

# **PUBLIC AGENDA**

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,  
Always in the Public Interest*



## **SUCCESS IS WHAT COUNTS: A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION TO HELP ALL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ACHIEVE**

### ***A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE***

***FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS,  
CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND  
INDIVIDUALS***

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## A Note on Public Agenda's Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

### Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways--they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

### Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides (and, when available, their video counterparts) as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda's approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, "beyond the usual suspects"
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org) and click on "Public Engagement."

Public Agenda Choicework Guides are provided free of charge. We encourage you to make and distribute as many copies as you like as long as it is for noncommercial or educational use only, and so long as the material is not altered and the Public Agenda copyright notice is maintained.



## **PARTICIPANT GUIDE**

### **Success Is What Counts: A Community Conversation to Help All Community College Students Achieve**

Community colleges serve a wide variety of students with a wide variety of goals. For example:

- They offer a first step into higher education, often the best step for students who can't afford tuition at a four-year college or who don't have the necessary grades
- They are an option for students who prefer to stay close to home
- They provide marketable job skills to both recent high school graduates and older students who want to upgrade their careers

Like all community colleges, our college has some students who are struggling. In other words, we have some achievement gaps—and we want to do something about them. Our goal in this dialogue is to think about how the college and community can work together to close achievement gaps and help all students succeed.

We'll begin by describing three areas that the college and community could focus on to achieve these goals:

- Making sure students are able to do college-level work
- Helping students deal with the pressures in their lives
- Ensuring a rigorous and engaging academic experience

Of course, each of these approaches to student success may be of value. And you may have other ideas to add. But, it's also important to set some priorities so that we can put our resources to the best possible use.

We'll begin by reviewing these three approaches in greater detail. Which do you think is likely to have the greatest impact on student success, and why?

### **Approach 1: Focus on making sure students are ready to do college-level work**

For a variety of reasons, too many community college students arrive without a solid enough academic foundation. With adequate preparation, these students are better able to take advantage of the educational opportunities the college has to offer, and less likely to be thrown off course by the pressures in their lives.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Strengthen remedial education and tutoring to help struggling students catch up
- Support improvements in K-12 education and the transition from high school to college
- Offer English as a Second Language programs for non-native English speakers

Those who like this approach say,

*“With many students arriving at community college without the academic skills and attitudes it takes to succeed, it’s critical to make sure they’re ready for college-level work.”*

But others say,

*“The college has a big enough task providing a quality education once students arrive. It’s not practical to expect it to make up for things students should have learned before they get there.”*

## **Approach 2: Focus on helping students deal with the pressures in their lives**

Community college students tend to be busy people with busy lives. Most have jobs, many have children, and few have a great deal of money. As a result, there are many pressures in their lives that can make it difficult for them to stick with their studies and meet their goals.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Ease the burden on lower-income students by providing scholarships and childcare
- Encourage employers to allow flexible work schedules to help students balance college and work
- Mentor students who need support and guidance in managing the challenges in their lives

Those who like this approach say:

*“By helping community college students cope with the pressures that can derail their studies, we can increase their chances of success.”*

But others say:

*“These are adult college students who need to take responsibility for their personal lives, however complicated they may be. The college should keep its focus on teaching and learning.”*



### **Approach 3: Focus on ensuring a rigorous and engaging academic experience**

The most important thing we can do to promote student achievement is provide a quality educational experience, one that is challenging and engaging, and gives students the skills they need to meet their educational and career goals. If we do that, we'll be able to help every motivated student to succeed.

Therefore, we should do things like:

- Raise academic expectations and standards
- Train faculty in effective teaching strategies, including those that help less successful students
- Invest in up-to-date technology

Those who like this approach say:

*“Having high academic expectations for students and providing them with a rigorous and engaging course of study is the key to student achievement.”*

But others say:

*“Community colleges serve many different kinds of students, and we shouldn't assume that all of them need or want an equally rigorous academic experience. Some have more immediate and practical goals.”*

## Helping All Community College Students Succeed

### Recap

#### **Approach 1: Focus on making sure students are ready to do college-level work**

Those who like this approach say,

“With many students arriving at community college without the academic skills and attitudes it takes to succeed, it’s critical to make sure they’re ready for college-level work.”

#### **Approach 2: Focus on helping students deal with the pressures in their lives**

Those who like this approach say:

“By helping community college students cope with the pressures that can derail their studies, we can increase their chances of success.”

#### **Approach 3: Focus on ensuring a rigorous and engaging academic experience**

Those who like this approach say:

“Having high academic expectations for students and providing them with a rigorous and engaging course of study is the key to student achievement.”

