

# Set Up To Fail?: The First Year Student Experience at BCCC

*Findings from interviews with Baltimore City high school graduates attending Baltimore City Community College reveal a transition fraught with obstacles to success*

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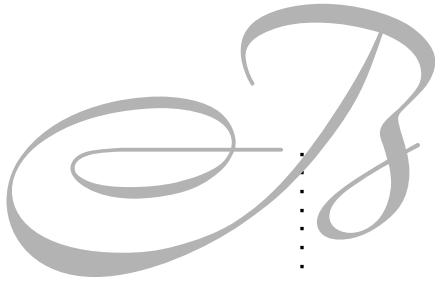
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# Introduction



*BCCC will bridge the gap for me between high school and college. It will be my stepping stone.*

—a 2001 graduate of Patterson High School

As this student’s comment implies, recent graduates of Baltimore City public high schools arrive at Baltimore City Community College (BCCC) with expectations of making a smooth transition into higher education and embarking on a course toward career success. In-depth interviews with current first-year students at BCCC, however, tell a different story, one that confirms past Abell Foundation findings that for many, the journey through BCCC is anything but successful and smooth. Poor academic preparation and minimal college planning in Baltimore City’s public high schools leave students with a tremendous remedial burden: they arrive at college handicapped, only to encounter a college support structure that is ill-equipped to help them overcome these deficiencies.

These students do not know how to make BCCC work for them, and absent more intensive support at the college, they risk being set up to fail.



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# Background



In March, 2002 the Abell Foundation published the report *Baltimore City Community College at the Crossroads: How Remedial Education and Other Impediments to Graduation Are Affecting the Mission of the College*.

The report documented the low rates of student success at Baltimore City Community College (BCCC), and identified numerous barriers that stand in the way of students obtaining certificates or degrees, and transferring to four-year colleges. Among the report's highlights:

- BCCC graduates with certificates and Associate degrees who enter the workforce directly after college significantly increase their earning potential: research shows that those in health-related fields triple their incomes within six years of graduation.
- BCCC graduation rates are low; only a small percentage of entering BCCC students complete certificate or degree programs. Of the Fall 1996 entering class, only 13 percent had earned a certificate or degree, or transferred by Fall 2000.
- In addition, BCCC's graduation numbers are falling. In 1996, the college awarded 432 Associate degrees, and in 2000 it awarded 259 degrees—a 40 percent decline in four years.
- The Baltimore City Public School System is the dominant feeder system for BCCC. More than one-third of incoming students arrive directly following graduation from city high schools.
- Students arrive at BCCC woefully unprepared: 96 percent of first-time students place into developmental English, reading and/or math; 65 percent require developmental course work in all three areas.
- First-time students are further handicapped by BCCC's placement process, which is based solely on the Accuplacer placement test. The computerized test is confusing and difficult to negotiate, and it tests higher math skills than are taught in high school and are required for college.
- Pass rates for developmental courses at BCCC are low. Only 31 percent of students, for example, typically pass MAT 80 (arithmetic), a course into which nearly half of incoming students place.
- There is a gap between the state's K-12 math requirements and the expectations of Maryland colleges. State higher education standards require that all two- and four-year college candidates demonstrate mastery of "Intermediate Algebra" (Algebra II and some trigonometry). The Maryland State Department of

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Education specifies only that K-12 students complete Algebra I, Geometry, and one other unspecified math course for high school graduation.

- Student supports and services at BCCC are uncoordinated and do not meet the myriad social, emotional, academic, and economic needs of students.

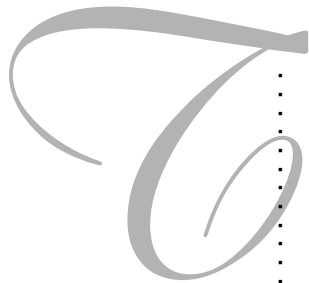
While BCCC has attempted numerous developmental education reforms over the years, the Abell report concluded that further research into and evaluation of the BCCC experience was needed—specifically, qualitative research into the success of remedial students and more information about student demographics, academic histories, and college expectations and goals.

In the wake of the report, The Abell Foundation hired two independent research consultants to assist the college in its reform efforts: one to look into the above-mentioned issues in greater depth and to research best practices with the goal of providing BCCC with the critical data to implement change; and one to conduct a student interview project with new BCCC students to generate some of the qualitative data not currently available.

This paper is the product of the latter assignment, the New Student Research Project.

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# Goals



The purpose of the New Student Research Project was to obtain qualitative data about the first-semester student experience at BCCC from the perspective of recent graduates of the Baltimore City Public School System. Student input and voices were largely absent from the initial Abell report, and yet as primary stakeholders in the college, their participation is crucial to any and all BCCC reforms. Specifically, the study set out to probe issues raised in the initial report that appear to hamper student success at BCCC.

The following two research questions guided the inquiry:

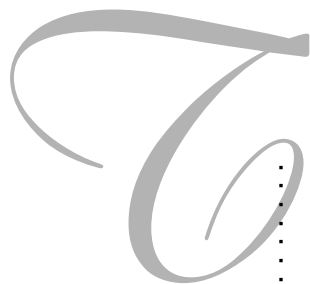
- 1. What obstacles are preventing successful degree and certificate completion among BCCC students?**
- 2. What recommendations would students make to overcome those obstacles and increase their odds of success?**

These questions directed all queries into the various aspects of students' lives, from their high school, home, and social experiences to the realities they confronted in their first year at BCCC. Because mathematics figured prominently in the Abell report as a likely obstacle to student success, a particular emphasis was placed on issues relating to math during the student interviews. For example, when students were asked about their high school curricula and performance, additional detail was sought about their mathematics preparation.



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# Methodology



The project was conducted over the course of BCCC's Spring 2002 semester. The actual student interviews took place from January 31 to May 9, 2002 and the data were compiled and analyzed during the months of June and July 2002.

The project targeted recent graduates of the Baltimore City Public School System as study participants for several reasons. The largest share of BCCC's incoming credit students come directly from a Baltimore City public high school; similarly, 40 percent of city high school graduates who go to college attend BCCC. Given increasing City and State educational standards, as well as the presence of fewer financial, family and job commitments among recent high school graduates, it was also presumed that recent City high school graduates would be the best prepared academically and least encumbered financially of BCCC's incoming students, and, as such, more likely to succeed than their older peers. Lastly, BCCC has the potential to serve as the critical link to connect City residents, particularly youth, to jobs in the Baltimore region.

The initial criteria for identifying student participants were defined as: 35 first-time, first-semester students who were currently pursuing a certificate or Associate degree at BCCC and who had graduated from BCPSS in the last two years.

To recruit students for the project, the interviewer made presentations to what are typically considered first-semester classes at BCCC. She presented to nine sections of PRE 100, "Preparation for Academic Achievement," a required first-semester course for all degree-seeking students; two remedial reading classes; and one class of Speech 101, "Fundamentals of Speech Communication," also a graduation requirement. Presentations were made at both the Harbor and Liberty campuses and to both day and evening classes. Due to difficulty recruiting participants for the project, however, the eligibility criteria were expanded to include students in their first year at BCCC. In addition, there were two students in their third and fourth semester.

Initially, the study group included 33 students—31 first- and second-semester students, and two students who had attended BCCC for more than two semesters. All participants had graduated from BCPSS in 1999, 2000, or 2001, except for one student who had graduated from a Baltimore County school with similar demographics.

- 17 students in their first semester at BCCC
- 14 students in their second semester at BCCC
- 2 students in their third or fourth semester at BCCC

The interviewer met individually with each of the students during three different sessions—at the beginning of the semester, mid-semester, and at the close of the semester. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and entailed 50 to 70 questions. As an incentive to participate, each student received \$150 for completion of the three interviews. A total of 30 students completed all three interviews; three students were



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excluded after they dropped out of the study, although they continued their enrollment at BCCC.

A process of thematic analysis was used to interpret interview notes from each of the 90 interviews. The interviewer and two members of the research team read the interview notes, then discussed them to interpret data, content, and themes.

### ***General Findings/Discussion***

The New Student Research Project provides, for the first time, a qualitative look at the experience of recent high school graduates in their first semester or year at Baltimore City Community College. The qualitative data and anecdotal accounts collected from interviews with these 30 students reveal in stark terms that the transition from high school to BCCC is rife with obstacles that impede Baltimore City students' chances of success in college.

The project set out to probe in greater depth obstacles to student success highlighted by the Abell Foundation's March 2002 report, *Baltimore City Community College at the Crossroads*, and in most cases affirms and enhances findings of the initial quantitative paper. While these findings confirm that BCPSS graduates are indeed unprepared to meet BCCC's current academic standards, they also suggest that the economic and social barriers students bring with them are not as insurmountable as often presumed.

The data also reiterate that once students enroll at BCCC, their academic needs often go unmet. Students continue to struggle at college with the consequences of a deficient K-12 education. Specifically, the interview project underscores the college's problematic placement and registration processes that resulted in a 100 percent remedial placement rate for these BCPSS high school graduates, and the challenges BCCC faces in advancing students through its developmental curricula, chiefly math. The project findings also suggest that first-time students don't know how to identify their academic needs, and once they do, they fail to access help at BCCC.

The 30 student interview participants enrolled at BCCC did not know how to make the college work for them, and they did not acquire that know-how in their first semester, or even first year, at the college.

#### **A. Students Are Not Too Needy to Persevere and Succeed**

***Although these young urban adults face their share of life's obstacles, most do not have pressing financial and social responsibilities.***

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While many students at BCCC face significant social and economic hurdles in their lives, in the case of recent high school graduates these may be overstated as barriers to college success. The experiences of the student interview participants suggest that recent BCPSS graduates may be better equipped to succeed in college than their older peers, thereby debunking the long-held opinion among BCCC staff that because these students are so economically needy, they fail.

*My mother is very supportive, and is doing whatever she can to help, including letting me live at home and helping me care for the baby.*

— a recent Baltimore City high school graduate  
and interview participant

More than three-quarters of the students live with a working adult and rely on families for financial support, and only four have dependent children of their own. Meanwhile, just over half the students work—for spending money in most cases; of those, only one-third work full-time. Most of the students also receive full financial aid, which in most cases covers their college expenses. These are important factors that alleviate, to some extent, the financial barriers and concerns plaguing many older BCCC students at the college.

In addition to financial support, the students receive other significant forms of support from family and friends. Of the four women who have children, for example, all but one get help from family members with child care; and for only a handful of students is transportation to and from school a problem. In many cases the students have parents who want more for their children than they had for themselves, and push their children as a result.

Ninety percent of the students said college is their highest priority at this point in their lives. Meanwhile, all of the students, including those who face significant life obstacles, were vocal about their motivation and commitment to being successful at BCCC. All 30 completed the entire semester at BCCC, and only five of them dropped courses.

## **B. The Gaps between BCPSS and BCCC Impede Success**

***The overwhelming need for remedial education at BCCC is confirmed by this group of recent BCPSS graduates: 100 percent required remediation and 80 percent required remediation in all three areas of reading, English and math.***

*The worst thing was that high school did not prepare me well enough for college intellectually.*

— a 2000 Lake Clifton graduate who failed  
her first semester remedial math course at BCCC

Given that the largest share of college-bound BCPSS graduates attends BCCC, the two systems require a seamless transition that does not currently exist. Based on the experiences reported by interview group members, the transition from one system to the other is a rocky one, marked by inadequate academic preparation and a lack of substantive information regarding BCCC’s expectations and offerings.

The most glaring evidence of this breakdown is the huge percentage of incoming BCCC students who place into remedial courses. According to the initial Abell report, “96 percent of BCCC’s first-time students will require remedial education before undertaking a full college-level curriculum.” Confirming that data, 100 percent of the student interview group required remedial placement at BCCC.

BCCC offers remedial education in three subjects, with three levels each: Reading 80, 81 and 82; English 80, 81 and 82; and Math 80, 81 and 82. The three remedial math courses cover basic arithmetic, elementary algebra (high school Algebra I), and intermediate algebra (high school Algebra II). Though remedial classes are non-credit courses, students pay college-level tuition for them, and currently have to pass the highest level of remedial course in each subject before they can advance to most college-level, credit-bearing courses.

**Remediation Needs of BCPSS Graduate Interview Group  
vs. Fall 2000 Enrollees at BCCC**

<b>Need Remediation In:</b>	<b>2000 New Enrollees*</b>	<b>BCPSS interview group</b>
English + Math + Reading	65 percent	80 percent
Math only	13 percent	3 percent
Math + English	9 percent	7 percent
Math + Reading	7 percent	10 percent
English + Reading	1 percent	0
Reading only	1 percent	0
English only	0	0
Total requiring remediation in one or more areas	96 percent	100 percent
No Remediation	4 percent	0

\*Source: BCCC, Institutional Research and Planning, 2000

The fact that 80 percent of these recent BCPSS graduates—the lifeblood of BCCC—required remediation in English, reading and math cries out for closing the gap in expectations between Baltimore City’s school system and its community college.

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***Academic expectations at BCPSS and BCCC are not aligned.***

It is clear that these BCPSS graduates did not meet BCCC’s entry criteria, and that the basic collaboration between the two systems that could ease the high school-to-college transition never took place. Starkest among these institutional breakdowns is the lack of alignment between academic expectations and standards.

BCCC uses the Accuplacer test as its sole determinant of student placement, yet only a few of the students knew that if they did poorly on the test, they would have to take remedial courses. Not even participants in the high school PASS<sup>1</sup> program were aware of this. It is critical that all prospective students know the high-stakes nature of the Accuplacer before they enroll at BCCC, preferably early in high school.

Students overwhelmingly reported that the test covered material they never learned in high school, particularly in math. This confirms another key finding of the Abell report: while Accuplacer requires Algebra II and some trigonometry concepts, Maryland students are mandated to take only Algebra I and Geometry to graduate high school. There is also some evidence that the Accuplacer test format—largely solving abstract equations—differs from the K-12 math orientation of “authentic” problem solving with word problem applications to real life scenarios.

But the Accuplacer is only the first academic hurdle new students to BCCC must overcome. Making it through remedial courses is the next, and, consistent with the Abell report’s findings, the biggest obstacle for the student interview participants was math. The state requires that all two- and four-year college students master Algebra II (intermediate algebra, the third level of remedial math at BCCC) before they can qualify for college-level math courses. A full 87 percent of the student interview participants completed Algebra II in high school and more than 25 percent took an advanced math course beyond Algebra II. What’s more, contrary to widespread opinion that few Baltimore City high school students take math during their senior year, 40 percent of the students in the interview group took math in as high school seniors. Yet 60 percent of the student interview participants placed into basic arithmetic at BCCC.

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<sup>1</sup> PASS is a pilot program that BCCC runs in select Baltimore City Public High Schools to prepare high school students for college entry by administering the Accuplacer and follow-up remedial coursework. To date, the program is small and posting mixed results.

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***Academic preparation and planning for college among these Baltimore City public high school students started late, was inconsistent, and often depended entirely on student initiative.***

Only one-third of the students entered high school knowing they wanted to attend college, and more than three-quarters—78 percent—did not begin planning for college until the 12th grade or after. A stunning 41 percent of them did not begin any college preparation or application activities until after high school graduation.

While the students generally have family support for college, only 20 percent received actual assistance from family members in researching and applying to college. The most consistent college-planning partner is The CollegeBound Foundation; more than half of the students reported receiving college counseling in high school through CollegeBound.

*“The college counseling was terrible. There were too many people and the counselor only met with the people who were academically excellent.”*

— a graduate of Northwestern High School

At the same time, high school for the student interview participants clearly was not a rigorous enough academic experience to prepare them for college. They reported that course content and selection did not in any way connect to the pursuit of higher education. Only 40 percent of the students received any counseling regarding high school courses, and on average they took a partial course load, only five of eight possible courses, in 12th grade. Meanwhile, 53 percent of them failed one or more high school courses (with a grade of only 60 percent required for passing), and 50 percent characterized their average grades as “C or lower” in high school math.

*“It was more about passing classes than how to get into college or do well in college.”*

— a 2001 Edmondson-Westside High School graduate

This low academic bar appears to have shaped the students’ notion of learning, creating a culture of “passing” coursework—versus striving to excel at academics—that follows them to college. The continued focus on being able to pass courses, the predominance of low grades, and the preoccupation with transferring as soon as possible to a four-year college suggests that the short-term academic survival mode persists at BCCC.

Finally, BCPSS did not provide a structure to support a proactive and thoughtful college and career planning process for every potential college candidate. Nor is there any comprehensive counseling available for those who are interested in beginning a career right after high school. There were few opportunities for students to make

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informed decisions about high school courses and career paths, and there was inadequate staffing capacity in high schools to start college planning early—in 9th grade if not earlier. As a result, these students were not in a position to take charge of their high school education, much less to make future plans—something that is crucial to succeeding in college.

***BCCC was overwhelmingly the school of last resort among the students, due in part to insufficient communication of BCCC’s assets as a community college.***

Nearly half the students—40 percent—enrolled in BCCC because they did not get into four-year colleges; 33 percent enrolled to “try out” or “get a feel” for college; and 33 percent enrolled simply because it was cheap or close to home.

*“BCCC was the only school left that made any sense because my SAT scores were so low.”*

— a 2001 graduate of Baltimore City College

Both institutions appear to be doing a poor job of marketing the opportunities available at BCCC to Baltimore City high school students, who comprise the community college’s single largest pipeline of incoming students. Only 7 percent of the student interview participants (two students) were steered toward BCCC by a high school counselor; only 17 percent learned about BCCC program offerings and admissions procedures prior to enrolling; and only 7 percent (two students) met individually with a BCCC representative.

### **C. Proof of the Gap: BCCC Lacks Structure for Student Success**

#### ***Accuplacer: The First and Highest-Stakes Obstacle to Success***

***70 percent of students did not know the severe academic and financial consequences of testing poorly on the Accuplacer; a majority expressed “shock” at their poor scores.***

The gap between BCPSS and BCCC becomes evident as students enroll at BCCC and encounter a series of obstacles that set the tone for a difficult college experience.

Students enrolling at BCCC must take the Accuplacer before they register for classes and attend orientation. Their scores on this test determine their overall need for remedial education, as well as their placement in remedial courses. The findings of this project suggest that students entering BCCC do not realize how critical their Accuplacer performance is, and are apt to presume that their recent high school

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diplomas will hold them in good stead. While 80 percent of the student interview participants knew they had to take a placement test, 70 percent did not understand the repercussions of their scores on college and remedial course selection. Most reported being “shocked” by their scores.

Nearly half of the 30 students were unaware that BCCC offered review sessions for the Accuplacer; only six students attended one or more review sessions and only two said they were helpful. In the wake of the test, meanwhile, 80 percent of the students believed they would have done better on the Accuplacer had they attended the review sessions. Again, these findings correspond with the Abell report, which noted that BCCC’s review sessions “are neither required nor well attended.”

Students are permitted to take the Accuplacer once, unless they receive special permission from the heads of the English and/or math departments—an option few students know about. Then, once they have enrolled in a remedial course, students may or may not be given a test early in the semester (usually the Nelson-Denny in reading) to place out of that course and into a higher level. Unlike the Accuplacer, these tests are timed, and students struggle to complete them. Only two of the 30 student interview participants passed such a test; due to a lack of available slots that early in the semester, only one advanced to the next level. Finally, the Accuplacer is not used to measure remedial progress: students proceed through remedial courses based on various final exams created by faculty, with no regard for the material that was tested on Accuplacer and used to determine remedial placement at the outset.

It is important to keep in mind that students can only take a remedial course twice before losing financial aid for the course. (Federal Pell grants cover the same course only twice.)

The Accuplacer test is administered once, students face low odds of advancing to the next remedial level during the semester, and their pass rates in remedial math classes are abysmal. These facts underscore the influence that Accuplacer, a single test, has in determining students’ course of success at BCCC.

***Registration: The Next Step, the Next Obstacle***

***Students describe BCCC’s course registration process as confusing and unaccommodating, and 27 percent could not register for the classes they needed.***

Once they took the Accuplacer, the new students’ next step at BCCC was registration, a process most said was difficult to navigate, tedious and confusing. Fewer than half of the students reported getting any help from BCCC staff in selecting and scheduling classes, and of these, more than three-quarters said these people were not helpful.

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*If I had had a counselor right from the beginning, someone who got to know me at the start of school and stuck with me, someone who could help me get the most out of BCCC, it would have been very helpful. They just leave you to figure it out on your own.*

— a student interview participant

Moreover, 27 percent of the students were unable to register for courses they wanted and/or needed their first semester—due to the high numbers of students requiring remedial education upon arrival at BCCC. These remedial courses are the first to fill up, and soon after the registration period starts, remedial courses are no longer available—particularly in the lower levels of reading, English and math. As a result, students either settle for lower or higher levels than those into which they placed, or they wait an entire semester to begin chipping away at their remedial requirements—which they must do before qualifying for most college-level, credit-bearing courses.

Although virtually all incoming students to BCCC require remedial education, and although BCCC offers four times as many remedial math sections as it does sections of college-level math, the college does not have the capacity to provide enough remedial course sections to meet first-time students' needs.

### ***Developmental Courses Dominate: The Toughest Obstacle to Overcome***

***BCCC has yet to show it can provide successful mathematics remediation to its incoming students; 68 percent failed their first remedial math course. On the other hand, remedial English and reading pass rates were extremely high at 88 percent and 96 percent, respectively. The pass rate for college-level courses was a respectable 81 percent.***

*“They call this a two-year school but really it is a four-year school where you only get credit for two.”*

— a student who wants to earn her Associate's degree, then transfer

The student interview participants' first semesters were dominated by remedial courses; 83 percent took two or more remedial courses, while just 40 percent took one or more introductory college-level courses. Meanwhile, despite the college's requirement that all students take PRE 100 or its equivalent, only 65 percent of the students took the mandated college study skills course their first semester.

Eighty-seven percent of the students complained they were revisiting high school material in their remedial courses. By mid-semester 76 percent of them had missed five or more classes, yet expressed little concern that the absences would affect their grades. Half the students described BCCC academics as easy as or easier than high school. As the semester drew to a close, more than three-quarters were confident



they'd pass all of their courses. Of the seven students who worried about failing a course, five worried about failing math.

But the students' end-of-semester grades did not fulfill their stated optimism. Their remedial course failure rates were high, particularly in math. In fact, recent high school graduates had a higher failure rate in math than the overall BCCC population. Of the 22 students in the interview group who took remedial math their first semester, 68 percent failed. Conversely, English and reading pass rates were higher for the interview group than BCCC's overall population. Of the 23 students who took remedial English, 13 percent failed; of the 18 students who took remedial reading, only 6 percent failed.

**Percentage of BCCC Students Who Passed Remedial Courses by Level  
Fall 2000 vs. Spring 2002 Interview Group**

Cohort/ Semester	Mathematics	English	Reading	College level courses
Fall 2000 all*	80 81 82 30 27 34	80 81 82 54 54 52	80 81 82 65 55 58	Not available
Spring 2002 Interview group	29 40 33	100 92 71	100 87 100	81

\*Source: BCCC, Institutional Research and Planning, 2000

Meanwhile, of the 13 students who took college-level courses their first semester, two withdrew and four failed a course—English 101, Speech 101, gym, and Gerontology 101. At the same time, 57 percent of these students earned final grades of B or better in English, speech, psychology, business administration, history, and computer courses. The students' success rates were higher in these college courses than they were in remedial courses, possibly underscoring first-time students' ability to do well at the college level and unnecessary remedial course requirements in English and reading.

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***Math: Truly a Gatekeeper***

***Although 87 percent of the students took Algebra II in high school, 100 percent required remediation in math at BCCC, two-thirds at the lowest Arithmetic level. Only 32 percent of students passed their first remedial math course.***

*It (remedial coursework) is keeping me from finishing school and getting into the workforce.*

— a student interview participant who took a year off to work before enrolling at BCCC

The Abell report identified math as a key obstacle to graduation among BCCC students, and the student interview project overwhelmingly confirmed that finding.

The state requires that all two- and four-year college students take at least one college-level math course to graduate with an A.A., A.S., A.A.S., or B.A. degree; it also requires that such a college-course be above the level of intermediate algebra, the high school equivalent of which is Algebra II, as a prerequisite to take such math courses at the college level.

The Abell report noted that most students who come to BCCC are not prepared to meet that requirement and place into remedial math as a result. It also showed that their low pass rates (averaging only 32 percent) in BCCC remedial math, in turn, keep them from becoming prepared for college-level math once they enroll at the college. Confirming those findings, the student interview project also provided some background for this persistent struggle with math.

A large majority of the student interview participants (87 percent) reported completing Algebra II in high school, and half of those took a more advanced math course, beyond the Algebra II level. Yet a number of the students disliked high school math, most earned average to low grades, and the vast majority of those who took the math SAT scored too poorly for admission to a four-year college.

**D. Students Don't Know How to Make BCCC Work for Them . . . and BCCC Doesn't Make the Job Easy**

***Only one-third of the students asked for help at BCCC. Nearly half were unaware of the student services provided by the college.***

*"This is a community college. People come here because they have other things going on in their lives that make them unable to go to school far away or full time. It should be easy to get help when you need it."*

— a student interview participant

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By and large, student supports and services at BCCC do not meet students' social, academic and economic needs. These gaps in assistance occur on several levels: students don't recognize their need for help; once they do, they don't know how to find the help they need; and of those who've sought help, most have been unsatisfied with the results.

The student interview participants arrived at BCCC unaware of their academic deficiencies, of what it would take to succeed at the college, and of what services exist at the college to help them do that. Furthermore, it is clear from the interviews that these are students who have had little experience in taking responsibility for their futures, and who have a limited notion of consequences for their decisions and actions. These students rely heavily on structure and direction, two things that are largely absent at BCCC. As a result, they arrived at the college and often floundered.

Compounding the students' inability to ask for help is the disparate and uncoordinated nature of supports and services at BCCC—everything from personal counseling to academic advising, tutoring, labs, math anxiety workshops, and financial aid assistance—which are often poorly staffed and publicized. At the beginning of their first semester, 73 percent of the students voiced concerns about staying focused on academics, getting good grades, and passing their classes, yet by semester's end, 43 percent were still unaware of existing services and supports for students at BCCC.

Only one-third of the students accessed help of some sort during their first semester. Only one-third met with their assigned academic advisor in their first year, while more than three-quarters relied on family and friends for college advice and support. Even though PRE 100 instructors acted as de facto advisors in several cases, only two-thirds of the students took the mandated PRE 100 their first semester—a time the college itself deems crucial for advisement. Finally, of those who sought assistance from the college's financial aid office, fewer than half received the help they needed.

In the absence of a consistent attendance policy and access to student supports, the majority of these new students missed lots of classes, insisting that poor attendance would have no impact on their grades. Their college peers, meanwhile, dropped classes in droves. Overall, the students reported that their classes had decreased in size by an average of 44 percent over the course of the semester.

*"The worst thing is that I am mostly by myself. I don't know a lot of people."*

— a student interview participant

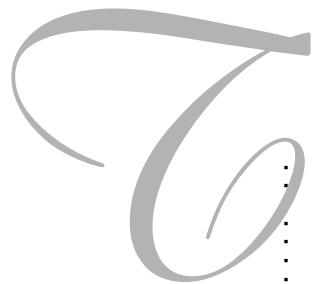
Students communicated an underlying theme of isolation at BCCC. These active and engaged high school students were not involved in college activities, had little inter-





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# The Data



The 90 interviews generated more than 400 pages of information summarized here in an effort to aid and inform decision-making at Baltimore City Community College and the Baltimore City Public School System. The data are organized as follows:

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# I. Personal Background: Who These Students Are

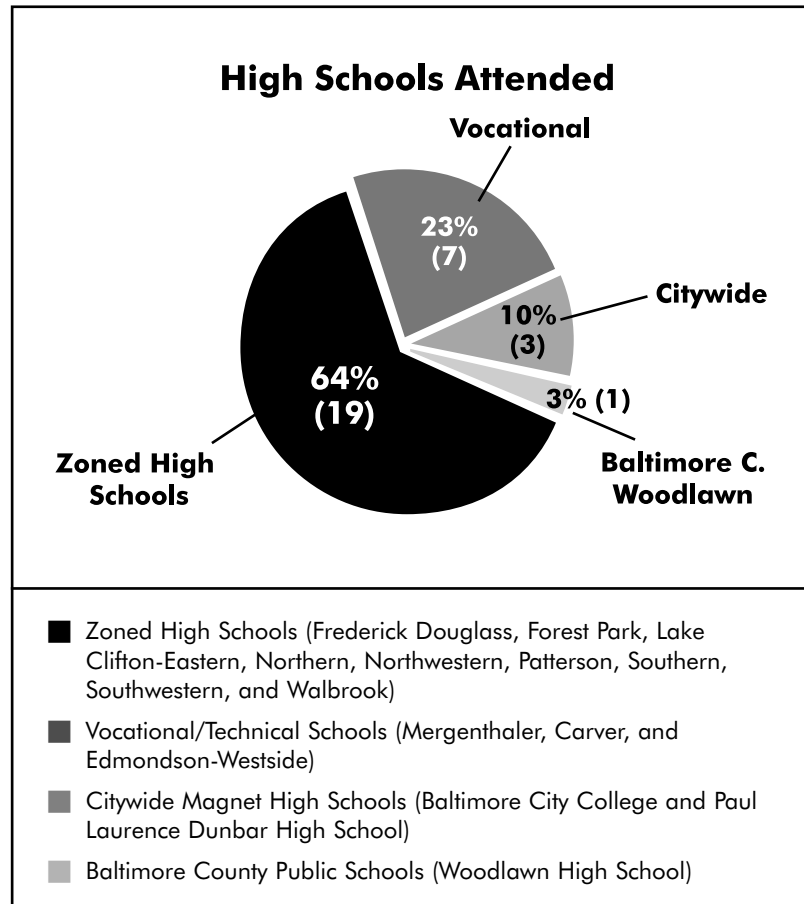
## A. General Demographics

### Findings

Of the 30 students who participated in the student interview project:

- All are black: 28 are African-American; 1 is of mixed African-American and Indian descent; 1 is Jamaican
- All are Baltimore City residents
- All are between 18 and 20 years of age; 26 are female, 4 are male
- None are married; 4 women are single mothers of infants or young children
- None were identified for special education in high school or reported diagnosed learning disabilities
- 3 have physical disabilities, none of which impair academic performance (2 have severe asthma; 1 is deaf in one ear and reads lips)

## B. High Schools Attended





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*Findings*

- All but one of the students graduated from the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), and together they represent 14 of the city's 17 high schools at the time; only Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Western and Baltimore School for the Arts were not represented.
- The majority of students entered college directly after, or within a semester of, high school graduation: 73 percent graduated in 2001, 13 percent in 2000, and 13 percent in 1999 (rounding accounts for the total of less than 100 percent).
- Although mobility rates in Baltimore City public schools are generally high, it is remarkable that 80 percent of the students in this study remained at the same high school from ninth grade through graduation, signaling a stability that should bode well for academic achievement.

### **C. Living Situation**

*Findings*

Most of the students come from what they describe as supportive home settings. Most live with adult relatives who work and generally provide for them financially. Most also have at least one relative who has attended college, and enjoy the encouragement of family members and friends in their decisions to attend college.

- 80 percent of the students live at home with adult relatives:
  - 7 live with two parents and/or step parents
  - 10 live with one parent
  - 7 live with grandparents, aunts or uncles
  - 3 live on their own (with children)
  - 3 live with significant others or friends
- 77 percent of the students (23 of 30) live in households with employed adults.
- Most of the students had some college exposure through their families: half have immediate and/or extended family members who graduated from college with a two- or four-year degree. At the same time, nearly half of the students are the first in their immediate families to attend college.

### **D. Financial Situation/ Employment**

The vast majority of the student interview participants are receiving financial support from families as well as full scholarship aid to attend BCCC.

*Findings*

- 25 of the 30 students rely on family members for financial support. Of the 5 who are financially independent, 2 receive federal income supports.

- 80 percent of students receive full financial aid for college, while 7 percent receive partial financial aid and the remaining 13 percent have relatives who are paying their college expenses.
- 60 percent of the students work. All but one (who is on work/study) have hourly, low-skill jobs, ranging from a bank teller and grocery store cashier to two nursing assistants:
  - 20 percent of total students work full-time (34 hours a week or more)
  - 40 percent of total students work part-time (less than 34 hours a week)
- Most of the interview project's students state that they work not out of necessity, but to earn their own spending money.

### **E. How the Student Research Participants Compare to BCCC Students Overall**

#### *Findings*

In general terms, the interview participants reflect the larger BCCC student body: they are majority African-American, single, and female; live in Baltimore; attended the city's public schools; and came to BCCC to earn an Associate degree, then transfer to a four-year college. In some critical ways, however, these students differ from their peers. They are younger and report having stronger support systems: 80 percent are dependents of parents or adult relatives, which removes some of the obstacles associated with living expenses and having to work. They were less likely to have the responsibility of children or full-time employment, and proportionately, more of them are receiving full scholarships.

<b>Overall BCCC credit population<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Student Research Cohort</b>
• 83 percent African-American	93 percent African-American
• 74 percent female	87 percent female
• 57 percent age 25 and older	100 percent ages 18-20
• 78 percent single	100 percent single
• 56 percent have children	13 percent have children
• 53 percent pay at least partial tuition costs	20 percent pay partial tuition costs
• 86 percent work, 56 percent full-time	60 percent work, 20 percent full-time
• 68 percent attend BCCC full-time	100 percent attend full-time
• 87 percent intend to transfer	80 percent plan to transfer
• 85 percent pursuing an Associate degree	70 percent pursuing an Associate degree
• 85 percent Baltimore City residents	100 percent Baltimore City residents

<sup>2</sup> Baltimore City Community College, 2001 Data Book

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## **F. Summary**

While many BCCC students face major social and economic challenges, the student interview participants arrived at college with support systems that suggest recent high school graduates may have fewer financial and social barriers to college success than BCCC officials claim for the overall student population.

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## II. Getting Ready For BCCC: Academic Preparation and College Counseling in Baltimore City Public High Schools

### A. High School Curriculum Comes Up Short

#### *Courses: Little Selection, Little Advising*

##### **Background**

Two-thirds of the research group attended BCPSS neighborhood or alternative high schools, which do not have selective admissions criteria and, thus, are less likely than citywide schools to have a strong college preparatory culture.

All of the Baltimore City high schools have guidance counselors charged with providing personal counseling, course selection assistance and scheduling, and advice regarding college and students' futures in general. At some schools, students have the same guidance counselor throughout, while at others there are designated counselors for each grade. Given these counselors' workloads, however—most have responsibility for more than 400 students each—their attentions are consumed by the mechanics of course scheduling and trouble-shooting, leaving little time for academic counseling and college preparation. This problem has been addressed to some extent with the support of the CollegeBound Foundation, a non-profit organization that has assumed the college counseling function in many Baltimore City high schools. CollegeBound's College Access Program Specialists are based in 13 City high schools and, among other things, provide college counseling to students, parent seminars on financial aid, and SAT preparation; they also host college fairs and college tours.

In order to receive a high school diploma in Maryland, students must meet core course requirements: all but 3 of the 21 1/2 credits required for graduation are designated courses such as English I-IV, Algebra I, and Geometry. Maryland requires that students earn 21 1/2 credits for graduation. In a traditional seven-period school day, students earn six credits per year, or 24 credits in four years. On the alternative "block schedule" that most Baltimore City high schools use, students take four courses per semester and eight credits per year and, thus, have 32 high school credits available. Once core requirements have been fulfilled, there are 10 1/2 credits remaining, the equivalent of more than one high school year, to spend in elective courses and internships. At present, many Baltimore City students use these additional credits to retake required high school courses they have failed, or to participate in a loosely defined "work-study" experience rather than taking higher level courses, for some of which students can earn college credits while they are still in high school.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Baltimore City Public School System has proposed raising the number of required credits to graduate with additional math, science and modern language courses beginning with the class of 2006.

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*Findings*

Overall, the student interview participants' high school courses reflected little anticipation of pursuing a post-secondary education. They received little direction in selecting high school courses or the appropriate level of high school courses (honors-level courses, for example), and had little input in when they took their courses. As a result, these students had little idea that certain courses could better prepare them for college than others, and they learned little about decision-making and thinking strategically about their education and future. The high school courses they took reflected these constraints:

- 60 percent of the students received no advice and minimal input regarding high school course selection, despite the fact that one in four courses was supposedly an elective course.

*In 12th grade you arrived and got a printout. Then you could go to your guidance counselor to change the schedule if you wanted.*

— a 2001 Southern High School graduate

*In 9th, 10th and 11th grades they just gave you a printout at the beginning of the year and that was your schedule. In 12th grade you made up your own schedule.*

— a 2001 Northwestern High School graduate

*We never had a choice and so never got any advice. Somebody made up your schedule and gave it to us.*

— a 2001 Frederick Douglass High School graduate

- 40 percent of the students had general conversations with a teacher or counselor regarding which courses to take in high school.

*I met with my trade counselor every semester to discuss what courses to take.*

— a 2001 Mergenthaler graduate enrolled in the school's business administration program

*At the beginning of the school year I met with my counselor to talk about electives and requirements.*

— a 2001 Edmondson-Westside High School graduate

*I had the same academy counselor for 10th, 11th and 12th grades. In the spring before school was over, the counselor would schedule a time to meet with each student individually. She would discuss what she thinks you should take and listen to what you want to take.*

— a 2001 Patterson High School graduate

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- Most of the students had not completed their core course requirements by the time they reached 12th grade, yet one-third of them participated in work-study outside the school:
    - 90 percent fulfilled English requirements in 12th grade
    - 27 percent fulfilled social studies requirements
    - 23 percent fulfilled science requirements
    - 20 percent fulfilled fine arts requirements
    - 17 percent fulfilled \_-credit health requirement
    - 17 percent fulfilled physical education requirements
    - 13 percent fulfilled their third math requirement
    - 30 percent spent some of their senior year on an off-site work-study assignment
  - On average, students took only five of the available eight courses in their 12th grade year. Only 17 percent had full, eight-course loads in their last year of high school.
  - 40 percent of these students took a math course in 12th grade:
    - 27 percent took advanced, non-required math courses, including Precalculus, Trigonometry, Advanced Geometry, and Advanced Math
    - 13 percent took Algebra II to fulfill their third math requirement
  - 87 percent of the students interviewed took Algebra II in high school.
  - Despite having available time in their 12th grade class schedule, 60 percent of the students said they received no advice in high school about which courses they should take specifically to help them get into college.

*Nobody gave me advice because I wasn't sure where or whether I wanted to go to college.*

— a 2001 Northern High School graduate

*My journalism teacher talked about the important classes to take for college like math and speech.*

— a 2001 Southern High School graduate,  
referencing an informal discussion he had with  
the teacher during the first semester of 12th grade

*English and math were important for my trade. Counselors and teachers told me that.*

— a 2001 Edmondson-Westside High School graduate

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## ***Grades: Low Bar, Low Performance***

### **Background**

Formerly, students in Baltimore City public schools had only to earn a cumulative grade of 60 percent or higher to receive credit for a high school course.<sup>4</sup> Students must retake failed core courses during summer school or in subsequent semesters; while a student who fails a non-core elective does not receive credit, neither is he or she required to repeat the course. For example, one student in the interview project failed Precalculus and Environmental Science in the 12th grade, but because they were “electives” and she had already earned the credits needed for graduation, she passed 12th grade and graduated from high school on time. A student who fails three or more of his or her eight courses in a school year must repeat the grade.

Poor enforcement of these promotion policies over the years has enabled students to pass from one grade to the next without meeting necessary requirements, which is typically known as “social promotion.” The city school system, however, spent last year tightening its promotion policy and as a result, nearly half of BCPSS’ 97,000 students were eligible for summer school in 2002, one-third of them high school students. During the 2001-02 school year, 54 percent of BCPSS high school students failed one or more courses.

### ***Findings***

High school transcripts for all student interview participants were requested, but were still unavailable at the end of the project. Student grades below are thus self-reported.

- Among the 83 percent of students who remembered their high school grades:
  - 54 percent reported graduating with a B average
  - 42 percent reported graduating with a C average
  - 4 percent (one student) graduated with an A average
- While most students took English IV in 12th grade, 27 percent did not read an entire book or novel, and 30 percent read only one or two books as seniors.
- 57 percent of the students failed at least one high school course; several reported that they failed due to poor attendance.
- Only 10 percent of these students repeated a grade.

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<sup>4</sup> BCPSS raised the passing grade for high school courses to 70 percent effective September 2002.

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## ***Math: Early Signs of Struggle***

### **Background**

All Baltimore City and Maryland students are required to pass three math courses to graduate from high school: Algebra I, Geometry, and a third, unspecified course. Students may also take other higher-level courses, but many stop taking math after completing the third required course, which in most cases was Algebra II.<sup>5</sup>

### **Findings**

Poor high school math grades and negative feelings about math suggest that it was a problem subject for most of the student interview participants prior to entering BCCC.

Among the 12 students who took math their senior year, eight took courses at levels higher than Algebra II, spanning Precalculus, Trigonometry, Advanced Geometry, and Advanced Math. These higher-level course titles suggest an interest in and perhaps a facility for math. Yet the students' overall performance in high school math suggests otherwise.

- Of the students who reported failing a high school course, 53 percent failed a math course.
- 56 percent of the students received poor high school math grades, earning Cs and Ds.
- 43 percent of students reported that they “hated” or “did not like” math, while just 23 percent said they “liked” it.
- 77 percent of the students, by contrast, said they “liked” or “loved” English.

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<sup>5</sup> Starting with students entering the 9th grade in Fall 2002, BCPSS will require a fourth math course for graduation.



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## **B. College Counseling During High School: Infrequent and Insubstantial**

### ***The College Expectation***

Most student interview participants said their families expected them to attend college, an expectation that was generally reinforced by teachers and counselors in high school. In most cases, the students also made clear that for them, and for their teachers and families, college was synonymous with attending a four-year school. Yet very few received actual guidance or assistance from families and high school staff when preparing for college.

### ***Little Hands-on Family Support***

#### *Findings*

Almost all the student interview participants reported having families who support their decision to attend college, but only for a few did this support translate into actual, hands-on help.

- 100 percent of the students live in households where there is support for college.

*My mother had always wanted to go to college herself, but she had a baby, making it impossible for her to go. Now I have a daughter of my own and am going to college and trying to do what my mother was unable to do.*

— a student and single mother of a two-year-old girl whose father is incarcerated

*My father wants more for me than he had. Everyone supports me and is rooting for me. I will be the first male grandchild to go to college.*

— a student whose father works maintenance and construction jobs, whose stepmother works at a temp agency and who has never seen his mother

*At first my family really didn't care, they were not pushing college at all. Now they fully support me.*

— a student who lives with her aunt and uncle, and whose mother, a drug addict, is incarcerated

*My aunt is my biggest supporter and wishes I had gotten into a university, but sees BCCC as a stepping stone.*

— a student who lives with her grandmother and aunt, a University of Maryland graduate

- 
- While students received emotional support at home, few had families able to give them concrete help and advice when preparing for college. Of the 26 students who said they received support from a parent, sibling, relative or friend, only six received hands-on help, such as visiting colleges, filling out applications, and completing financial aid forms. The support students received from family and friends was largely in the form of encouragement and pride. This kind of support should not be underestimated; in some cases it was the difference that made a student decide to attend college. At the same time, it underscores the fact that when it came to making college happen, these students were largely on their own.

*Two people in particular who worked at Hopkins and were also African-American pushed me to go to college. They told me to go to Mondawmin Mall and look at the people working there and asked if that was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.*

— a student who worked at Johns Hopkins Hospital for a year before attending BCCC, and lives with her mother, a BCCC graduate with an Associate degree

*My mother pushed me. I was the first one of her children to even graduate from high school.*

— a student who is one of nine children and whose mother works as a geriatric nurse

## ***College Planning Support at High School: Too Little, Too Late***

### **Background**

The CollegeBound Foundation was founded in 1988 to help guide more Baltimore City students toward college. Over the years, CollegeBound has helped address the absence of college advising and counseling among overextended high school counselors in Baltimore City public high schools. Through a partnership with the Baltimore City Public School System, it has placed College Access Program Specialists in 13 high schools throughout the city. These specialists work one-on-one with students, helping them through the college preparation and financial aid processes. CollegeBound also awards “Last Dollar” college grants when sufficient funds are not available through loans, scholarships, or work/study programs.

Initially, CollegeBound advisors provided college advising in City schools on a part-time basis. In the last few years they have expanded service and now provide a full-time, daily presence in all BCPSS high schools except Polytechnic Institute, Baltimore City College, Western High School, and the Baltimore School for the Arts. In collaboration with BCPSS, CollegeBound is opening “College Centers” in designated spaces within each of the nine neighborhood high schools and Paul Laurence Dunbar High

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School. Most of the students in the interview group attended BCPSS high schools when CollegeBound had a more limited presence.

*Findings*

In most cases, the student interview participants emerged from high school unprepared both academically and psychologically for college. While most of the students received some level of college counseling in high school and two-thirds of them took the SAT at least once, few took the PSAT, took SAT preparation classes, and/or received substantive college and career counseling. Counselors were spread thin, and it was often up to the students to seek out help with their college preparation. Yet it is also clear from the interviews that many students did not know what kind of help to ask for; many of them seem to believe that college counseling consisted of going to college fairs and filling out forms.

**Too Little Substantive College Advising . . .**

- 90 percent of the students received some level of college counseling in high school; some got counseling from more than one source.
- About half of the students (53 percent) received counseling through CollegeBound specialists, while the other half received counseling through guidance or academy counselors (33 percent) or community-based, after-school, or special academic programs such as the Baltimore Initiative and Safe and Sound (19 percent).
- The college advising services the students received in high school varied widely, though many students described them as group activities involving college trips and fairs, and filling out applications and financial aid forms:
  - 57 percent visited colleges, often through school-sponsored trips
  - 37 percent attended college fairs, including one at the Convention Center
  - 20 percent received college applications and/or help filling them out
  - 17 percent received help practicing for and scheduling SATs
  - 13 percent received academic advice on which courses to take to graduate or qualify for college and on maintaining good grades
  - 10 percent received information about financial aid
  - 10 percent received information about the college process and what colleges expect of incoming students
  - 7 percent received help with goal-setting and problem-solving
- Similarly, the students' experiences with college counselors ranged widely.

*The 12th grade counselor went over my grades and told me what I needed to graduate. She told me what colleges were available to me and what courses I needed to take to graduate. She also told me I needed to do well in school to progress to college.*

— a 2001 Edmondson-Westside graduate who earned her nursing assistant certificate in high school

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*There was one college counselor from CollegeBound. She helped me a lot. She took me on tours of colleges, helped with SAT practice and helped me prepare for college. I started seeing her in the 10th or 11th grade. I saw her whenever I needed to. She helped me write essays, helped me narrow down where to go to college, talked with me about goals.*

— a high school track star and 2000 Mergenthaler graduate who went to Morgan State, but transferred to BCCC for academic reasons

*My overall college counselor was helpful, but I wasn't interested in college. I was also part of Talent Search. They took groups of kids on trips to colleges. We never met with a counselor one on one, but we did things in groups. I stuck with this all the way through 12th grade. They convinced me to go to BCCC, but I just wasn't ready to go and so ended up taking a year off. The year off made me realize how much I needed to go to college.*

— a 1999 graduate of Dunbar and participant in the federally funded Talent Search program that helps disadvantaged students complete high school and plan for post-secondary education

*The CollegeBound counselor came on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I never sat down and talked to her like a regular meeting. You had to get a pass to get out of a class to see her. She told you dates that things were due and helped with financial aid, but there was definitely no real counseling. You had to find time to go to the office on your own. We should have been counseled long before the middle of 12th grade. There was no time left for counseling.*

— a 2001 graduate of Northern High School who also got help from the counselor in the Environmental Sciences Academy at school, and from her aunt who helped her fill out financial aid forms

*There was only one college counselor for the entire school. He was from CollegeBound. I never received any college counseling. You had to ask for anything you got. There was a bulletin board where the schedule of visiting colleges was listed. You basically used the college counseling office as a place to get forms. You never got any motivation or inspiration or advice from there. The way I found out about college visits was from my English teacher. My 11th grade chemistry teacher gave advice, motivation and information about college.*

— a 2001 graduate of Mergenthaler who did her college research and applications on her own

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*The office was closed a lot and she was always busy. During lunch you would go up to her office to sign up for a time to meet with her; and then most of the time when you went for your appointment, she wasn't there. We got so frustrated, even my mother met with her once. She did try, but she couldn't take care of everyone. I went to [hear] three different college speakers and to a college fair at Pikesville Armory. I visited Morgan with the Morgan Engineering Program on Saturdays in my junior year.*

— a 2001 Northwestern graduate whose older brother, currently at University of Maryland, helped her apply to college

- One of the two students who attended a citywide high school describes a very different experience:

*There were two college counselors for the school. I met with one who helped make sure my financial things were in order as well as my transcript. We were required to go to five college information sessions. They helped me meet the SAT and PSAT deadlines in 11th grade. My grade counselor met with me also and helped me develop my goals and helped me believe in myself even after [I got] pregnant. She encouraged me.*

— a 2001 graduate of Baltimore City College

### **And Too Little Preparation . . .**

- While 90 percent of the students said they received at least some college counseling in high school, only 27 percent took the PSAT and 67 percent took the SAT.
- Few PSAT-takers knew their scores. Of the 20 SAT-takers, 16 recalled their scores:
  - 81 percent reported a combined Math/Verbal score lower than 860. At Coppin State College and Morgan State University—the colleges that most of these students applied to and hope to attend one day—the combined SAT scores students need to be considered for admission are 900 and 820, respectively.
  - Just 23 percent took SAT prep classes, typically at school, to prepare for the test

### **. . . Too Late**

In most cases, the college counseling the students received came too late for them to make strategic decisions that would impact their college options—this despite the fact that a majority had their sights set on college since long before the 12th grade.

- 57 percent of the students knew they wanted to go to college before the 12th grade:
  - 17 percent had “always known [they] wanted to go to college”
  - 13 percent decided in grade or middle school that they wanted to go to college
  - 27 percent decided between 9th and 11th grade that they wanted to go to college
  - 13 percent decided during 12th grade that they wanted to go to college

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- 30 percent decided after high school that they wanted to go to college
  - Yet 78 percent of the students did not begin the college admissions process until 12th grade or following high school graduation; 41 percent waited until after high school graduation.

*I always wanted to go to college but really decided for sure in the middle of the 12th grade. No one special helped me decide.*

— a student who lives with her mother, who did not attend college  
(her father attended college but is not involved in her life)

### **Teachers Fill in the Gaps**

One clear pattern to emerge from the students' college counseling experiences in high school is that most received informal support for college from their teachers.

- 93 percent of the students said a teacher or mentor shaped their decision to attend college.

*11th grade was a big turnaround year for me. I became interested in criminal justice. My ROTC commander helped me get an internship with a police officer. Something inside me clicked, and at the same time I had people around me supporting me and pushing me to do my best and strive for excellence. When I expressed an interest in going to college, my ROTC commander jumped right on it and started watching out for me, pushing me to take classes that would help me for college. He even suggested certain classes that would help me get into college.*

— a Walbrook Uniformed Services Academy graduate  
with an A average in high school

*My psychology teacher encouraged me to go to college. She gave lots of people help and advice about college. Also, my geometry teacher gave information and advice about college. Both these teachers helped lots of students with college applications, resources, references.*

— a 2001 graduate of Mergenthaler

*My history and government teacher was my favorite teacher. She definitely played a part in helping me get to college. She actually took me to Dundalk to take the placement tests as well as to schedule my classes. She always stressed the importance of college.*

— a 2001 graduate of Patterson

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*One teacher was very hard on me, but ended up helping me in the end. He took me to Coppin and helped me apply.*

— a 2000 graduate of Northwestern, the first of her father’s 23 children to go to college

### **C. Summary**

Overall, the students in the interview project received limited academic preparation for college in high school. They had little opportunity and guidance to strategically choose courses that would prepare them for college. Because they had completed most of their graduation requirements by senior year, many spent 12th grade taking only a few, non-core courses and had time available in their schedules. Perhaps most importantly, few received substantive college counseling, and most did not begin preparing and planning for college until the 12th grade, or later. Absent formal college preparation, it appears that Baltimore City high school teachers play a larger role in college advising than is officially recognized or designated.

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# III. Choosing BCCC

Many of the student interview participants believe that a post-secondary education is key to succeeding in work and life. Yet for most, BCCC was never part of that college notion. For only a small handful of the students was BCCC a true college of choice; most came because they couldn't get into four-year colleges, they weren't sure about their commitment to college, or BCCC was inexpensive and close to home. The majority expressed an interest in progressing to a four-year school—some as soon as possible, before obtaining a BCCC degree. It is clear that many students decided to attend BCCC at the last minute, not as a deliberate or strategic part of larger career plans and goals.

## A. Going to College: A Given

### *Findings*

- All of the students said they believed college was key to succeeding professionally, personally, and financially; 23 percent said college is simply necessary in today's world.
- All of the students said college would impact their lives in significant ways:
  - 43 percent believe it will improve their job and career opportunities
  - 30 percent believe it will allow them to maximize their earnings potential, achieve financial independence, or support families
  - 27 percent believe it will make them feel better about themselves
- The students cited a variety of motivations for attending college.

*My daughter is the one who truly inspired me to apply to college. I do not want to be older and be ignorant around my daughter. I want to be educated for my daughter. I want to be able to help her with her homework and be able to talk to her about her education.*  
— a student and mother of a two-year-old

*All through high school I was planning to go into the service with the idea that they would pay for my college eventually. I was supposed to enlist in September and then 9-11 happened and I changed my mind. So, I got a job and then in December of 2001 . . . I decided to go to college.*  
— a student whose father has a college degree and whose mother is working toward her Associate degree in surgical nursing

*In the 4th grade when I had my first operation on my brain and met Dr. Ben Carson, I was inspired. I read Dr. Carson's book and saw what he went through to become a doctor and was inspired to do the same.*  
— a student who was a patient of renowned Johns Hopkins pediatric neurosurgeon Benjamin Carson



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*I was working a summer job at Manor Care [nursing home] and began to realize that I needed more education in order to get out of doing all the menial tasks that a nursing assistant does. My mother also really pushed me and told me I could not stay living at home without going to college.*

— a student whose parents both have college degrees

- 23 percent cited careers that require college degrees as their rationale for attending BCCC.

*For as long as I can remember I have wanted to be a dentist. Since 9th grade I have understood that to be a dentist, you have to start with college.*

— a student who planned to become a pediatrician but switched to dentistry because she “didn’t like blood and guts”

*In 9th grade I decided that I definitely wanted a career in nursing. I want to be an R.N. in pediatrics. It’s not about college, it’s about my career. I am here to get in and get out and go to work.*

— a student whose aunt, with whom she lives, is her only relative with a college degree

- 17 percent named specific people who influenced their decision to attend college.

*I always wanted to go to college and wanted to be an architect. Both my parents before they died, and my great-grandparents, always encouraged education.*

— a student whose 84-year old great-grandfather, with whom she lives, graduated from Howard University

*My godmother told me I needed to move on and apply what knowledge I was getting more. I needed to make something of myself. She told me if I did not go straight to college she would stop being my godmother.*

— a student who lives with her unemployed aunt and uncle and who has worked since she was 13 years old

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- 20 percent decided to attend college on their own, or said it seemed like the “thing to do.”

*I chose to further my education and achieve things my parents were never able to. I want to be able to take care of them some day in the same way they have taken care of me.*

— a student who is the first in her immediate family to attend college and who lives with her unemployed mother and her father

*Whole of society tells you that you have to get a degree and I bought it. At first I thought it would take too long, I thought I would go to a technical institute.*

— a student who lives alone with her infant son

## **B. Going to BCCC: A Last Resort**

Among most student interview participants, BCCC did not factor into initial decisions to pursue a higher education. Most landed at the college due to a lack of other options.

### ***Few Ready for Four-Year College***

#### *Findings*

All but two of the students enrolled at BCCC because they were not ready for a four-year college, or somehow couldn't manage one of the other community colleges:

- 40 percent of the students went to BCCC because they didn't get into other four-year schools or because their grades and/or SAT scores were too low to go elsewhere.

*Actually, I wanted to go to Coppin. I filled out a Coppin application in July [2001] and received an acceptance letter from BCCC. The letter told me I was in the Project Focus. I went to an interview at Coppin where they told me I needed to get a 2.0 average, get 15 credits and take English 101. I am hoping to go to Coppin in the fall of 2002.*

— a 2001 Northern graduate who is enrolled in Project Focus, a BCCC program for students intending to transfer to Coppin State College.

*When I found out I couldn't get into Bowie, I applied here in the summer of 2001.*

— a 2001 graduate who wants to transfer to a four-year college

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- 33 percent of the students felt they needed to start their college education with a two-year school, to get “a feel” for college or “try it out.”

*BCCC will bridge the gap for me between high school and college. It will be my stepping stone to Coppin.*

— a student whose SAT scores weren’t high enough for admission to Coppin

*I came to BCCC because I wanted to test the waters and see what college life was really like.*

— an Edmondson-Westside graduate who decided to try college after finishing high school

- 30 percent of the students said they came to BCCC because it was the “cheapest” option and the closest to home.

*I attended Catonsville Community College from fall of 1999 until spring of 2001. I took remedial classes the entire first year and then took some regular courses the second year. It was getting too difficult to get out to Catonsville and the cost was too great, so I transferred to BCCC for Spring 2002.*

— a student who lives in West Baltimore

*I wanted to be closer to home. Essex and Catonsville [community colleges] are too far away.*

— a student who lives in northeast Baltimore

- Only 2 students reported that they enrolled because they liked BCCC’s offerings.

*I got a course packet from BCCC, read it and liked what BCCC had to offer.*

— a student who says, “I never even thought I would go to college.”

- Most of the students view BCCC as a short-term, interim move:
  - 80 percent want to transfer, 20 percent of them without even getting a BCCC degree
  - 17 percent don’t know what they want to do
  - 3 percent see BCCC as their last educational stop and have no desire to transfer

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## ***Student Decisions about BCCC Don't Match Their Bigger Plans***

### *Findings*

Most of the student interview participants have career and college goals that go well beyond BCCC, but in many cases the decision to attend BCCC did not reflect these—suggesting that the decision to come to BCCC was made with little thought about how it might fit into larger plans.

- Most of the students intend to go on to a four-year college. Yet of the 21 students who entered BCCC with a major in mind, more than half were in career programs designed to prepare students for workplace entry following graduation:
  - 11 identified career programs such as surgical technician, accounting, early childhood education, computer information systems, and computer-aided drafting as their majors of choice
  - 10 said they wanted to enroll in nursing or one of BCCC's transfer programs, all of which are designed for transfer to four-year colleges

## **C. Marketing BCCC: A Soft Sell**

Because BCCC is not the first choice for many high school students, it is important to look at the marketing and outreach by BCCC in Baltimore City schools.

### *Findings*

BCCC's outreach to the student interview participants was primarily large-scale and impersonal. More than two-thirds of the students received information about BCCC in the mail inviting them to visit the school or apply. Yet fewer than half said BCCC representatives came to their school as part of a college fair or to give a 12th-grade presentation, or that students saw them at a large college fair at the Convention Center downtown. Of the latter, only a handful said they learned about individual BCCC programs or the specific steps for applying to BCCC. Fewer still actually spoke with a representative from BCCC. More than one-quarter of the students never received any information from or about BCCC.

- 73 percent of the students received information of some sort about BCCC in the mail, although not always enough, or on a timely basis, to generate interest:
  - Some started receiving information in the 11th grade; others didn't receive any until after applying to the college
  - The information ranged from brochures and open house invitations to course booklets and orientation and registration schedules
- Students were exposed to BCCC predominantly via large group presentations:
  - 30 percent said BCCC came to their school to give a presentation to the 12th grade

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- 17 percent said BCCC came to their school as part of a college fair
  - 20 percent said they saw BCCC at a college fair at the convention center
  - 7 percent heard about BCCC through participation in PASS, a BCCC program to prepare high school students for the Accuplacer
  - 26 percent didn't see or meet anyone from BCCC at any pre-college activities
  - Despite seeing BCCC representatives on these occasions, few students had personal or substantive contact:
    - 17 percent learned about BCCC programs, how to prepare for/apply to the college
    - 7 percent met a BCCC representative and discussed the college
  - Few of the students' high school college counselors or advisors recommended BCCC:
    - 93 percent said they were not encouraged in any way to attend BCCC
    - 7 percent were steered toward BCCC due to poor high school performance
    - Even among the 20 percent who were steered toward two-year colleges or nursing programs, BCCC was never specifically mentioned or suggested

**D. Summary**

While most of the students decided to attend college because they felt it was vital to succeeding in life, all but two of them ended up at BCCC as a last resort. It is clear from these interviews that students know very little about the college, but tend to have a negative perception nonetheless. The data gathered here suggest that more personalized and targeted college recruitment strategies are needed for students, and that BCCC must market to high school guidance counselors, CollegeBound specialists, administrators, and teachers.

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# IV. Arriving At BCCC

Despite their lack of initial planning for BCCC, most members of the student interview group had developed expectations by the time they arrived. Their first series of contacts with the college—enrollment, registration, and orientation—were often negative, however, compounding the barriers to college success they brought with them from high school. Most notable among these negative experiences was taking the Accuplacer placement test, which for many proved extremely difficult, and then discovering they would have to take remedial courses as a result of their low test scores.

## A. Great Expectations

Once they had decided to attend BCCC, the student interview participants relayed high expectations for their academic lives.

### *Findings*

- Student interview participants hope to make significant strides at BCCC:
  - 39 percent want to build the necessary foundation to transfer to a four-year college
  - 25 percent want to acquire the necessary skills and experience to land a good job
  - 21 percent have their sights set on getting good grades and/or a degree
  - 14 percent are striving for personal improvement
- 70 percent of the students expect to attain an Associate (A.A. or A.S.) degree, the highest degree BCCC confers; 20 percent want to transfer from BCCC as soon as possible; and 10 percent either want a certificate or don't know.
- The students are committed to being successful at BCCC; 90 percent said that at this point in their lives, school is more important than working or getting a job.
- Most of the students are optimistic they will move through BCCC fairly quickly, perhaps unrealistically in some cases:
  - 46 percent expect to get a BCCC degree within 1 to 2 years
  - 43 percent expect to a BCCC degree within 2\_ to 3 years
  - 7 percent expect getting a BCCC degree will take more than 3 years
  - 3 percent don't know how long it will take to get a BCCC degree
- The students believe BCCC will have a positive and significant impact on their lives.

*It will help me prepare for the business world and the real world—working and getting along with others. The sky is the limit.*

— a student who wants to be a businesswoman  
and own her own web design company

*This is a starting place to help me get to where I want to be. It will help me do what I am capable of doing.*

— a student who wants to help her family by becoming a nurse

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## B. Enrolling at BCCC: The Accuplacer Challenge

Because BCCC is an open admissions school, the process of enrolling, on its face, is easy and straightforward: fill out an application, pay a small fee, and take a placement test. But for many of the students in the interview project, the placement test proved a significant challenge in both its content and its unforeseen consequences.

### Background

BCCC's admissions policy requires that incoming students have a high school diploma, a GED, or a high-school equivalency certificate or diploma. As a result, enrolling at BCCC amounts to little more than submitting a two-page application in person, online, or by mail.

The application covers students' vital statistics (e.g., where they attended high school) and asks questions aimed at discerning their college goals. It asks students to identify their major by choosing among 83 instructional programs (there is also an 84th option, "undecided"). It asks students whether their academic objective is an Associate degree, a certificate, or neither. Finally, the application asks students what academic goals they hope to achieve at BCCC; answer choices include updating skills for current jobs, preparing for immediate entry into a career, preparing for transfer to a four-year college, and pursuing personal enrichment.

Students must also provide appropriate academic credentials, pay a \$10 fee, and take the Accuplacer, the college's mandatory placement test for all first-time students seeking certificates or degrees. Students must take the test in reading, writing, and mathematics before registering for classes. Students who score a 550 or higher on the SAT math and verbal sections are exempt from taking the Accuplacer, as are some transfer students from other colleges. According to the BCCC catalog, students will be referred to courses based on their test scores, and (in bold caps) **"KNOWLEDGE OF COMPUTERS IS NOT NECESSARY TO TAKE THIS TEST."**

The Accuplacer is a computer-adaptive test, meaning that the student's answer to each question will determine the level of difficulty of the next question. The math portion of the test covers arithmetic, elementary algebra, and college-level math. Students begin with elementary algebra and, depending on their answers, the computer either cycles them up to college-level math questions or down to arithmetic questions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Following a study on BCCC's placement process last spring, and ensuing debate this summer, the test center planned to have students begin with arithmetic problems on the math portion of the Accuplacer test in the 2002-03 school year.

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Most of the test questions are multiple-choice, the test is not timed, and students may take it just once, unless they have permission from the head of BCCC's math or English departments. BCCC sends students review booklets in the mail and offers review classes in all three subjects, but while review sessions are advertised on the Web site, there is no mention of them in the catalog that students receive in the mail before enrolling.

### *Findings*

Some student interview participants enrolled in person on campus and took the Accuplacer the same day. Many, however, took it at a later date—sometime before registration and orientation. Nearly all had previous notice of the placement test, either from high school or BCCC literature they received in the mail, yet more than one-third did not know they could attend Accuplacer test review sessions before taking the test. Their experiences taking the test varied greatly: roughly half said it was fair, while the other half said they struggled, mostly with the math. Finally, not realizing the consequences of the test, many rushed through it, and only a few of the students who knew about the review sessions bothered to take them. Generally, these students, who had just earned their high school diplomas, assumed they were well prepared for a college placement test.

### **Knowledge of the Test**

- 80 percent of the students knew they would have to take a placement test prior to registering for classes at BCCC.

### **Preparing for the Test**

- 43 percent of the students did not know about the Accuplacer review sessions:
  - three didn't learn about the review sessions until after they took the test, including one who was part of Talent Search, a federally funded program through which BCCC recruits high school students
- Of the 17 students who knew about the review sessions, only six attended one or more sessions (all took a math session) and only two said they were helpful.

*I felt I was fresh out of high school and didn't need them.*

— a student who graduated from Baltimore City College  
in 2001 with a C average

*What they taught in the classes was not on the test. It was a total waste of time and did not help me do better at all.*

— a 2001 graduate of Southern who attended two weeks of review classes for math and two classes for reading



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*I was confused; it helped a little. If I hadn't gone it would really have been terrible.*

— a 2001 graduate of Northwestern who took one review class in math

- Only two students studied the review booklet BCCC sent in the mail.

### **The Test**

- 43 percent of the students described the Accuplacer as “hard” or “not fair.”

*I thought the Accuplacer was hard. It was totally different from the pamphlet they give you to help you study. Even the pre-test they give you was much easier. I went to all the review courses and still couldn't pass. I studied and had a tutor for the math.*

— a 2001 graduate of Southern High School

*It tested me on things I did not know. No one told me about the review classes and I felt totally unprepared.*

— a 2001 graduate of Patterson who received information about the review sessions in the mail after taking the test

- 57 percent of the students described the Accuplacer as “good,” “okay” or “fair.”

*It was basic stuff. I was mad I had forgotten so much. I went to a few review classes. They told me about the review classes in high school. The review was too easy.*

— a 2001 graduate of Carver

*It was fair. It let me know what I would be up against as I started college.*

— a 2000 graduate of Forest Park High School who did not know about the review classes and opted not to use the review booklet she received in the mail

- 30 percent of the students said the Accuplacer tested them on material they were not taught in high school, particularly in math.

*The college math is something we never learned in high school. I thought the English and reading were fair tests.*

— a 2001 graduate of Edmondson-Westside High School who took Algebra I, II and Geometry and was in BCCC's PASS (Accuplacer prep) program during high school

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*I did not know anything about being able to take review classes and I did not score well because much of what was on the math part, I had never been taught in high school.*

— a 1999 graduate who did not take Algebra II in high school

- While most of the students said they felt comfortable with the Accuplacer's computerized format, 20 percent said it negatively affected their test performance.

*If you missed questions or wanted to leave one blank and come back to it or wanted to check over the test, you could not do it.*

— a 2001 graduate of Northern who didn't know about the Accuplacer or the review sessions prior to taking the test

*The directions were confusing and made me feel uncomfortable. I wish we had a choice [of formats] like the driver's test.*

— a 2001 graduate of Baltimore City College who knew about the placement test, but not the review sessions

### **Test Hindsight**

After taking the test, 80 percent of the students said they thought they would have scored higher had they taken the review sessions, particularly in math. Students repeatedly mentioned that they rushed through the test and did not understand the impact of a low score on college course options and BCCC's remedial education requirements in general.

*If I had taken it seriously I could have passed all the subjects. I was distracted and rushing and didn't think I was going to BCCC and so did much more poorly than I should have. It tested me on things I knew and had been taught in school.*

— a 2001 graduate of Baltimore City College who applied to BCCC only to fulfill the City College requirement that all students go through the college preparation process

## **C. Registration and Orientation: The Accuplacer Shock and a Difficult First Day**

Most of the students in the interview project enrolled at BCCC by mail before registration, so in most cases their first substantive experience at the college, after taking the Accuplacer test, was the day they registered and attended orientation. In few cases, however, did they know beforehand what the day would entail. While most had taken the placement test or knew they would have to, few knew that their test scores would be the sole factor BCCC used to place them in classes at the college, and that low test

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scores would require them to take remedial classes. Absent that information, the students were shocked to find themselves signing up for remedial courses at registration.

In addition to the disappointment at remedial class placements, students said large crowds, hasty and limited course selection, and overall confusion marked registration. Orientation was more positive, but all in all, student interviewees reported that this was a long and tedious first day.

### ***Accuplacer Placement: Reality Check No. 1***

#### **Background**

Accuplacer scores are the sole measure BCCC uses to determine whether or not students are ready for college-level course work and, where they are not, to place them into remedial courses of various levels.

The college's remedial education program comprises three subjects, each with three course levels: Reading 80, 81 and 82; English 80, 81 and 82; and Math 80, 81 and 82. The three remedial math courses cover basic arithmetic, elementary algebra (high school Algebra I), and intermediate algebra (high school Algebra II). Though remedial classes are non-credit courses, students pay college-level tuition for them, and they must pass the highest level remedial course in a subject (the 82 course) before they can advance to most college-level, credit-bearing courses in that subject.

#### *Findings*

Most of the student interview participants had no idea how a low Accuplacer score would affect them, yet all of them placed into remedial courses, most of them in all three subject areas. It was at registration that many students first learned of their remedial placements, and their reaction was overwhelmingly one of disappointment and surprise.

#### **Accuplacer Placement**

- 100 percent of the students were placed in developmental courses as a result of their Accuplacer scores:
  - 100 percent placed into developmental math
  - 90 percent placed into developmental reading
  - 87 percent placed into developmental English
- 80 percent of the students were placed in developmental courses for all three subject areas.
- Most of the students were placed in the lowest level of developmental math, while only a few placed into the highest level:
  - 60 percent placed into MAT 80, Arithmetic: Concepts and Applications
  - 27 percent placed into MAT 81, Elementary Algebra

- 13 percent placed into MAT 82, Intermediate Algebra
- In English, most of the students placed into the top two developmental levels:
  - 10 percent placed into ENG 80, Intensive Support Program in Writing
  - 47 percent placed into ENG 81, Composition Skills I
  - 33 percent placed into ENG 82, Composition Skills II
- In reading, the students placed evenly across the three developmental levels:
  - 30 percent placed into RDG 80, Intensive Support Program in Reading
  - 27 percent placed into RDG 81, Reading Skills I
  - 30 percent placed into RDG 82, Reading Skills II

**Student Reaction: Shock and Surprise**

- 70 percent of the students did not know their Accuplacer scores would affect their course selection.
- 70 percent of the students did not know that doing poorly on the test would mean having to take developmental courses.
- Two-thirds of the students were surprised to learn of their developmental placements. They expressed this in different ways:
  - 68 percent were “shocked,” “upset,” or “disappointed”
  - 42 percent were surprised at both the developmental subjects and the low developmental levels they placed into
  - 32 percent were concerned about the cost of developmental courses and the time that they would add to earning a degree
  - 26 percent were upset about the fact that developmental courses don’t earn college credit

*I certainly came hoping to take college credit courses, but I didn’t have any specific courses in mind. I was really upset about having to take remedial classes because it is a waste of time and money.*

— a student who graduated high school with a B average

*When I came to BCCC I just wanted to take college-level classes, not remedial. I felt badly about these classes because it takes up too much time.*

— a student who took a semester off between high school and college to make money, and works 20 hours a week at Hopkins Hospital

*I didn’t even know what remedial classes were. I thought I was just taking required classes. It never occurred to me that these classes weren’t counting towards my degree. Once I realized I would be taking courses for no credit I got very upset and said, “Why am I working so hard for a class I am not even getting credit for?”*

— a student who had a C average in high school and came to BCCC to get credits so she could transfer

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## ***The Registration Process: More Disappointment***

For the student interview participants, learning that their Accuplacer scores had landed them in remedial courses was the single worst aspect of registration. But the chaotic, impersonal process of registration compounded this early disappointment at BCCC.

### **Background**

There is no information in the BCCC catalog or on the college's Web site about the registration process and what students should do when they arrive. There is an early registration period, followed by an "arena registration," which was started a few years ago to streamline the registration process by consolidating most registration activities in a large auditorium. This is by far the more popular option than early registration, and it runs for three weeks before classes begin each semester.

However, first-time students typically participate in a separate registration process tied to new student orientation, for which they are given specific dates to attend. First-time students are supposed to be assigned a faculty member to advise them on course choices; later, that person or another faculty member should be assigned to them as a permanent advisor.

### **Findings**

In student interviews, 63 percent cited negative aspects of registration, and many described the registration process as confusing and chaotic. Additionally, many could not register for the courses—namely developmental courses—they needed. Late registrants didn't get into certain courses, but even those who registered early had trouble.

- 37 percent of the students said registration was confusing and hectic.

*The day I came to register made me not want to come to BCCC. There was a lot of running around. It was way too crowded.*

— a 2001 graduate of Baltimore City College who registered in July for the Fall 2001 semester

*This was a very frustrating day. I took the Accuplacer and registered all on the same day. I went to the wrong place, then after I finally found where to take the test, the people there told me to go to the wrong place to register for classes. Then I finally found where you registered and they gave me a number where I sat and waited for 45 minutes for my number to get called.*

— a 2001 graduate of Northern who registered on the last possible day for the Spring 2002 semester

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*We got lost going around campus looking for where we were supposed to go next.*

— a 2001 graduate of Edmondson-Westside who registered in January for the Spring 2002 semester

*Registration was confusing. It wasn't until I got to my PRE 100 class that I understood the process.*

— a 2000 Lake Clifton graduate who registered in August for the Fall 2001 semester

- 17 percent of the students said long waits and lines made for a tedious process.
- 27 percent of the students—including those who registered early—were unable to register for courses they wanted because all classes were full.

*They gave me classes at night and I needed classes in the morning. I also got given classes at Liberty when I said I wanted classes at the Harbor.*

— a student who registered in early December for the Spring 2002 semester

*There were no more math classes left and the reading class was very late in the afternoon and would have interfered with my job.*

— a student who registered in late August for the Fall 2001 semester

*I wanted to take math, but no math was available and so I could only take English and PRE 100. They are now trying to tell me that I have to pay back the financial aid because I am not going full time, but I would have gone full time if the classes had been available.*

— a student who registered on the last possible day for the Spring 2002 semester

- 77 percent of the students said they were not offered a choice between traditional and self-paced classes for remedial math, while 30 percent said they would have liked to take remedial math in a different format.
- 47 percent of students specifically mentioned a BCCC official who helped them select and schedule classes during registration. Among these, 79 percent said the officials had “bad attitudes” and/or weren’t helpful.

*Registration was confusing. They were trying to give me hours I didn't need and told me classes were full and to come back. The counselor was not listening to me. He was doing whatever he wanted*

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*and moving on without answering my questions and bearing my issues. He had a bad attitude. I came back another day and the person I talked to changed my entire schedule around.*

— a student who registered in late August for the Spring 2002 semester

*I was not helped at all. In fact, all they did was give me conflicting classes and make me go back and forth between people who messed things up.*

— a student who registered in December for the Spring 2002 semester

*I thought registration was bad. It was confusing and I didn't even know how to ask the right questions.*

— a student who registered in August for the Fall 2001 semester

- Asked whether they received help at registration, only a few of the students responded. Most said they were on their own.

*I really felt like I was on my own and did all the work myself. I basically registered myself.*

— a student who registered in January for the Spring 2002 semester

*People who registered us never really told us what to do. There was no uniformity. It was pretty confusing. There should be one person who explains the whole system to us.*

— a student who registered in January for the Spring 2002 semester

## ***New Student Orientation***

### **Background**

According to the BCCC catalogue, all first-time, full-time students must attend the one-day New Student Orientation. Students typically do this the same day they register. They gather in an auditorium, each takes a number to register and, while they are waiting, listen to speeches about the college experience and learn about services such as financial aid.

### *Findings*

Student interview participants gave orientation high marks overall.

- 80 percent of the students attended the mandatory orientation.
- Most of the students had a positive orientation experience overall:

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- 61 percent said orientation was good or very good
  - 28 percent said orientation was “okay”
  - 11 percent had a negative orientation experience
  - Most of the students said they learned something about what college would be like.

*We played a get-to-know-you game, toured the campus, listened to inspirational speakers, went to lunch, then went to registration.*

— a student who attended orientation in January for the Spring 2002 semester

- Still, some students found orientation discouraging.

*No one had told me you had to take a number. So I listened to the speeches and went on lunch break and came back to listen to more people talking about financial aid and still didn't know about needing a number; and I was just sitting there all day and finally realized you took a number to find out when it was your turn to register. It took until 3 p.m. to finally register for classes.*

— a student who attended a November 2001 orientation

*They warned you that most people around you would never finish BCCC.*

— a student who attended an August 2001 orientation

## **D. Summary**

The placement process, registration, and orientation all clearly have high stakes for first-time students at BCCC. What's more, all are areas where basic changes in protocol would allow BCCC to make the college work better for its students logistically, academically, and financially. Promoting the Accuplacer test and explaining its role in course selection to high school students; publicizing the review sessions; improving both the content and delivery of test instructions; and making registration more efficient and student-friendly are all simple steps the college could take with little expense to improve students' early experiences at BCCC.





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# V. BCCC First-Semester Academics

## A. Remedial Courses Dominate

### Background

All first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students, full-time and part-time alike, are required to take an orientation courses during their first semester: either PRE 100, Preparation for Academic Achievement or CSS 110, College Success Seminar.

And because the vast majority of incoming BCCC students must take remedial course work before they will be permitted to take most college-level courses, many students start their first year by taking predominantly developmental courses.

### Findings

Because 100 percent of the student interview participants placed into developmental courses and 80 percent placed into developmental courses in all three subject areas, these courses overwhelmingly dominated their first semester. All but two of the 30 students took developmental courses during their first semester at BCCC, and more than two-thirds took only courses that were developmental.

- 93 percent of the students took one or more developmental courses their first semester.
- 83 percent of the students took two or more developmental courses their first semester.
- 73 percent of the students took developmental math their first semester (100 percent qualified)
- 77 percent of the students took developmental English their first semester (90 percent qualified)
- 60 percent of the students took developmental reading their first semester (87 percent qualified)
- 40 percent of the students took at least one college-level, credit-bearing course their first semester in English, Speech, Health, Psychology, or Business Computer Applications.
- Only 63 percent of the students took PRE 100 in their first semester, even though it is a BCCC first-semester requirement.

## B. “College Is Easy”

### *Early Semester: Academic Workload Is Manageable*

For three-quarters of the students in the interview project, academic success was the single biggest concern upon arrival at BCCC, more so than financial and family concerns. Yet most reported early on that their courses were easy: most said they were relearning material, underscoring again the dominance of remedial course work early in students’ BCCC tenures.

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*Findings*

- 87 percent of the students said they were “relearning” or covering “old material” in their remedial courses:
  - 65 percent of those who took remedial math said they were relearning
  - 73 percent of those who took remedial English said they were relearning
  - 65 percent of those who took remedial reading said they were relearning
- Only remedial reading offered a second placement for those who felt they were misplaced: 77 percent of the students were offered the opportunity to take the Nelson-Denny or another test to place out of a remedial reading course. Relatively few succeeded:
  - 70 percent took at least one test, and only 7 percent passed
  - 63 percent said they failed due to time limits; only 11 percent said the tests were difficult
  - Of the 7 percent (two students) who passed, only 3 percent (one student) actually changed classes

*There was a time limit and I did not pass because there was not enough time. There were 25 reading questions to be finished in 15 minutes and 50 vocabulary questions to answer in 15 minutes.*

— a student who tried unsuccessfully to test out of RDG 81

*In reading . . . I passed the test, but there was no room in any RDG 82 classes so I just stayed in RDG 81.*

— a student whose Accuplacer score placed her into RDG 82, but who took RDG 81 due to lack of course openings

- 50 percent of the students would have liked to take such a test in other subjects.
- Only 40 percent of the students said they had at least one course that was difficult; two-thirds of these cited math as their difficult course.
- 77 percent of the students said they knew how they were doing because they were receiving regular grades in their classes on daily, weekly, or biweekly tests, papers, and quizzes.

### ***Mid-Semester: Confidence Prevails***

*Findings*

By mid-semester, two-thirds of the student interview participants were citing concerns about juggling school with family life and financial pressures, but most of them remained committed to school, saying that if something had to “give,” it would be work or their social lives, not academics. By mid-semester a majority had already missed several classes, but most felt that the absences did not affect their grades. They also reported that they were getting sufficient individual attention and help in

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class, and, while a handful admitted struggling with math, the vast majority felt confident they were doing well overall.

### **School Still Comes First**

- 67 percent of the students said aspects of their lives were difficult to balance with school, but only 3 percent (one student) cited school as the source of difficulty or imbalance:
  - 20 percent voiced concerns about money
  - 17 percent were struggling to juggle family issues and school
  - 13 percent were struggling to juggle jobs and school
  - 7 percent said transportation was a problem
  - 7 percent were tired or had trouble getting to early classes
  - 3 percent were struggling with their academic workload
- 90 percent of the students said that if they continued to struggle, school would not suffer:
  - 47 percent said that if they had to, they would cut back on work
  - 27 percent said that if they had to, they would cut back on social activities
  - 13 percent said that nothing in their lives would suffer
  - 3 percent said that if they had to, they would seek help so as not to affect school

### **Workloads Still Manageable**

- Although 33 percent of the students said their classes had become more difficult by mid-semester, 77 percent were spending 15 hours or less a week studying and doing homework:
  - 30 percent study fewer than 10 hours a week
  - 47 percent study between 10 and 15 hours a week
  - 13 percent study between 16 and 20 hours a week
  - 10 percent study between 21 and 30 hours a week

*I study mostly at night, but the work is not hard. It is about the same as high school.*

— a student who took ENG 82, MAT 82, and RDG 81 her first semester, and said she was relearning in math and reading

*I don't have to study because all of my courses are way too easy.*

— a student who took ENG 80, RDG 81, MAT 80 and PRE 100 his first semester, and said he was covering old material in all of them

*Most of the time I do my work on the weekends and read on the bus. Math is all repeat work and so it is way too easy.*

— a student who took MAT 81, RDG 81 and ENG 82 her first semester, and said the material in her reading and English courses was all “review”

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### Missed Classes, Few Worries and Plenty of Help

- 90 percent of the students said that by mid-semester they had missed several classes:
  - 23 percent had missed more than 10 classes
  - 53 percent had missed between five and 10 classes
  - 14 percent had missed fewer than five classes
  - 10 percent had perfect attendance
- 70 percent of the students with absences said poor attendance would not affect their grade.
- 87 percent of the students felt their class size was good; 50 percent said their classes had shrunk considerably by mid-semester.
- 73 percent of the students said they get enough individual attention in class.
- 83 percent of the students said instructors explained the course work for each class well.
- 97 percent of the students said help was available for their courses, from tutors or instructors after class, during office hours, via email, or in labs.
- Only half the students sought help, and most received the help they needed in their courses:
  - 15 sought help in at least one class; 10 got the help they needed
  - 8 sought help specifically in math; 6 said they got the help they needed

### Feeling Good About Performance . . .

- By mid-semester, most of the students continued to feel they were doing well in their classes:
  - 73 percent said they were doing satisfactorily or better in all of their classes, while 27 percent said they were doing less than satisfactorily in one class
- By mid-semester, only one-fifth of the students were worried about failing a class:
  - 79 percent said they were averaging a C or better in all of their classes, while 21 percent said they were failing one class
- By mid-semester, 17 percent of the students had considered dropping out.

*Sometimes I think about quitting when I don't feel like getting up in the morning, but mentally I know I have to go to school to get a career.*

— a student who lives with her mother, doesn't work, and took ENG 82, MAT 82 and RDG 81 her first semester

*Dropping out has crossed my mind. Some of the teachers are frustrating and some are confusing. When I have tried to get help, there has been no one there for me.*

— a student who lives with her mother (who has one year of college) and stepfather (who does not have a high school degree), who works 20-plus hours a week at Sinai Hospital, and who took RDG 80, MAT 80, ENG 81 and PRE 100 her first semester

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*I have thought about dropping out because it feels overwhelming.  
But I know that I am one step closer to achieving financial stability.*  
— a student who lives on her own with her baby,  
works all day as a cashier at Target and goes to school  
at night, and took ENG 81 and MAT 81 her first semester

**... Though a Few Struggle with Math**

- Of the 8 students who said they were doing poorly in one class, 6 cited math.
- Of the 6 students who said they were failing one class, 5 said it was math.

***End of Semester: Optimism Still Reigns***

- By the end of their first semester, 15 of the 30 students said BCCC was academically the same as or easier than high school.
- Most of the students (23 of 30) thought they would pass all of their courses.
- Of the 7 students who were uncertain:
  - 5 worried about passing math
  - 2 worried about passing reading or English
  - 5 hoped to improve their chances of passing
  - 2 had given up on math

*I am worried about reading. I am trying to find ways to make up  
my work and go to the tutoring center.*  
— a student who took RDG 82 his first semester

*I think I will fail math. I failed one test and then just gave up. I  
should have dropped the class right away.*  
— a student who took MAT 80 her first semester

**C. Summary**

It is clear from the interviews that first-time BCCC students spend their first semester—even their first year—taking primarily remedial courses. It is also clear that for many, these remedial courses are not challenging. Some say they are “too easy,” while others say that the content is merely a repeat of high school; their lackadaisical approach to studying reflects as much. By and large, these students do not study extensively outside of class and they have erratic attendance, yet they are confident they are doing well by semester’s end.



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# VI. BCCC First-Semester Supports

Members of the student interview project neither sought nor received much guidance and help during their first semester at BCCC. The college offers a range of support services, but they are largely decentralized and poorly promoted, making it difficult for students to know where and how to access help. Compounding this problem are a lack of academic advising from faculty; the apparent absence among staff of a larger sense of what students need to succeed; and finally, students' inability, due to a lack of initiative and knowledge, to make BCCC work for them.

By semester's end, few students had met their academic advisor. Most said they would go to their PRE 100 instructor for help over an advisor or the college's counseling services. Meanwhile, most rely on family and friends for college guidance and support.

## **A. Plenty of Services, But Few Who Know about Them . . .**

### **Background**

For the purposes of this paper, student supports and services include all academic and personal counseling, financial aid, and advising services, all academic supports such as tutoring, and special academic programs. At BCCC, these services are broadly dispersed among many departments and offices. As a result, there is confusion about what is available where. Even college staff has articulated a need to clarify the various programs' and players' roles. Additionally, many of the services and supports are limited to those enrolled in special programs, and thus unavailable to a majority of students.

Academic advisement is provided largely through the Academic Advisement Center in the college's Academic Affairs division. In addition to providing academic advisement, Academic Affairs coordinates the PRE 100 and CSS 110 courses that all first-time students must take. The division also operates the Academic Learning Center, an "open lab" where tutoring and study skills workshops are available; it also oversees the college's Learning Community, a program designed to target highly motivated remedial students who move through courses as cohorts and to whom mentors are available.

Student Affairs, meanwhile, oversees all other student supports and services. It runs extracurricular activities and high school recruitment programs. It oversees partnerships with Morgan and Coppin (Morgan Connect and Project Focus, respectively) that provide enhanced services to students intending to transfer to those four-year institutions.

Student Affairs runs the Office of Student Support Services, through which admissions, financial aid, registration, counseling, and advisement services are offered, and it runs the Counseling, Career Services, and Transfer Center. The division also runs a volunteer mentoring program in which BCCC employees assist students in all areas of their college experience, and a program staffed with "retention specialists" that provides



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support to “economically and educationally disadvantaged” students through career and personal counseling, pre-vocational assessment, and job placement assistance.

*Findings*

Upon arriving at BCCC, many of the student interview participants voiced concern about being able to stay focused on academics, getting good grades, and passing their classes. Yet, few students sought and/or received substantive supports and services during their first semester, despite the array of resources and opportunities established to ensure student success at the college. A majority, meanwhile, relied on help from friends and family members.

- Nearly half the students were unaware of any BCCC supports or services for students:
  - 17 cited one or more services
  - 13 said they didn’t know what supports were available
- Among the 17 students who knew of existing services, 8 cited specific sources of help—tutors, labs, or teachers—and 5 mentioned the Office of Student Support Services. In general terms, others mentioned advising or counseling, employment assistance, financial aid, and day care.

*There is employment, housing, study help and financial aid.*

— a student who works part-time as a bank teller and took MAT 80, RDG 80, ENG 82, and PRE 100 her first semester (BCCC does not offer housing.)

*I don’t know of any kinds of support.*

— a student who was concerned about passing RDG 82 and was “trying to find ways to make up [his] work”

*There are scholarships and financial aid.*

— a student who was worried she might fail MAT 80 and had “pretty much given up” due to test anxiety

- None of the students are participating in the college’s “Learning Community,” and only one student had heard about it and knew what it was.
- Only one-third of the students knew about the Academic Learning Center, and only two students knew about the tutoring labs at the Harbor Campus.

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## B. . . . And Even Fewer Takers or Satisfied Customers

### *Findings*

- 12 of the 30 student interview participants sought help outside of class through BCCC services their first semester; 7 received the help they needed:
  - 6 sought help from the Financial Aid Office; 3 received help
  - 2 sought help from Student Support Services; 1 received help
  - 3 sought help from tutors; 2 received help
  - 1 sought help from an academic advisor; 1 received help

*Now I go to Student Support Services for math tutoring and they are a great help.*

— a student who works full-time and took MAT 80, ENG 81 and PRE 100 her first semester, and who by mid-semester was concerned she was failing math

*I have gone to Financial Aid for help and the result was not good. No one wanted to take the time to listen to my situation. Different people told me different things.*

— a student who does not receive any financial aid at BCCC and works 40 hours a week at a CVS to pay her way through college

*In tutoring for math you either wait for a long time for someone to show up or there are too many people needing help and you can't get your issues resolved.*

— a student who took RDG 80, ENG 81, MAT 80 and OR 50 (the equivalent of PRE 100 for students in the Morgan Connect program) her first semester, and said her math instructor was unavailable for help outside of class

*I have been to Student Support Services two times and both times people have not been available to help me. I have had to help myself.*

— a student who dropped out of BCCC the previous year failing English and math, but who returned in Fall 2001 to take MAT 80, ENG 82 and RDG 82

- Meanwhile, 57 percent of the students sought help outside BCCC, primarily among family and friends, and all said they received the help they needed.

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## C. Academic Advisement for Only a Few

### Background

In the late 1990s, BCCC removed the academic advisement function from its Student Affairs division and made it the responsibility of Academic Affairs. The intent was to reduce the burden on the college’s eight counselors, who then had caseloads of 400 to 500 students each, by giving faculty members the additional role of academic advisors. It was also thought that the academic experts should be providing the academic advising.

The BCCC catalog describes academic advisement as a two-pronged effort that is an “essential part of the BCCC experience.” The first component is the mandatory New Student Orientation; the second is assignment of an academic advisor from either the Counseling, Career Services, and Transfer Center (overseen by Student Affairs) or the Academic Advisement Center (in the Academic Affairs division) to each student.

According to the catalog, “each degree-seeking student meets with an advisement specialist or counselor” following orientation to design an educational plan, learn the academic requirements for graduation, select first-semester courses, and learn how to access the various services offered by BCCC. Students are typically advised through the Counseling, Career Services, and Transfer Center until they have satisfied all remedial requirements, completed six academic credits, and earned a grade point average of at least 2.0, at which point they should be assigned to the Academic Advisement Center.

Somewhere between mid-semester grade reports and the beginning of the second semester, the Academic Advisement Center assigns an academic advisor to every new student. According to the catalog, this advisor “will meet with the student at regular intervals to choose an academic program, select appropriate courses, monitor the student’s success, and generally provide academic advice and guidance.” Students with identified majors and without special academic needs are, in theory, assigned advisors within their program’s department, whom they keep as advisors throughout their college tenure. BCCC does, however, “expect students to take the initiative in seeking out their advisors to set up regular meetings.” Furthermore, because the registration process requires advisors to sign off on students’ course selections, students must meet with their advisor before they can register for classes each semester.

Despite BCCC’s intent to streamline academic advising, its transfer to Academic Affairs has been only marginally successful, BCCC staff contend. Because faculty members are busy and receive no advisement training, they perform what is termed “schedule-building”—that is, helping students register for courses—but little else in the way of checking in with students and tracking their academic performance.

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*Findings*

Despite protocol and policies that depict an intensive academic advisement system, intensive advising was not the practice during the student interview participants' first semester. Few of these students received any academic advisement—as evidenced by their own accounts and by deficiencies in areas that advisement is designed to address among new BCCC students. The few students who did receive help from advisors were mostly participants in Morgan Connect or Coppin's Project Focus.

**Little Advisement at BCCC**

- Only 10 of the 30 students met his/her academic advisor during their first semester or year. Of those:
  - 6 were part of the Morgan Connect or Coppin Project Focus programs
  - Only one, a Morgan Connect participant, met his advisor in his first semester

*I don't think I ever met my advisor. When I registered, that person never told me they were my advisor. They never invited me to come to them if I had a problem, so I guess I don't have one.*

— a student who took MAT 80 and PRE 100 her first semester, who was placed in a self-paced math course due to unavailability of other courses and who has struggled to get the help she needs

*You just go to the advising room and sign in and get help. I don't know who my advisor is.*

— a student who went to Student Support Services twice, but could not find anyone to help her

*I have seen the name of my advisor on my schedule but she is never there. I have gone to her office a lot of times and she is never there so I just stopped going.*

— a student who is concerned about being able to keep up his grades and tuition payments

- Those students who had met their advisors reported that they got little help:
  - 5 of the 6 Morgan Connect and Project Focus participants said their advisors only helped with class registration; only 2 would return to them for help
  - 3 of the 4 non-Coppin or Morgan program students said their advisors were not helpful

*I met my advisor twice to register for each semester. I do not like her and have not learned anything from her. She has just signed my papers.*

— a Morgan Connect participant who said she would go to her mother or a friend for help—“definitely no one at school”

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*I had to go to my advisor to register for this semester. I asked her about courses and she told me to change my major because I am not good at math. It is really hard to get in touch with her. She is never in her office when she is supposed to be having office hours.*

— a student with worries about passing math

- 9 of the 30 students had met with a BCCC representative during their first year or semester to discuss academic and career goals; only 4 got the help they needed:
  - 4 met with their advisors; 3 merely discussed and scheduled classes, only 1 discussed career goals
  - 3 met with PRE 100 instructors; all got help with academic and career goals
  - 2 went to the Counseling, Career Services, and Transfer Center, but did not discuss career or academic goals with anyone
- Meanwhile, 24 of the 30 students report they had discussed their academic and career goals with friends and family, while 6 hadn't discussed either one with anybody.

#### **The Lack of Advisement Shows**

- When talking about the careers they want to pursue, only half of the students said they had made a decision based on research or first-hand experience (such as observing a relative) and showed a solid grasp of what was involved in pursuing their career choice. Only one of those students received help with a career decision from someone at BCCC, a PRE 100 instructor. The remaining students were vague about their career decisions, having based them on broad likes and dislikes rather than opportunities and abilities. Some clearly didn't know about options available to them in their areas of interest.

*I decided I want to be a nurse after talking to my teacher in high school. I think I would look nice in the outfit. A hospital is a nice place to work.*

— a Project Focus student who wants to transfer to Coppin for nursing

*I want to be in business because I like computer work, answering the phone, dressing in business wear, and working behind a desk.*

— a student who wants to transfer to a four-year college as soon as possible, before getting a BCCC degree

*I decided to be a doctor because I like to help people and I like science and biology. I also like to watch medical shows on TV.*

— a student who claims she is pursuing an Associate degree at BCCC in “pre-med” who is determined to prove her advisor—who has tried to persuade her not to pursue medicine because she is doing poorly in math—wrong

- In naming the degrees or certificates they wanted to obtain, most of the students exhibited confusion about the options available to them and the requirements that come with those options; 23 of the 30 students showed little grasp of how being at BCCC and earning an Associate degree might fit into larger life and career plans.

*I want to get a certificate, I think. I do still wonder if I should get an A.A.*

— a student who wants to go to work for a while after graduating from BCCC, then go back to college and on to law school

*I want to get an A.A. degree or some type of certificate. I want to transfer because I want to be some kind of boss some day.*

— a student who is debating between computer technology and administrative assistant programs

- By the end of the semester, only 60 percent of the students (18 of 30) had specified which major and which degree they were pursuing. The rest had identified areas of interest or specified whether they wanted an Associate degree or a certificate, but not both.
- Contrary to what the catalog stipulates, at the end of the semester 13 of the 30 students said that they did not know whether or not they had to talk to an advisor before registering for the fall, or stated that they did not have to.
- Of the 17 students who did meet with their advisor, or knew they had to before registering for the fall, 5 simply found a random person to sign off on their schedule.

## **D. PRE 100: De Facto Support System**

### **Background**

During their first semester at BCCC, all new students are required to take either PRE 100, Preparation for Academic Achievement or CSS 110, College Success Seminar, courses designed to familiarize students with the demands and responsibilities of college and the supports and resources that exist to facilitate their college success. Although participants in the college's Learning Community take CSS 110 and participants in Morgan Connect attend their own orientation course (OR 50), the vast majority of first-time BCCC students take PRE 100.

### *Findings*

Only two-thirds of the student interview participants took PRE 100 as required during their first semester, which might account for their lack of knowledge about supports and services at the college. Yet, asked what they learned in PRE 100, few even mentioned hearing about these resources. The students described PRE 100 as a good

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experience overall. Perhaps more importantly, in many cases PRE 100 instructors provided help students weren't getting elsewhere.

- Asked to name the five most important things they learned in PRE 100, students most often cited study skills, interpersonal skills, and self-improvement skills, while learning about the supports and services available at BCCC was cited least often:
  - 60 percent learned specific study skills: how to take notes, think critically, write papers, study for tests, and complete assignments
  - 53 percent learned interpersonal skills: how to deal with people, work as a group, communicate, and meet new people
  - 47 percent learned personal improvement skills: increasing self-control, improving self-esteem, being one's self, dealing with stress, making decisions, staying focused, and assessing one's strengths and weaknesses
  - 47 percent learned how to manage their time better
  - 33 percent learned about setting career and life goals
  - 23 percent learned money management skills
  - 17 percent learned about different learning styles and how to identify their own
  - 13 percent learned about the various resources available at BCCC
  - 7 percent learned how to navigate the college's campuses
- Asked who they would go to for help with their college concerns, 73 percent of the students cited someone at BCCC; they were most likely to name their PRE 100 instructor:
  - 30 percent would go to their PRE 100 instructor for help
  - 20 percent would go to a course instructor for help
  - 13 percent would go to tutors or advisors for help
  - 10 percent would go to Student Support Services for help
- 27 percent of the students would not seek help from anyone at BCCC.

## E. Financial Aid

### Background

BCCC offers most major state and federal financial aid programs and 15 categories of institutional scholarships to help students with the costs of tuition and books. Students usually receive financial aid "packages" that consist of a combination of these, with federal Pell grants being the most common form of aid. State and federal aid programs are based on need, and students must reapply each year for most of these. Applications take four to six weeks to process. Awards are made on a first-come, first-served need basis and can be affected negatively by a student's academic standing. BCCC's Financial Aid Office staff is available to review students' applications and assist with completing the various forms. Workshops in which students receive such assistance are also available "periodically," the catalog states.

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*Findings*

Most of the student interview participants receive financial aid for college. Only limited information about financial aid emerged in the interviews, but it is clear that the students could benefit from more guidance in this area.

- While 87 percent of the students receive financial aid for college, 31 percent reported that they struggle to cover their expenses.

*They told me I might have to pay for summer school and they also said my work-study might continue for the summer. I can't go to summer school without these things.*

— a student who received federal Pell and Supplemental Education Opportunity grants and had a work-study job during the Spring 2002 semester

*They only gave me \$350 for summer classes so I can only take one class. My college is just barely getting paid for.*

— a student who works 40 hours a week at Hopkins Hospital and received a grant through Hopkins that was supposed to cover half her tuition, books, and fees for Spring 2002 semester, but did not

- 46 percent of the students who receive financial aid said that they did not receive the help they needed at BCCC's Financial Aid Office.

*When you go to Financial Aid, they have work-study students there and they do not know what they are talking about.*

— a student who received a federal Pell Grant for books and tuition

*I have gone to financial aid for help trying to get a student loan and the result was not good. No one wanted to take the time to listen to my situation. Different people told me different things.*

— a student who works 40 hours a week at a CVS store who did not receive financial aid for Spring 2002 semester

*I have had to go to Financial Aid. Certain people were helpful, but they just repeat what the government tells them. One time I was there and there was no one at the desk or even around the office.*

— a student with insufficient financial aid and financial problems



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*Financial aid was very complicated. My father couldn't fill out the forms; he only has a 6th grade education. I was very frustrated and they told me I was not eligible. Eventually it got worked out, but it took a long time and was very trying.*

— a student who eventually received a federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant for books and tuition

## **F. Summary**

While few students sought help during their first semester, few even knew what sources of help were available to them at BCCC. The college's myriad supports and services are neither well coordinated nor publicized, and are not being maximized as a result. Starker yet, is the lack of academic advising taking place early in students' college careers; of these 30 students, only 10 had met an advisor during their first year, most of them Morgan Connect or Coppin Focus participants. First-time BCCC students do not appear to be getting much guidance and support at the college, and the help they do receive tends to come through informal channels, such as PRE 100 instructors.

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# VII. Student Life at the College

The BCCC catalog asserts that extracurricular activities on campus allow students to develop leadership and interpersonal skills that are central to the college experience. Yet the catalog devotes less than a page to student life and extracurricular activities. Not surprisingly, participation among students interviewed was correspondingly low in this area. Unlike high school, where the majority of the interview group was very involved in extracurricular activities, BCCC for these students appears to be a place to take classes and little else.

## A. Students Are Disengaged

### Background

Students are referred to the Student Life Office to learn about clubs, organizations and extracurricular activities linked to areas of academic study. In addition, the catalog briefly describes the student newspaper, student government, intercollegiate athletic program, and its honors society, Phi Theta Kappa.

### Findings

Though the student interview participants said they were very involved in extracurricular activities in high school, such engagement in school life did not carry over to BCCC. Several students said they had made new friends in their classes, but none had gotten to know people through extracurricular activities, and only a few had made friends outside of class.

A majority of the students were aware of an extracurricular activity at BCCC, but this knowledge was extremely limited—they knew, for example, that there is a basketball team—and few had any interest in getting involved. Most also said that they interact very little with instructors outside of class, and most discuss their college experiences, concerns, and progress solely with family members and friends. Most also say they study primarily at home, isolating them even more from the college environment.

- 77 percent of the students were involved in extracurricular activities at their high schools:

*I was in the choir, track, student government, the student council, dance, and community service.*

— a 2001 Carver graduate

*I was in the choir, volleyball, Students Helping other People, debate, the law club, Teen Corps Community Service, and school-sponsored work at the Preakness.*

— a 2001 Northwestern graduate

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*I was on the varsity basketball, track, and cross country teams,  
and in two clubs – MESA and HOPE (Helping Others Excel).*  
— a 2000 Mergenthaler graduate

*I was captain of the marching band, in a gospel choir, played the  
drums in ROTC, and went to church.*  
— a 2001 Northwestern graduate

- None of the students was involved in campus or extracurricular activities at BCCC.
- 53 percent of the students were aware of some of the clubs, organizations, and sports teams at BCCC, but for nearly half of these, that knowledge was limited to sports teams.
- 37 percent of the students were interested in learning more about these extracurricular activities or in getting involved.
- 73 percent of the students said they had made new friends at BCCC, mostly in class.
- Only 27 percent of the students said they interact with instructors outside of class.
- Most of the students spend their spare time off-campus, visiting with family and friends, shopping and going to parties and movies.
- 97 percent of the students do most of their studying and homework at home versus school, another factor that limits the amount of time they spend on campus and opportunities for socialization.
- Almost all of the students discuss their college experience and classes with family and friends, as opposed to people at school:
  - 77 percent talk exclusively to family and friends
  - 13 percent talk to PRE 100 instructors and classmates as well as family and friends
  - 7 percent don't talk to anyone

## **B. Summary**

For many of these students, having to juggle work and school leaves little time for social interaction and extracurricular activities; yet more than one-third of the students expressed interest in learning more about what, in the way of clubs, sports, and activities the college has to offer. College for these students is clearly a place they come to go to class—and leave. While it is unclear the extent of the bearing this may have on academic performance, this lack of engagement in recreational and academic-related activities at school is a missed opportunity for peer mentoring and support for these recent high school graduates.

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# VIII. Reality Check: Final Grades Don't Match Student Optimism

Overall, student interview participants finished their first semester feeling they had performed well academically. Based on in-class experiences and grades to date, 77 percent felt confident they had passed all of their classes, and only 17 percent worried about passing math. Yet the students' final course grades, issued after classes finished and the final interviews were conducted, did not match their optimistic predictions.

The 30 students completed 95 courses between them. Failing grades were issued in 21 of these 95 courses. In other words, as a group, these students failed nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of their courses. Nearly all of those Fs were in remedial courses, and more than half of them were in math. Instead of confirming the students' sense of confidence, the grades serve as a grim reality check. (Among those students who took one or more college-level courses, the pass rate was much higher.)

In addition to their own disappointing grades, the dramatic reduction in the students' class sizes during the semester reflects the struggles of first-semester students at BCCC. While only five of the students dropped a class during their first semester due to schedule conflicts or poor performance, a large number of their peers dropped courses, driving down the student interview participants' class sizes by an average of 44 percent, according to student estimates.

## A. Disappointing Grades

### *Findings*

Contrary to their expectations, many of the students failed first-semester courses.

### **Developmental Mathematics**

- 22 of the 30 students took developmental math in the first semester; 68 percent failed:
  - 14 took MAT 80 (arithmetic); 4 got Cs and 10 got Fs
  - 5 took MAT 81 (elementary algebra); 2 got Cs and 3 got Fs
  - 3 took MAT 82 (intermediate algebra); 1 got a B and 2 got Fs
- Of the 15 students who failed math, 13 had taken a course titled "Algebra II" in high school (intermediate algebra ostensibly the substantive equivalent of MAT 82 at BCCC).

### **Developmental English**

- 23 of the 30 students took developmental English their first semester; 13 percent failed:
  - 3 took ENG 80; 1 got an A and two got Cs
  - 13 took ENG 81; 2 got As, 5 got Bs, 5 got Cs, and 1 got an F
  - 7 took ENG 82; 1 got an A, 1 got a B, 3 got Cs, and 2 got Fs

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### Developmental Reading

- 18 of the 30 students took developmental reading their first-semester; 6 percent failed:
- 5 took RDG 80; 1 got an A, 3 got Bs, and 1 got a C
  - 8 took RDG 81; 1 got an A, 3 got Bs, 3 got Cs, and 1 got an F
  - 5 took RDG 82; 4 got Bs and 1 got a C

### PRE 100

- 21 of the 30 students took PRE 100 in their first semester; 10 percent didn't pass:
  - 9 got As, 8 got Bs, 1 got a C, 2 got Fs, and 1 withdrew

### College-level Courses

- 13 of the 30 students took 21 college-level courses their first semester; 19 percent failed:
  - 4 took English 101; 3 got Bs, 1 got an F
  - 2 took Psychology 101; both got Bs
  - 7 took Speech 101; 3 got As, 1 got a B, 1 got an F, and 2 withdrew
  - 1 took History 110 and got a C
  - 1 took Business Administration 112 and got an A
  - 1 took Business Computer Applications 104 and got an A
  - 4 took Health and Life Fitness 166,167 or 201; 1 got an A, 1 got a C, 1 got a D, and 1 got an F
  - 1 took Gerontology 101 and got an F
- Students had far greater success in college level courses (81 percent pass rate) and remedial English and reading courses (87 percent and 94 percent pass rates, respectively) than they did in remedial math courses (32 percent pass rate).

## B. Shrinking Classes

### *Findings*

Of the 30 student interview participants, only five dropped a class during their first semester due to scheduling conflicts and/or course difficulty. At the same time, nearly all of the students said they had classes, predominantly remedial courses, that decreased considerably in size. It is not clear why so many people in these students' classes dropped courses, though many of the students noted that they left once they received refund checks from Financial Aid. Whatever the reason, the numbers show low commitment to and/or ability to manage academics among students at BCCC, particularly students in remedial courses.

- All but one student (97 percent) reported that at least one first-semester class decreased in size by 20 percent or more; 67 percent had at least one class that shrank by 50 percent or more.

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- 70 percent of the students had multiple classes that decreased in size by 20 percent or more.
  - 84 percent of the decreases in class size occurred in remedial or PRE 100 classes.

### **C. Looking Forward—and Still Floundering**

#### ***Still Worried about Succeeding . . .***

- Despite having an entire semester (or in some cases an entire year) to settle into BCCC and college life, and despite finishing the school year feeling confident they were doing well, 80 percent of the student interview participants still expressed some concern about their ability to succeed at BCCC:
  - 33 percent worried the work will get too hard or they won't pass their courses
  - 20 percent worried about being able to stick with BCCC and stay focused
  - 17 percent worried about being able to juggle studying and work
  - 13 percent worried generally about succeeding and achieving their goals
  - 10 percent worried about how long it will take to get through BCCC
  - 10 percent worried about being held back because of remedial requirements
  - 7 percent worried about not being able to afford college

#### ***Still Unclear on How to Negotiate BCCC***

- Two weeks before classes ended, a majority of the students still seemed unclear about how to proceed for the Fall 2002 semester:
  - 15 did not know they had to meet with an advisor to register for Fall 2002
  - 5 did not know how to register for the Fall 2002 semester
- 8 of the 16 students who wanted to go to summer school did not know how to go about registering.

### **D. Summary**

The students did not do nearly as well academically as they had predicted they would do, suggesting that they lacked accurate performance indicators throughout the semester, and that they needed much more in the way of academic intervention than they received during their first semester



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# IX. Student Concerns and Recommendations

The student interview participants made a number of observations and voiced a number of concerns as they looked back on their first semester or first year at BCCC. They also made a number of recommendations to improve the overall experience of first-semester students at the college. (These thoughts and reflections were reported before students received their final grades for the Spring 2002 semester.)

As they looked ahead, the students expressed continued concern about achieving their academic goals. Their uncertainty about the college process suggests that they are also still finding their way at BCCC.

## A. Observations and Concerns

### ***Best and Worst Experiences: Academics Still Foremost for Students***

Asked about their best and worst experiences since arriving at BCCC, a majority of the students' answers related to academic performance, implying a sustained focus on college success, as well as lingering academic concerns.

- 52 percent of the students cited academic strides as their "best experience," while 48 percent cited personal growth and improvements.

*The best thing was receiving an A in Speech class. Before that I did not like to speak in front of people.*

— a student who took the required Speech 101 his first semester

*The best thing that has happened to me is that I have become a good writer. I thought I could write in high school but now I know I can write. My English 101 teacher is a great teacher and really taught me well and has encouraged me and given me great confidence.*

— a student who took a full course load her senior year in high school and was an English honors student, and who later learned she had passed ENG 101 in her first semester

*The best thing was doing well in some classes.*

— a student who took four courses her first semester, and got a B in ENG 82, an A in PRE 100, an A in BUAD 112 (a computer course for business students), and an F in Speech 101



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*The best thing is that BCCC has helped me as a person. I know I can do it. It makes me feel like doing better and doing more.*

— a student who came to BCCC to get an Associate degree in Nursing and who failed PRE 100 first semester and MAT 80 her second semester

*The best thing is that I have matured more and don't take school as a joke. I used to have an "I don't care" attitude.*

— a student who did not want to go to college and only applied to BCCC to fulfill City College's college application requirement

*The best thing is that I have become more responsible and am doing things on my own.*

— a student who decided on her own to attend college, and who reported consistently that she did not receive help from anyone at BCCC her first semester

*The best thing is that I feel like an adult. People look at me differently and think, "This girl is smart."*

— a student who had planned to enter the Air Force but changed her mind following the terrorist attacks of September 11

- 72 percent of students cited an academic experience (failing a class, having work that was too hard, not getting help, remedial classes) as the worst experience at BCCC:
- 28 percent cited problems other than academics.
  - 11 percent cited not being able to juggle school and work
  - 11 percent cited logistical difficulties, such as getting to and from school
  - 6 percent cited social isolation at the college

*The worst thing was almost failing remedial math last semester and reading this semester.*

— a student who got a C in MAT 81 in Fall 2001 and a C in RDG 81 in Spring 2002, who later learned she got an F in MAT 82 in Spring 2002

*The worst thing was my math class. I hate math, I have a bad teacher; there is too much work and not enough time to get it all done.*

— a student who took MAT 80 and said her instructor brushed her off when she requested help

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*The worst thing was being left behind in remedial classes.*

— a student who placed into MAT 81, ENG 81, and RDG 82 and failed MAT 81 her first semester (and learned later that she failed again her second semester)

*The worst thing is when you try to get help, it is always a long wait. Trying to find a teacher for help is difficult and sometimes teachers rush through things.*

— a Morgan Connect participant who struggled with ENG 81 and MAT 80 her first semester

*The worst thing is my financial situation.*

— a student who is raising an infant daughter and receives financial aid for tuition and books

### ***Revisiting High School***

If they had it to do all over again, the majority of students said they would prepare and plan for college very differently, and do so proactively during high school. Prevalent throughout their comments is the sense that, had they worked harder in high school and been more strategic about college search and application processes, they would have been able to attend a four-year institution.

- 87 percent of the students said they would have been more strategic about planning 12th grade classes and the college search process:
  - 42 percent would have applied themselves more academically in high school
  - 42 percent would have taken the SAT, studied harder for it, and/or taken it sooner
  - 37 percent would have sought out information about more and different colleges
  - 19 percent would have taken better advantage of college counselors
  - 19 percent would have started the whole college search process earlier
- 97 percent of the students said they would welcome the opportunity to return to their high schools and advise 11th graders on the college application and choice process:
  - 45 percent would advise students to focus more on high school academics
  - 34 percent would advise students to start the college search process early
  - 34 percent would urge students to make informed decisions about going to college
  - 24 percent would urge students to take, and prepare more for, the SAT
  - 21 percent would urge students to rely more on college counselors in high school

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- 17 percent would advise students to know what colleges expect of them and be prepared to work hard
  - 14 percent would advise students to apply for financial aid early
  - 100 percent of the students said they would welcome the opportunity to return to their high schools and advise 11th graders specifically about BCCC:
    - 67 percent would advise students to learn about the Accuplacer and to prepare for it
    - 47 percent would warn students about being placed in remedial courses
    - 20 percent would advise students to immediately seek an advisor or mentor
    - 20 percent would advise students to register early for classes
    - 14 percent would advise students not to attend BCCC

### ***Making the Early BCCC Experience Easier***

- Asked whether their early experience at BCCC could have been any different, a little more than half of the students said it could have been made easier, repeating earlier themes such as having more knowledge about the Accuplacer, a better organized registration process, and individualized academic counseling.

*The Accuplacer could have been handled better. We could have been told what it was about and what the consequences of our performance would be. Also, I would have liked to have my classes scheduled at better times.*

— a student who knew about the placement test but wished she had known about the review sessions

*If I knew the requirements of Accuplacer, I would now be more academically challenged.*

— a student who did not know about Accuplacer, placed into MAT 80, ENG 81 and RDG 81, and failed MAT 80

*There needs to be more one-on-one counseling available.*

— a student who took MAT 80 her first semester, was unable to get tutoring help, and failed the course

*Registration was very disorganized. They should be able to do that better.*

— a student who said she spent registration scrambling to get different forms signed, only to learn that all the classes she wanted were full

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*If I had had a counselor right from the beginning, someone who got to know me at the start of school and stuck with me, someone who could help me get the most out of BCCC, it would have been very helpful. They just leave you to figure it out on your own. Even when they finally assigned me to an advisor, she was in the dental school and did not know anything about the things I was interested in. It was a waste of time.*

— a student who now relies on her PRE 100 instructor for help

- Asked whether there was anything BCCC could do to help them be more successful at the college, half the student interviewees said there is plenty the college could do.

*Teachers could be more available to students, communicate more with students and help them stay more on track.*

— a student who has struggled to choose a major

*They need to have more tutoring. You shouldn't have to hunt for everything.*

— a student who works 35 hours a week at a grocery store

*I would like there to be more career workshops. There need to be more counselors who really know what they are talking about.*

— a student who spent three semesters without an advisor, and finally, in her fourth semester, took PRE 100 and designated the instructor as her informal advisor

*I would like to have more choice in the classes available.*

— a student who placed into MAT 82, RDG 82 and ENG 81, all unavailable her first semester

*I would like to test out of remedials or take the Accuplacer again.*

— a student who took ENG 80, RDG 81 and MAT 80 his first semester, and said they were “all too easy”

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## **B. Students' Recommendations**

The students also made several explicit recommendations they believe would improve the BCCC experience for first-time students. The most common recommendations centered on high school preparation, counseling and advising for students, and the Accuplacer.

### ***High Schools Should Lay More Groundwork for College***

- A common theme throughout the students' comments about improving the first-semester experience at BCCC centered on the need for high schools and BCCC to work more closely together to ensure college students' success:
  - BCCC should go into high schools and conduct seminars explaining the college admission, placement and registration process and experience
  - BCCC should go into high schools and tell students exactly what is expected of them academically when they get to the college
  - BCCC and BCPSS should allow high school students to take the Accuplacer test and start non-credit, remedial courses while still in high school
  - BCCC officials should look into what high schools are teaching, not what they think they should be teaching, and test incoming students on that

### ***Improving the Accuplacer***

- 73 percent of the students contend that BCCC could do several things to improve students' chances of success on the Accuplacer placement test:
  - 57 percent said BCCC could improve the Accuplacer review sessions and make them more available and more public
  - 13 percent said BCCC should allow students to take the test more than once
  - 10 percent said BCCC should better publicize the consequences of a poor test score
  - 7 percent said BCCC should give students a pencil-and-paper option
- Toward that end, the students recommended that BCCC do the following:
  - Stress the importance of attending review sessions before taking the test
  - Offer a paper-and-pencil alternative, or clarify computerized instructions
  - Emphasize the consequences of students' test scores before they take the test
  - Broaden the math portion of the test, make the questions more practically oriented, and provide students with formulas to do certain problems
  - Make sure the test is aligned with what students are taught in high school



