because we are only thinking about them in terms of provision of resources, instead of more holistic terms of building an initiative-taking culture of care. If, for example, we reached out to students more directly to make resources known, students who may not have access or who may have difficulty in knowing these resources exist to begin with might find the resources they need. This project addresses these gaps of not providing a centralized place where students can find existing resources and directed support to first-generation students by providing an innovative tool of access to information. No student should feel left without a connection to programs that can make a difference in their college experience.

Review of Literature

The themes gathered for the framework of the CommunityBridge project utilized social justice as a foundational construct, stemming from my Ethnic Studies coursework. This department led me to the participation of two OSU Social Justice tours. The annual tour tells of historical Corvallis community stories relating to social justice; the implication that all people should have equal access to wealth, health, well-being, privileges, and opportunity. The Ethnic Studies curricula helped in the development of a social justice advocacy perspective. Developed perspective, through coursework, helped guide the evaluation of specialized, redesign of resources that meet the unique needs of first-generation students. This act affirms that these students are to be provided with equal opportunities in the higher educational system. In addition, content within the Adult in Higher Education coursework also support the same notion, cultural ways of knowing and learning are important to understanding within institutions, others may not agree but, “this view is quite ethnocentric; that is the tendency to view one’s own cultural group as superior to others...being ethnocentric reinforces the marginalization and oppression of other systems of knowing” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 219). The examination (and active incorporation) of differing cultural systems can offer new opportunities to expand the institution’s understanding of learning and knowing.

The College Student Services Administration (CSSA) field discusses Sanford’s Theory of Challenge and the significance provided mentorship. The theory can help model an ethic of care towards first-generation students, “Mentors should assess students’ needs and provide a balance of challenge and support, which is crucial for healthy development to transpire” (Sanford, 1962). Literature found that first-generation students foster immediate connection when they are

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provided with mentorship opportunities from student affairs professionals. A second referenced CSSA theory is the Theory of Marginality and Mattering, Schlossberg (1989) discusses how mattering is a motive, determining the behavior of students. They also reference an institutional evaluation occurring (and the degree to which it is felt by students) to ensure programs, practices, and policies are helping people feel they matter. The theory has a theme that coincides with Experiential learning and Transformational Learning Theory. When taking Adult in Higher education courses, Experiential and Transformation Learning were discussed in order to provide the best approaches when teaching 'non-traditional' adult learners.

The literature related to supporting first-generation college students focuses on both academic success as well as other supports. McKenzie (2015) asserts:

First-generation students struggle both economically and academically. The socioeconomic status of students is a crucial factor that justifies the need for this population to have additional resources to increase transfer success rates. The literature indicated that first generation students arrive at college underprepared and without college level skills to advance academically. Given the needs of this category of student, further research on the factors leading to success is warranted. (pp. 25-26)

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines first-generation college students as those who are “enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any postsecondary education experience” (Baldivia et al., 2021, p. 44). The reality for first-generation students is that it is a challenge navigating two different worlds. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) further explains low-income, first-generation students not only face barriers to their academic and social integration, but they also

confront obstacles with respect to cultural adaptation. Due to differences between the culture (i.e., norms, values, expectations) of their families and communities and the culture that exists on college campuses. Engle & Tinto (2008) explain:

First-generation students often experience problems that arise from [living] simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither. First-generation students reported that relationships [back home] often become strained and difficult to maintain as they are perceived as changing and separating from [family], which causes immediate, oftentimes intense stress for these students. (p. 21)

When they enter college, the above referenced stress can be intensified when students do not find a comfortable support network straight away. In an initiative-taking solution to provide answers for potential barriers for underrepresented students in a PWI, Redd (2018) provided their qualitative study's emerging themes of institutional barriers being institutional financial challenges, implications of existing silos, equitable resources and treatment not being consistently equal, social challenges create systemic discrimination and implicit bias checking boxes and formality are common practices. Being aware of existing possible themes for first-generation students attending a PWI, can provide these students with transparency and awareness to overcome and avoid potential challenges. To dig deeper into discussing different types of first-generation students, and barriers they may face, this paper briefly discusses transfer first-generation students and low-income student gaps when arriving to higher academia.

Transfer Students

A transfer student is a student that earns prior credits at one institution then later chooses to transfer to another educational institution, typically at the same academic level. Many underrepresented first-generation students transfer in from community colleges. Transfer students face significant barriers such as, “limited access to information, curricular complexity, muddy articulation policies, inadequate advising, and vexing financial aid policies” (Wang et al., 2021, p. 11). Additionally, “Students often experience the cumulative effect of multiple hurdles, impacting their connection to the institution and cost of their degree. Transfer students frequently feel like they are alone on this journey without clear signposts to guide them” (Wang et al., 2021, p. 11). Many first-generation college students at OSU are transfer students.

Low-Income First-Generation Students

Another classification of a first-generation college student is one from a low-income bracket. First-generation college students are complex and can come from varying economic and ethnic backgrounds. For students to classify as low-income, their annual family income is less than \$25,000 (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 8). The Higher Education Coordinating Commission informed Oregon State University’s 2020 Evaluation and provided, “that of the 33,030 students attending OSU in fall 2019, 5,234 students were from underrepresented minority populations, representing 15.8% of the total headcount. In addition, 23.6% of OSU’s undergraduates were Pell Grant recipients during the 2019-20 academic year” (Cannon, 2021). These percentages show the reality of the percentage of the undergraduate student population being that of a low-income status, within the first-generation student bracket.

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To further inform, low-income first-generation students may lack the monetary wealth that the dominant culture views to be most notable but there are differing categorizations of capital that are just as significant. For example, communities of color cultivate cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Even though social capital plays a role as a barrier for first-generation low-income college students, universities may start to learn how to incorporate more of the six other forms of capital within the encompassing community cultural capital grouping. To adhere to advancing equity, Bourdieu posits, within Yosso's (2015) work:

Cultural capital (i.e., education, language), social capital (i.e., social networks, connections) and economic capital (i.e., money and other material possessions) can be acquired two ways, from one's family and/or through formal schooling. The dominant groups within society are able to maintain power because access is limited to acquiring and learning strategies to use these forms of capital for social mobility. (p.76)

To help off-set any lack of access due to limitations of social capital, an online resource hub (accessible to everyone) can help low-income first-generation student groups gain the proper mobility and access to find appropriate programs and aiding services. These students can also become empowered by the stories and theories that have worked for students with similar educational experiences.

A significant percentage of first-generation students arrive from backgrounds that tend to be from low-income status. If this is the case, the delivery (plus advertising) of informative support services and aiding resources should be strengthened in order to sufficiently support the indicated demographic of students. Certainly, institutions may not want students to be missing crucial information because of one's social capital. One's financial background should not affect

the ways in which the information of pertinent resources arrives to these students, especially if they have already successfully entered their new institution.

Relation to Race

First-generation students are more likely than their non-first-generation counterparts to be students of color; therefore, they may experience multiple forms of marginality based on their race and class (Nuñez, 2011, p. 642). Race shapes dynamics for students when they reach the university level. Museus et al. (2015) defines racism as a: “Complex social system that functions to allow a dominant racial group to maintain power and privilege over minoritized racial populations, their conditions and experiences, and their access to opportunities and resources” (pp. 12-13). While this shows the origins of whom the institutions were designed for, that certainly does not mean institutions are not evolving, but is simply a historical detail that provides context. Museus et al. (2015) provide examples how systemic racism can contribute to inequalities in academia. Being in the formation and interpretation of policy, evolution of organizations, construction of campus spaces, the development and implementation of co-curricula, and the delivery of information and support.

An example of how race can shape dynamics for first-generation students is the immediate culture shock, or the difference of culture while participating in a PWI, where a lack of familism can exist. *Familism*, the ideology that puts immense importance and priority on family, is prominent in many cultures, especially towards first-generation student groups who are majorly originating from Latinx backgrounds (but not limited to) causing the need for a campus culture that takes cultural ideology into full consideration. The strong sense of familism is prevalent within many Latinx cultures, Ovinks (2017) further asserts:

[Familism] has been defined as uniquely strong among Latino/a groups...Previous studies contend that familism is stronger among families of Latino/a origin relative to other groups, that its effects continue across generations, and that it may help or hinder educational outcomes. (p. 163)

My own experience with Indigenous and Mexican cultures emphasized the importance of having family at the forefront, serving as the driving force for all that one does. My personal example of cultural knowledge can often conflict with the innate individualistic nature of higher educational environments for students who may have strong family centered origins. “A familistic [or familism] orientation and college success are widely viewed as competing interests is due in large part to the US propensity to frame college education as an individualistic pursuit” (Ovinks, 2017, p. 164). These students often originate from backgrounds that highly attribute their family input and support for decision making; oftentimes coming from upbringings of collectivist cultures. De-valued community-based thinking can have students losing their cultural ways by their need to conform to higher academia’s more individualistic nature. The de-valued cultural ways of thinking can serve as an example of a racialized issue for first-generation students while entering higher academia. First-generation students can find themselves in a new system that positions them to necessitate assimilation in order to prevail.

Discussion of Access

Access to resource “inner knowledge” can be limited for first-generation students who are not directly exposed to circles that openly discuss college as an option, nor have the insight as to how higher education operates. Kathleen King (2009) writes that access can also be defined by access to opportunities to learn, access to physical entrance into institutions and the access or

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acquisition of new forms of social and cultural capital. Readers can now infer as to why there is the existing need to transform higher education so that it is more equitable to all students. One way to improve format and delivery of all city and college resources is to be delivered to students, in a universally simplified manner so college resource access can be attainable for any student. Currently, college information is available through various means (e.g., internet, school counselors); nevertheless, McKillip et al. (2012) agree that the accessibility of this information is questionable. If students are the first within their families to enter higher education, to help mitigate the informed potential barrier of equal access of informed resources, universities should consider adding a web link directly to their home pages to help guide students to a centralized “resource hub” for their immediate browsing.

I can understand how the process of finding resources is not intuitive for first-generation students, who often come from backgrounds where the utilization of support resources may be seen as a weakness. For example, my family emphasized independent problem solving with no external assistance, no matter how frustrating the problem might be. If I were to fail, I was to keep trying, move on or humbly request assistance from a relative or friend; the negative stigma and sense of shame for even asking prevented that much of the time. The journey through higher education was a drastic change due to many of the solutions for navigating through common problems requiring an outreach process, opposite to what I had learned growing up. One aspect of this learning experience that I can reflect upon well is that it can be discouraging to a student to encounter difficulties locating which exact buildings their resource may be found. Overall, combing through a cumbersome series of web pages is a frustrating process and can instill a sense of hesitancy towards repeat use in the future. I fear that the above example could serve as a barrier to success; prolonging these student groups' graduation rates with the avoidance of

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resources that may have been a determinantal factor in whether they graduate. First-generation students need a centralization of all helpful resources available to them, the promotion of instrumental campus programs, and an easy route to access any information needed.

Overview of CommunityBridge

The CommunityBridge website was created to help support first-generation and transfer student groups at Oregon State University. CommunityBridge displays crucial non-profit and university student resources into one easily accessible website. Thus, leading to one consolidated source of information to aid in the success of new students while simultaneously connecting them to the Corvallis community. The mission of CommunityBridge is to foster a sense of belonging and a culture of care in an environment where social and educational resource availability is paramount. CommunityBridge serves as a key gateway for accessing information about city and campus-wide resources intended to facilitate student success. By creating a website that congregates community resources and programs, not only can it help students directly, but it also helps faculty and advisors facilitate material that enhances student success.

CommunityBridge will encourage community engagement while cultivating a culture of care. I want these students to feel that the university supports them. Student Affairs professionals seek to provide the utmost of care for their students; therefore, I hope they can support CommunityBridge's main goals. The three primary goals of CommunityBridge are to:

1. Centralize available resources and deliver them in an accessible format.
2. Aid in the success of students while simultaneously connecting them to communities within the city and university.
3. Grow the sense of value and community belonging for underrepresented, first-generation student demographics at OSU.

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With the main goals of CommunityBridge in mind, my work aspires to help create a culture of care and a sense of belonging for students who may not immediately feel that care when entering higher education.

To address the gaps that I personally witnessed as a first-generation, transfer college student at a PWI, I began work curating the CommunityBridge resource hub for students entering Corvallis that are completely new and looking for support. The utilization of CommunityBridge helps to serve as an open pathway of access to resources relating to higher level education while simultaneously connecting historically underrepresented groups to their chosen new city and community.

Included in the CommunityBridge website is the location and images of city resources, information linking students to support of basic needs, and the curated resources for academic success within Oregon State University. Specifically, the website highlights various innovative programs and resource centers located on campus. CommunityBridge also displays helpful Transfer Student information, campus events, basic needs resources and lastly, but certainly not least, the powerful testimonials of Oregon State University first-generation college students' experiences and voices. These voices are an informative insight into how they successfully navigated through their educational journeys. In addition to these shared testimonials, OSU's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) participants also provided their testimonials of their program experiences.

How CommunityBridge Evolved

During the last year of my undergraduate Ethnic Studies degree, I was unsure if graduate school was the next step for me. I realized that I would need a support system to succeed in moving forward. On a whim, I created a website that would later be named CommunityBridge, I utilized Squarespace.com and began curating helpful resources that aided in my undergraduate success and centralized these spaces, to reference them if I continued onward to graduate school. After receiving support through the Master of Arts Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS), I made the connection of utilizing the website into a further developed project that aims to curate OSU and community resources for first generation students. When students feel supported and cared for, it can contribute to more positive retention and completion rates. The next step, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, was to reach out to departments for further support for the development of CommunityBridge. I was then connected with carrying helpful OSU Faculty members: OSU's Transfer Coordinator, OSU's Extension Diversity Equity and Inclusion Specialist, the Juntos Statewide Director, the Interim Dean of the College of Earth, Ocean, and Atmospheric Sciences, Director of OSU's Pre-College Programs, OSU's Community Engagement & Leadership Director, and EOP's director and Beaver Connect Coordinator.

The last two connections made with Caitlin McVay and Janet Nishihara from EOP served to be most instrumental in the development of the gathering of material to be placed within CommunityBridge's *Student Testimonials* page. We met biweekly meetings from Winter 2021-Spring 2022. We discussed the First-generation + EOP student Voices project, which served as CSSA Project credits. Caitlin also informed me of OSU's current First-generation resource for students on EOP website. With their support, we compiled a spreadsheet of first-generation and EOP participant students contacts. These students were then asked to participate in a video

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recorded interview answering five questions about their first-generation college experience or their EOP participation experience.

As the project further developed, I compiled the stories of OSU's first-generation students, making videos of first-generation student testimonials of their EOP experiences. Quotes from interviews were used on personalized student posters on the CommunityBridge website. The recorded interviews are being stored into OSU's Multicultural Archives. I approached CommunityBridge with a well-intentioned, holistic, culture of care approach and received great receptiveness after using collaboration as my primary method, in addition to receiving impactful mentorship from my supervisor and colleagues within the College of Liberal Arts advising office. Due to these collaborative efforts, I received the immense support that helped launch CommunityBridge to what it is today.

EOP and *First!* have been great collaborators throughout this project. *First!* is now a proud partner of CommunityBridge, currently highlighting the CommunityBridge purpose and link for students to reference, (<https://eop.oregonstate.edu/first>). First-generation students may now be directed, by advisors and faculty members, to The CommunityBridge website link at any time, (www.Community-Bridge.org) for continued community support.

Partners

On the CommunityBridge home page, I have provided a link that directs students to a list of non-profits within the Corvallis area. Students can then select organizations or programs of interest that they could potentially contact to receive support. I believe that by displaying non-profit organizations alongside OSU programs, it widens the avenues available for assistance. In

addition, it also increases opportunities for collaboration and partnerships between local organizations and the university.

EOP has already been a great collaborator for this project, deciding to move forward with adding CommunityBridge to their website, serving as another avenue for students to locate resources that are specific to their needs. Their mission and values are impactful to their students, this sentiment is what I aim to translate to CommunityBridge, leading me to choose to highlight (and partner with) the Equal Opportunities Program office's instrumental work.

Next Steps and Recommendations

Culture of Care

OSU could benefit from cross organizational collaboration in addition to a strong implementation of care culture on campus. Some institutions are intentional about building a culture of care on their campuses and OSU should look to other models when strategizing how to best support first generation students. For example, Occidental College has built a culture of care on their campus. Their website describes and states:

The Culture of Care refers to a community in which faculty, staff, students, administrators, and all those connected to the college, pay close attention to the individual needs of students, and are proactive in connecting with students who appear to be struggling. They can then lend support and guidance or facilitate a connection with an on- or off-campus resource that may be of assistance. Further, we hope that this spirit of caring and empathy permeates our entire campus community, and that students demonstrate a Culture of Care with each other as well. (Culture, 2020)

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We are at a moment in time within society where changes to traditional institutional systems are required; these changes provide an opportunity for OSU to become more outwardly caring towards its First-generation student populations. This serves as a recommendation for how OSU might further support first-generation students. In my opinion, I think OSU is hinting at a culture of care within their five Diversity Strategic Plan goals, despite it not being fully realized from them. Their five Diversity Strategic Plan goals are as follow:

1. Integrate and advance inclusive excellence within all aspects of the university.
2. Improve recruitment of students and employees from underrepresented communities.
3. Create an inclusive university climate to support the retention and success of all students and employees.
4. Provide innovative and transformative learning experiences enabling all students and employees to advance inclusive excellence.
5. Communicate Oregon State's accomplishments, initiatives, and innovations as the university advances inclusive excellence.

While theoretically agreeable, this strategy could easily be interpreted as simply a checklist for meeting socially expected and broad student resource goals, rather than fostering an authentic culture of care environment through more initiative-taking, interactive, and relational methods.

What began as an independent project is now being considered for adoption by OSU. My vision is for CommunityBridge to be a dedicated resource on campus that is focused on serving student needs at OSU, while also being a unique campus space that promotes collaboration, inclusivity, and a culture of care. In the future, I plan to use CommunityBridge to implement a once per term online survey checking in with the academic, social, and financial status for first-generation students, highlight the testimonies of their voices, and implement

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routine non-profit outreach further strengthening the outreach of resources that will be directly given to students via CommunityBridge's weblink.

One of my goals is to acquire quantitative data that shows the measurable metrics on how CommunityBridge increases student usage of campus support services and aiding programs. For future steps, I will be seeking support from an EOP faculty member who has expertise in statistics in relation to student numbers. In the near future, specifically during the start of Fall 2022 term, I will begin collaborating efforts to reach out to CommunityBridge's displayed programs to see if I may reference current statistics of student usage. Due to the limitation of this graduate project's timeline, data inquiry will need to be completed in the near future and CommunityBridge is still under development.

Currently, I am working on the aspirational solution to center the Student Affairs professional's attention towards first-generation student groups, therefore data analytics is the next phase of the CommunityBridge project and will provide the backing of evidence to help prove that the consolidating website can increase usage of resources. Advertising is a future step alongside the future gathered data analytics. It is then where I aspire to present CommunityBridge with a yearly presentation at OSU's Bridge and START orientations for new entering students. They will be able to access the curated resource hub with a presentation displaying a QR code linking them directly to the CommunityBridge home page. My hope would be for students to become familiarized with the name, knowing they have access to a wide variety of resources whenever they are seeking additional community support.

While it is important to note that these available resources may have their own individually effective advertising agendas, it is not guaranteed that students will find resources vital to their success. Therefore, I think the incorporation of a centralized 'resource hub,' such as

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that provided by CommunityBridge, would serve the interests of students, especially those from underrepresented or marginalized demographics. Without a solution, students may be unaware that these resources even exist; further exacerbating the problem of completion rates for first-generation students. Therefore, the CommunityBridge project shows a way of improving access to available resources so that these students can persist within higher education.

Conclusion

Recommendations for the Future

Currently CommunityBridge has been pitched to the University's Relation and Marketing Vice President and is awaiting the next move. It was expressed that branding may be an issue to move forward but nonetheless, I plan to further develop CommunityBridge under the guidance of OSU's Advantage Accelerator program during the Fall of 2022 term. This program is designed to assist startups in their initial stages of growth, with the primary goal being to help launch each venture with a growth strategy tailored to their needs. The Advantage Accelerator program will aid in CommunityBridge's future, to serve First-generation students across multiple universities. Therefore, a recommendation for OSU would be to fully support the CommunityBridge project initiative by integrating CommunityBridge across differing departmental websites, the university's Summer Bridge program, and START new student orientation. The collaboration with OSU would be the first step into witnessing how effective CommunityBridge could be in supporting the university's first-generation student populations.

A grander and more long-term recommendation for OSU would be to incorporate a new framework towards the care and intended success of first-generation students. This could be done through, not only the implementation of CommunityBridge, but also the incorporation of a

holistic ideology (that resembles that of a non-profit), through various avenues of collaboration. Oftentimes universities focus on having separate spaces to focus on their office's main objectives, alternatively unification of gathered knowledge can be more effective for first-generation students. If offices emphasized the use of strong collaboration with other departments, grounded with a holistic culture of care, the unification of varying collaborative programs could be transformative for students.

Coursework Reflection

My undergraduate and master's coursework has informed the development of this project and instigated the founding of CommunityBridge. Had I not chosen the path of my two degrees, I would not have been provided the proper lens by which to evaluate and critically analyze existing gaps of inequity within the higher education system. My Bachelor of Arts in Ethnic Studies provided insight into the diaspora of varying ethnicities and how present-day racism still exists in different forms within a multitude of systems. This Master of Arts Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS) project aims to inform and dismantle inequity within higher education by promoting equal access to all.

My graduate coursework led to my critical inquiry of how to improve retention and graduation rates amongst first-generation students with more campus utilization of cultural ways of learning and thinking. The CommunityBridge's project's way of addressing this question was the redesign of the delivery of key student resources. While also providing relatable testimonials that these students may benefit from seeing people on campus that went through very similar first-generation journeys. I utilized an interdisciplinary approach in gathering appropriate shared themes within the curricula of Ethnic Studies, College Student Services Administration and

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Adults in Higher Education. I discovered that barriers exist in the accessing of campus resources, such as the lack of equitable delivery and attention given to all students. First-generation, transfer and low-income students may struggle with navigating these issues encountered in higher education, when they are unaware of what resources they will need to begin with. Therefore, CommunityBridge is a place that can give any student guidance to resources and highlights a culture of care while providing people with the help they are looking for. I hope CommunityBridge is utilized by students at college orientations, serving to ‘level out the playing field,’ of immediate direct delivery of which support services will right away set these students up for success. The direct support from Oregon State University through the implementation of the website would emphasize success, starting with access to resources for everyone. Throughout my graduate coursework I improved in many aspects, including more effective communication, effective collaborative learning, critical thinking, interdisciplinary skills, professional, and problem-solving skills. I practiced leadership roles, community building, integration of methods best suited for adult learners, and how to apply these skill sets to our students as a student affair professional. The specific coursework that supported my professional development in an impactful way was Multicultural Issues in Higher Education (CSSA), Foundations of Social Justice (CSSA), Leadership Development & Human Relations (AHE), Needs Assessment and Research (AHE), Theories of Race and Ethnicity (ES), Ethnohistory Methodology (ES) and lastly the course Apply Interdisciplinary Perspectives (IST).

In my own experience, having immediate support from faculty in OSU’s Ethnic Studies department as an undergraduate student, proved to be instrumental in my own transfer experience. In my Native American Ethnic Studies course, my professor made it a point to walk the class to the universities Cultural Centers, OSU Library Archives and most importantly the

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Human Services Resource Center located on campus. The tour positively shifted my OSU experience; I firsthand saw how genuine and helpful each staff member was in aiding our success while at OSU. Reflecting, I remember the genuineness that was apparent within each resource visit. Each location provided a great rundown of the services they offered, informing our class of our student opportunities. It is imperative to emphasize a genuine sense of familial belonging on campus, incorporating a positive care culture throughout the entirety of a student's stay. The classes in which I found the most familial sense of belonging with my stay at OSU were those primarily from the College Student Services Administration program and the Ethnic Studies department, both rooted with a social justice framework, Ethnic Studies coursework informed me of multicultural insights of the diverse histories that are a part of students' identities. While CSSA provided theories and themes to put into practice of how-to best support students with the use of equitable and accessible student services and programs.

Innovative unifying tools such as CommunityBridge can help universities target students that may have fallen 'through the cracks' and have not found their campus community, while also looking for one online source where questions may be genuinely answered. As student support service professionals, we can get ahead of already proven barriers for these students and provide them with the unifying and connecting resource of CommunityBridge. Students will then feel connected and fully supported by the Student Affairs professionals and CommunityBridge, from the very start of their educational experience with their needs being immediately addressed.

If given the opportunity, OSU community members have the chance to gain insight and understanding into these students' rich experiences and cultural histories. CommunityBridge centralizes specialized services for underrepresented first-generation and transfer students' differing needs, while also giving campus wide attention to these students' powerful experiences.

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The creation of CommunityBridge helps to support first-generation students by curating imperative OSU and community resources into one place. An innovative display of resources would further engage and connect these student groups through a thoughtful, community-centered, and simplified pathway of access to their available resources, further empowering success, and the grander utilization of existing OSU resources.

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