PERKINS V COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT
SAN DIEGO AND IMPERIAL COUNTIES COMMUNITY COLLEGES

C·O·E
CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE
FOR LABOR MARKET RESEARCH

SAN DIEGO & IMPERIAL
REGIONAL CONSORTIUM
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

COMMUNITY COLLEGES
SAN DIEGO & IMPERIAL COUNTIES
CAREER EDUCATION

California
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To support the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges with their Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) process, the San Diego-Imperial Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research (COE)[1] and Regional Consortium[2] commissioned Voltera Corporation[3] to conduct a study that would provide insight into the needs of special populations across the region. This study includes qualitative information from 48 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021: 24 with individuals from special populations and 24 with representatives from community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide services to special populations. According to the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), **special populations** include:

- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, including low-income youth and adults
- Individuals preparing for nontraditional fields
- Single parents, including single pregnant women
- Out-of-workforce individuals
- Homeless individuals
- Youth who are in, or have aged out of, the foster care system
- Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty
- Individuals with other barriers to educational achievement, including English language learners

The purpose of this study is to provide the community colleges with a comprehensive needs assessment at the regional level. This **Comprehensive Regional Needs Assessment (CRNA)** examines qualitative data from the 48 interviews and provides recommendations on how the colleges could better serve special populations across the region. This study builds upon the CRNA conducted in program year 2020-21[4] for the San Diego-Imperial region and identifies key trends that persisted and emerged since then. Interviews from the 2020-21 CRNA and this 2021-22 CRNA suggest that current and prospective students from special populations need:

- Guidance in navigating the community college system prior to and after enrollment
- Trauma-informed faculty and staff
- Wraparound services
- A caring campus
- Formal and consistent communication and coordination
- Increased awareness of in-demand CE/CTE programs and related occupations

This study elaborates on these needs and explores solutions for what we can do as a region to address them. **Reflection questions** are also embedded throughout this report for community college stakeholders to consider as they complete their Comprehensive Local Needs Assessments.

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[1] myworkforceconnection.org/lmi
[2] myworkforceconnection.org/about-us
[3] volteracorp.com
[4] sdccd.edu/docs/ISPT/workforce/docs/SP20-SDIC-CLNA-ConsultationReport.pdf

INTRODUCTION

The reauthorization of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act—the Perkins V legislation—provides more than $1.2 billion in federal funds to support career education and career technical education (CE/CTE) programs across the nation.[5] To apply for Perkins V funds, institutions must conduct a Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA), which examines the needs of the following **special populations**:

- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, including low-income youth and adults
- Individuals preparing for nontraditional fields
- Single parents, including single pregnant women
- Out-of-workforce individuals
- Homeless individuals
- Youth who are in, or have aged out of, the foster care system
- Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty
- Individuals with other barriers to educational achievement, including English language learners

Recipients of Perkins V funding must engage a diverse group of stakeholders in the CLNA, including, but not limited to:

- Representatives of special populations
- Representatives of CTE programs at local educational service agencies
- Representatives of CTE programs at postsecondary educational institutions
- Representatives of local Workforce Developments Boards
- Representatives of local agencies serving out-of-school youth, homeless children and youth, and at-risk youth
- Parents and students

To support the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges with the CLNA process, the San Diego-Imperial Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research (COE) and Regional Consortium commissioned Voltera Corporation to conduct a total of 48 semi-structured interviews: 24 with individuals from special populations and 24 with representatives from community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve special populations (including economic development councils, workforce development boards, and CTE program providers). The interviews occurred between June and October 2021 and totaled nearly 100 hours. For more information about the methodology, see Appendix A.

The purpose of this study is to provide the community colleges with a comprehensive needs assessment at the regional level. This **Comprehensive Regional Needs Assessment (CRNA)** examines qualitative data from the 48 interviews and provides recommendations on how the colleges can better serve special populations across the region. This study builds upon the CRNA conducted in program year 2020-21[6] for the San Diego-Imperial region and identifies key trends that persisted and emerged since then.

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[5] cte.ed.gov/legislation/perkins-v
[6] sdccd.edu/docs/ISPT/workforce/docs/SP20-SDIC-CLNA-ConsultationReport.pdf

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consistent with the 2020-21 CRNA, stakeholders interviewed for this study agreed that the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges provide valuable career technical education and student support services for the region. However, challenges for special populations to successfully access and utilize such resources still exist.

To summarize (in no particular order), current and prospective students from special populations still need:

1. Guidance in navigating the community college system prior to and after enrollment
2. Trauma-informed faculty and staff
3. Wraparound services
4. A caring campus
5. Formal and consistent communication and coordination
6. Increased awareness of in-demand CE/CTE programs and related occupations

The following section elaborates on what these needs are and explores ideas about what the region can do to address them. Embedded throughout this report are **reflection questions** for community college stakeholders to consider as they complete their Comprehensive Local Needs Assessments.

1) GUIDANCE IN NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM PRIOR TO AND AFTER ENROLLMENT

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Individuals from special populations need assistance with applying to the community college system and navigating the resources available at the college after they enroll. Applying for college can be daunting for first-time college students, especially if they experience barriers that complicate the process. A representative from a CBO (i.e., special population service provider) explained that it may be easy to assume that prospective students have access to internet or a computer; however, her clients typically go through extensive lengths to access technology, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when libraries and other resources closed down. She described working with one such client who faced these challenges: "I asked a participant if we could go on her computer. She said she doesn't have a computer. For this person, in particular, she just wasn't able to fill out the form for this reason. And then she was hoping to borrow a family member's computer, so she went to their house. And then they forgot, and they locked her out. And she missed a deadline." Interviewees emphasized the need to "streamline the process in order to get students enrolled."

In addition to experiencing difficulty in accessing and navigating the application process, being uncertain about the support services offered at a college can affect their decision to apply. For example, a blind interviewee explained that he had classes from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. during high school and was unable to connect with disability specialists whose offices close early during the day. At a student outreach event, a college had a dedicated table from the "Office of Students with Disabilities" while no other institution had such a table present. The simple presence of this table and assurance that the college offered dedicated resources was a significant part of why he decided to apply for that specific college.

While he was able to successfully enroll in a college, he also described the challenges in navigating available resources that he did not expect to experience after enrollment:

> "Sometimes the instructors kind of just casually mentioned: 'oh, and there's an exam coming up.' And then I'm like, oh shoot. I need to go get the form from the testing center, have the professor fill it out, and then I have to fill it out. And then I have to go for a specific window of time where I can drop that off, so they can actually schedule my test. So it was a lot of work...You kind of had to know how the system was structured. And especially if there are multiple buildings like this, you might not have the idea of the structure down until the first quarter or two, or the first semester or

two." In short, if there was a delay in getting a braille version of the exam, then he would fall a week or more behind his fellow classmates.

His interview provided insight into how basic course requirements could become an extensive process for individuals from special populations, especially those with disabilities.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

In response to these challenges, interviewees recommended that community college outreach staff provide workshops during special education classes at high schools and at CBOs that serve special populations. Hosting these workshops at high schools and CBOs where technology is available could ensure access, and community college recruiters could answer questions in real-time as prospective students complete their online applications. These workshops could also include information about resources available at the community colleges (e.g., Office of Students with Disabilities), so students are aware of them before applying.

Interviewees emphasized that assistance with administrative activities such as completing applications would eliminate misunderstandings that prospective students may have about community college processes. In addition to resolving their clients' misunderstandings, CBOs recommended that community colleges work with their case managers to address students' financial questions. A representative from Urban League[7] explained that their clients often reject scholarships because they impact financial aid eligibility and case managers need to better understand how to address this issue:

> "A case manager needs to have a wealth of knowledge on maneuvering through not just financial aid and economic issues. Kids are sometimes coming to the colleges who get scholarships from nonprofits like ourselves, and then have to turn down scholarships, because the financial aid package is going to be reduced, and then they can't afford college. And when they're told that, they're like 'I don't have any money, so I can't do this.' So, there's a need to have somebody who can help troubleshoot all of those types of things."

Interviewees also suggested that the community colleges set up mentorships to demystify the application process and provide support in the community college environment. A representative from the Imperial Valley Regional Occupational Program[8] (IVROP) suggested that the community colleges "invite [their] CTE high school students to be a part of an event that's already going on or work together to build some type of mentorship between [them and] college students." Having a safe space for mentors and mentees to connect over similar life challenges helps students from special populations learn how other individuals with similar circumstances navigate the complexities in enrolling, persisting, and completing community college programs.

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[7] sdul.org
[8] ivrop.org

2) TRAUMA-INFORMED FACULTY AND STAFF

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Individuals from special populations reported that community college faculty and staff need to be aware of the constant life challenges such as physical restrictions, cognitive barriers, or psychological trauma that they face. Prior trauma, compounded with lack of experience in navigating the community college system, exacerbate the challenges that special populations are confronted with while completing their education and career goals. For example, a representative from the San Diego Brain Injury Foundation[9] explained that "after somebody goes through a traumatic brain injury, they often feel like their life has been uprooted. And they're completely alone. They often feel like they're the only person going through this situation…They don't know what to do about it, they don't know where to go, even though resources are available. They see their doctor to get a brain scan, like an MRI, and they find that there's nothing showing up on a brain scan, yet they know clearly their ability to function is impacted in a significant way."

An interviewee from the San Diego College of Continuing Education[10] further elaborated that anyone could experience a traumatic brain injury, which affects their reading, listening, speaking, or writing and typing abilities. Interviewees agreed that faculty and staff must be aware of how traumatic experiences negatively impact students' ability to thrive in a community college environment.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Community-based organizations recommended that community colleges train faculty and staff on how to apply a trauma-informed approach to their work. Doing so allows faculty and staff to gain practical knowledge of how to develop rapport with individuals who suffered trauma and how to provide a safe learning environment for them.

Trauma-informed practices seek to:

- Realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand paths for recovery;
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in students;
- Integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
- Actively avoid re-traumatization[11]

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[9] sdbif.org
[10] sdcce.edu
[11] Adapted from the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center (traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care) and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (samhsa.gov/programs)

If the community colleges are unsure where to begin in providing this type of training, they can explore existing trauma-informed training resources such as the crash course on trauma-informed teaching from *Truth for Teachers*[12]; the Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package from the *National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments*[13]; or the Trauma-Informed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) toolkit from *Transforming Education*[14], to name a few.

In addition to providing training to faculty and staff, CBOs recommended providing trauma-informed training to all students—regardless of special population status—to help them adjust to college life. When asked to provide an example, one CBO representative reported that a training similar to Florida State University's (FSU) Student Resilience Project[15] would be helpful for students. FSU requires *all* incoming freshmen and transfer students review the *Introduction to Trauma* and *Introduction to Resilience* training models. FSU designed the Student Resilience Project to "increase students' sense of belonging and connectedness, safety, and well-being," "strengthen student emotional and academic coping skills," and "encourage personal growth, whether or not students have experienced prior trauma."[16] Researchers found that requiring all students take this training positively impacted students' resiliency and persistence at FSU.[17]

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Are faculty and staff encouraged to participate in trainings on trauma-informed practices or offered guidance on how to best support students who have suffered trauma?
- What type of orientation process does your college provide for incoming students, and does it address trauma and resilience?
- Do you have a structured or formal process to help students adjust to the community college environment, similar to Florida State University's Student Resilience Project?
- Are students informed of the potential challenges they may experience in higher education and offered solutions on how to cope?

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[12] truthforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/trauma-informed-teaching
[13] safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/trauma-sensitive-schools-training-package
[14] transformingeducation.org/resources/trauma-informed-sel-toolkit/
[15] strong.fsu.edu
[16] strong.fsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/About-project.pdf
[17] Karen Oehme, Ann Perko, James Clark, Elizabeth C. Ray, Laura Arpan & Lyndi Bradley (2019) A Trauma-Informed Approach to Building College Students' Resilience, Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work, 16:1, 93-107, DOI: 10.1080/23761407.2018.1533503

3) WRAPAROUND SERVICES

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Similar to the 2020-21 CRNA, interviewees in this study reiterated that individuals from special populations need wraparound services, including (but not limited to) financial assistance (e.g., scholarships, loans, grants); mental health support; employment services; access to technology (e.g., computers, internet); childcare assistance; emergency housing; transportation assistance; and basic needs (e.g., food, clothing).

Despite their need for wraparound services, individuals from special populations also reported having difficulty asking for help and trusting systems that claim to serve them. As a foster youth representative explained, "My parents were adults that couldn't be depended on. If you were dependent on them, they would disappoint you."

An interviewee from Just in Time Foster Youth also elaborated on this topic: "As a child, when you're going through foster care, you're forced to do therapy, to keep yourself on track, because you are experiencing these traumatic events, such as separation and probably loss…We feel forced because we don't want to talk about what we have been told or taught. There is a perception that if you talk, you'll get in trouble."

Therefore, many individuals from special populations are often reluctant to ask for assistance and prefer to seek resources on their own. In interviews, individuals from special populations explained that they browse community college websites as a first step in searching for resources. However, they repeatedly lamented that they had difficulty navigating community college websites. One individual reported that she found a website so confusing that she wanted to reach out to a staff member for help; however, she was unsure which community college staff member was appropriate to contact due to their confusing job titles. Therefore, students who need these wraparound services should be able to easily access and search for them on community college websites.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Not surprisingly, at minimum, evaluating the usability of community college websites with users not familiar with the system is the first recommendation that interviewees suggested. This is important because users will leave a site if they find a website challenging to navigate, get lost, or if information is hard to find.[18] One individual suggested that student's direct feedback should be used to adjust as needed to increase the "user friendliness" of community college websites.

> **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**
>
> - Do you know whether students can easily navigate to and access information related to wraparound services on your college website?
> - How often does your college ask students for feedback on the usability of your college's website?
> - Do you regularly use feedback from students or external stakeholders to inform adjustments and updates to the website?

Beyond updating college websites, interviewees suggested that community college faculty and staff be aware of local resources and provide that information as standard or "boilerplate" language in syllabus templates or communication materials. For example, a representative from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) shared that their syllabus includes a "health and well-being statement" to increase students' awareness of resources. UCSD also consistently emails students about wraparound services, including:

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[18] nngroup.com/articles/usability-101-introduction-to-usability

- Childcare assistance[19]
- Emergency housing[20]
- Food pantry[21]
- Transportation assistance[22]

UCSD SYLLABUS HEALTH AND WELL-BEING STATEMENT

Throughout your time at UC San Diego, you may experience a range of issues that can negatively impact your learning. These may include physical illness, housing or food insecurity, strained relationships, loss of motivation, depression, anxiety, high levels of stress, alcohol, and drug problems, feeling down, interpersonal or sexual violence, or grief.

These concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance and affect your ability to participate in day-to-day activities. If there are issues related to coursework that are a source of particular stress or challenge, please speak with me, so that I am able to support you. UC San Diego provides a number of resources to all enrolled students, including:

- Counseling and Psychological Services (858-534-3755 | caps.ucsd.edu)
- Student Health Services (858-534-3300 | studenthealth.ucsd.edu)
- CARE at the Sexual Assault Resource Center (858-534-5793 | care.ucsd.edu)
- The Hub Basic Needs Center (858-246-2632 | basicneeds.ucsd.edu)

We care about you at UC San Diego, and there is always help available.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Basic Needs: Any student who has difficulty accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believes this may affect their academic performance, is encouraged to contact: foodpantry@ucsd.edu, basicneeds@ucsd.edu, or call 858-246-2632.
- Triton Food Pantry is an emergency food relief program to provide food for students and fight food insecurity. You can get canned food, pasta, beans, and rice as well as fruit and vegetables at the pantry. foodpantry@ucsd.edu
- The Hub Basic Needs Center coordinates basic needs resources vital to thrive as a student, which includes access to nutritious food, stable housing, and financial wellness resources. We provide basic needs services and resource referrals to registered UC San Diego students. Ask us about CalFresh food benefits! basicneeds.ucsd.edu 858-246-2632.

If faculty and staff collectively adopt these practices across the college, this could enhance the likelihood that students become aware of the resources available. Additionally, making resources available to all students ensures that students from special populations are not "singled out." They do not need to reveal any information about their current situation to know how to access a resource. The UCSD representative further explains that the language in the basic needs website[23] is also very purposeful in acknowledging the situation that students are in: "The mission of the Triton Food Pantry is to provide a discreet service to UC San Diego students in need of food." Students from special populations will not always self-identify as such, therefore, providing standard language that addresses all

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[19] grad.ucsd.edu/financial/employment/benefits/support-for-student-parents.html
[20] basicneeds.ucsd.edu/housing-resources/emergency-housing/index.html
[21] basicneeds.ucsd.edu/food-security/pantry/index.html
[22] basicneeds.ucsd.edu/forms/lyft-program/index.html
[23] basicneeds.ucsd.edu/index.html

students—regardless of special population status—may encourage more students to access these services when needed.

Interviewees also recommended that community colleges partner with local CBOs that provide wraparound services and provide a main point of contact for community college students. For example, a representative from the Wesley House Student Residence[24] said that the organization offers below-market rent rates and can subsidize their clients' rent. He further explained that the community colleges could work with his organization "to help students with at least subsidized rent" to cover one of the many needed wraparound services.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Do faculty at your college include information about basic needs resources (e.g., food pantry, emergency housing) as standard language in course syllabi?
- Aside from course syllabi, what are other ways that your college, faculty, or staff make information about wraparound services accessible to more students? What about hard-to-reach students (e.g., students who are unaware of resources, students who work or are pressed for time)?
- Does your college partner with any local CBOs that provide wraparound services for students, and how is information about these CBOs disseminated?
- Are wraparound services promoted using standard language that is inclusive of all students, or does language single out students of special populations? How can language be modified to ensure that students feel supported regardless of special population status?

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[24] wesleysdsu.org

4) A CARING CAMPUS

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Interviewees from both 2020-21 and 2021-22 CRNAs stressed that each special population has different needs and that the individuals themselves have distinct, unique needs. While it may not be feasible for community colleges to offer services tailored to each individual student, they can still develop a campus that is caring and understanding of special populations.

Individuals from special populations experience disruptive life events that may prevent them from completing an entire training program. A representative from Dreams for Change[25] described how homeless individuals that his organization serves often experience disruptive life events that force them to suspend their participation in education or the labor force. Then, months later, when they finally find stability and are ready to continue their training program, they find that they must start all over again.

Moreover, individuals from special populations may experience day-to-day challenges that prevent them from completing assignments by expected due dates. A representative from a special population shared the following experience:

> "A lot of community college students work while they're going to school -- but I had to work between 40 and 60 hours and go to school at night. Because for me, if I didn't have money, it meant that I wasn't making my car payment, I wasn't making my rent, and so on. There were times where I would have to skip class sometimes to pick up an extra shift. The repercussions of not having money were way more severe for me than someone at a nuclear family, where maybe rent was optional, or they had someone to help with the car."

Similarly, another CBO representative explained that "they basically go off the grid for a week or two to deal with whatever family crisis that comes up, and in a school environment, that's not very forgiving." While individuals from special populations will inevitably encounter these challenges in the workforce, also experiencing them in a community college environment prevents them from obtaining the training needed to enter employment in the first place.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

While it is impractical for the community colleges to build in-depth support systems uniquely suited to each group, the following generalizable recommendations may benefit all students.

To foster a caring campus, interviewees suggested that the community colleges increase faculty and staff awareness of special populations' needs and provide professional opportunities that can train them to better connect with students. Existing research has shown that students leave "college because they do not feel connected to the institution."[26] To connect with students, interviewees suggested that instead of diving directly into course requirements (e.g., assessments), instructors could take the time to schedule one-on-one meetings with students and build relationships with them. At minimum, instructors should be understanding of unforeseen disruptions in students' lives, be flexible with assessments (when appropriate), and provide reasonable accommodations for students. For example, an interviewee requested that Braille versions of class materials be provided more easily for blind students, so they do not have to navigate the "bureaucracy" of obtaining such resources for themselves.

CBOs also underscored the importance of creating a community on campus that is supportive of all students. Not only instructors, but student workers, staff, and administrators should all be trained on how to interact with, and support, individuals from special populations. As a representative from Just in Time Foster Youth explained, "The community aspect is probably one of our main focuses, what we mean by that is that anyone involved in [our

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[25] dreamsforchange.org

[26] iebcnow.org/chancellors-office-expands-caring-campus-partnership-with-iebc-to-additional-california-community-colleges

organization], from staff members to our investors, to our community members have some form of interaction with [foster] youth."

Connecting with students, especially students from special populations, requires significant patience and understanding. Interviewees emphasized that building a level of trust with individuals from special populations requires greater effort in relationship-building and personalization than other students. The interviewee from Just in Time Foster Youth demonstrated how such a relationship does not occur overnight:

> "We had a student walk into our offices, who was super quiet. He wouldn't say anything. He was a Black male, probably early 20s. He would just walk into our computer lounge and not say anything, with his head down. And then every day, we say hi to him, and slowly he'll say hi back. Super shy. Then maybe a week and a half passes. And then he started talking to us. He could only speak a few words, and we came to find out that he was homeless. He had a very remedial communication style, because of his abusive family. He didn't speak much. He didn't have a job, he didn't have an income. And slowly, a month goes by and now he's talking to me four sentences. And then a month and a half. And then he's expressing that he's working on his resume. So we sit, and go through it. And before long, he ends up getting two jobs. And he now has his own room, is on his company's website, and is doing great. He also does speaking engagements, to bring people into our community. Just for fun, because he loves it."

As his narrative revealed, many individuals from special populations experience "intersectionality"—a phenomenon where multiple social identities intersect, and life challenges are compounded due to experiences associated with each social identity.[27] In this case, the student was both a foster youth and a homeless individual; therefore, he experienced life challenges unique to these identities.

ONE MAN'S LONELY JOURNEY THROUGH CALIFORNIA'S PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS

To better understand the life challenges that the homeless population experiences, CalMatters released an article following the two-year journey of a homeless veteran, which can be found at: **calmatters.org/california-divide/2022/01/california-homeless-permanent-supportive-housing**.

To foster a caring campus, at minimum, interviewees recommended that community college faculty and staff be informed of how special populations' circumstances and potential life challenges can affect their success. They also suggested that community colleges partner with CBOs to provide workshops or other professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. These collaborations could also strengthen the relationship between the community colleges and local CBOs that serve special populations, which could merge joint efforts to create more caring campuses and communities.

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[27] Harris, A., & Leonardo, Z. (2018). Intersectionality, race-gender subordination, and education. *Review of Research in Education*, *42*(1), 1–27.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How does your institution foster a caring campus for special populations?
- What are some ways that faculty and staff connect and build relationships with students? Do they connect with students on a one-on-one basis to identify their individual needs?
- What professional development opportunities does your institution provide faculty and staff to help them connect with students and recognize that some may face unique challenges?
- How do your instructors accommodate students who consistently experience life challenges? Are instructors at your college willing to adjust course assignment deadlines? Why or why not?
- Can you identify a CBO that could provide training or professional development opportunities for faculty and staff at your college? What would be a first step to building that partnership?

5) FORMAL AND CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

WHAT IS THE NEED?

While partnering with CBOs was a recurring recommendation in interviews for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 CRNAs, frustration with creating those partnerships was also a recurring theme. On the condition of anonymity, representatives from CBOs, workforce and economic development agencies, and CTE program providers asked that this study address the following issue: Their conversations and collaborations with community college stakeholders tend to "die off" when there are no formal, established partnerships. A representative from a nonprofit serving military families in San Diego County shared his frustration during his interview:

> "I started talking to a representative at [a community college] and the conversation kept dying off. And then one of their executives reached out to me, and he apologized. Because we started a dialogue, which then ended, and then we started another dialogue -- and it just ended. But I think that's where the disconnect is. It's not only in the conversation and communication, but really the focus and the effort. Because it's got to be more than just, 'Hey, we're going to offer you a program.' And my whole what-if scenario is, 'What if [our organization] could take care of the childcare aspect of things, while the military spouse went to [your] community college?'"

In short, there are few established formal relationships between the community colleges and their external partners, and there is a need to reduce redundancies across programs to better serve special populations. Many of the relationships are based on projects or grants, which all have start and end dates. As the interviewee explained, the need for a sustained and coordinated "ecosystem" of colleges and partners persists:

> "When we look at the education system, all our corporate donors who are hiring, and all the breadth of services out there -- if we're working together in collaboration, then we can create an ecosystem that keeps the families out of a food line. As opposed to what I call 'wound worshipping,' where people try to just, for example, grow the food line. You know, I can raise a bunch of money, and I can serve more people. But I don't want to grow food lines in San Diego, especially not with military families."

WHAT CAN WE DO?

To enhance coordination efforts, communication must occur regularly and not be dependent on a single person to sustain the relationship. Interviewees recommended identifying common objectives among community college partners and formalizing a united front. In Imperial County, for example, educational institutions understood that they repeatedly hosted industry advisory groups with the same employees in the county. Instead of hearing from the same businesses year after year, they realized that they needed to expand their regional advisory meetings, so they collectively partnered with the Regional Consortium for the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges to do so:

> "We started working with [the Regional Consortium]. We started to build a partnership because we wanted to expand our regional advisory meetings. So, we decided to just have one regional advisory meeting a couple of years ago -- because since we're a small community with seven different school districts, all were kind of hitting up the same industry members. We saw how it would be more cost effective if we had one place where they could collaborate in the schools, so they just need to go to one event, at one time and once there, share the information and build networking and more opportunities to connect with the separate individual school districts. So, what we wanted to do is reach out of the county."

This collective coordination ensured that not one institution led the efforts and sustained the initiative among multiple stakeholders. A representative from the Imperial County Office of Education[28] (ICOE) explained that after patient and consistent relationship-building efforts, their efforts paid off:

> "It really is time [for us to come together], for our local partnerships with our high schools, middle schools, community colleges and higher ed partners. We're in the same boat. We have conversations today which we would have never had five years ago…I appreciate the process we've been through as participants in the region. And I feel like the good stuff is still yet to come."

In addition to increased collaboration with external partners, interviewees suggested that the community colleges increase communication and coordination internally as well. Interviewees emphasized the need for counselors to communicate more regularly with instructors; without a dialogue, suggestions from counselors may not always translate into practical application in classes. For example, a representative from an office for students with disabilities in Imperial County explained that students regularly meet with counselors and "do a needs assessment there, and there's different accommodations that are suggested and agreed upon." For some students, having a notetaker in class is a necessary accommodation. However, after class starts and they forget to secure a notetaker for whatever reason (e.g., life challenges), they decide to say, "That's not working for me…I just deal with it." Instructors may never be aware of the challenges or accommodations that students discuss with their counselors. As a former foster and homeless youth pointed out in his interview, not communicating students' needs with faculty "kind of leaves it up to the student to advocate for their accommodations." However, he further explained that not all students from special populations are accustomed to self-advocating for themselves.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Do you have formal relationships with local CBOs that serve special populations? How were these relationships formed, and how have they been sustained over time?
- How have formal relationships with CBOs reduced redundancies or solved common challenges?
- What systems does your college have in place to increase communication and coordination between counselors and instructors, and between instructors and staff?
- Is there a clear process for how students can get necessary accommodations at your college? How does your campus ensure that necessary accommodations are provided for students when they are not accustomed to advocating for themselves?

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[28] icoe.org

6) INCREASED AWARENESS OF CE/CTE PROGRAMS AND RELATED OCCUPATIONS

WHAT IS THE NEED?

According to interviews, many individuals from special populations are unaware of which CE/CTE programs may be most suitable for them. When the stay-at-home order for the COVID-19 pandemic forced programs to transition to an online environment, individuals with cognitive disabilities experienced significant difficulties in adjusting to remote learning and were unaware of CE/CTE programs that provided hands-on training. As a representative from the Arc of San Diego explained, "there are always some people who just can't do it. It's difficult for them to sit in front of a computer for an hour, listening to their instructor or job coach." He further explained that "because of the shift to virtual, [clients] were unable to get the level of support they were accustomed to…Our clients are often very tactile and receptive to expressions and emotions."

Because they are unaware of programs most suitable for them, individuals from special populations will also self-select themselves out of programs. A representative from Just in Time Foster Youth shared, Information and Communication Technologies or Information Technologies (ICT/IT) noted that programs could be a good fit for individuals from special populations, but they may lack the confidence to enroll in those programs:

> "There are also foster youth that want to do computer science, but this route, as with the other sciences, is a little bit more difficult to get across to them, because we [foster youth] have the idea that we're simply not smart enough."

He further shared that foster youth tend to pursue careers that they have been exposed to. Therefore, there is a need to increase exposure to the various CE/CTE programs and occupations, and ensure that special populations are considered when promoting these programs.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Interviewees from both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 CRNAs suggested that the community colleges work directly with CBOs to promote or market CE/CTE programs to their clients. Many CE/CTE programs train for occupations that require tactile skills, which are appropriate for individuals with cognitive disabilities, for example. In addition to increasing efforts to identify suitable programs and employment for special populations, interviewees recommended that the region continue CE/CTE marketing efforts because CE/CTE programs may not be the first choice for their clients or students. A representative from IVROP shared a perspective for this study that echoed statements from the 2020-21 CRNA interviews:

> "I think career technical education has a stigma, as do community colleges. That's not where you visualize yourself…the choice is often 'either a four-year university, or I'm just leaving Imperial County and going somewhere else.' So that's what a lot of kids see [in terms of a career choice]."

While the community colleges increased their marketing efforts in recent years to change public perception about CE/CTE programs, repetitive messaging is still necessary. Furthermore, intentional tailored messaging for special populations in marketing efforts should be considered to ensure that students can identify with CE/CTE professional paths. As one advantage, interviewees repeatedly stated that CE/CTE programs can help students obtain employment faster than four-year programs, which is a powerful narrative for students of special populations because "for a lot of people that come to San Diego, living costs are expensive. So, their goal is to survive by any means they can." An IVROP representative described her enthusiasm for CE/CTE programs because of their potential to help students become employed and obtain work experience while they're going to school:

> "In the last few years, we've done a good job of promoting career technical education. For example, just by emphasizing the opportunity that CTE presents: Right out of high school they can hold a certification, and be able to work and go to school. Like how awesome is that? You

already have that experience right at high school. And then [compared to] a four-year education, and you still don't have [experience] when you're looking for employment."

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment and described how CE/CTE programs can help English-language learners:

"So CTE has the power to do very focused training in a short amount of time. There are opportunities in CTE, and we can layer it with language support, specific to the field. And I think it's proven that you learn language better in context. And so, I believe CTE and adult education with its flexibility have the power to offer quite a few opportunities for language learners, beyond what is offered [with] a traditional community college degree or university degree -- because those programs are too long. In talking about the division between academic and CTE, we need to come together as instructors and as an educational community, and understand that if we can offer accelerated programs, just as one step on the path, then the student can exit, go to work in their field, and from there, continue their education while they're working. So [CTE with language support] gives them the tools they need to live, enter the workforce, build experience...and then they can decide if they're ready for further education."

In addition to marketing, multiple interviewees suggested that the community colleges and CBOs provide a mentorship program for special populations so that students (i.e., mentees) have role models (i.e., mentors) who went through CE/CTE programs and can provide insight into their experiences and offer support through the program. Connecting students and role models can also help reduce beliefs that they may not belong, and increase feelings of self-efficacy that they too can pursue a CE/CTE professional path.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Does your college develop tailored messaging or implement marketing strategies to specifically promote CE/CTE among special populations? Are there opportunities for students of special populations to offer feedback about the effectiveness of this messaging?
- How does your college market the value of CE/CTE to local secondary schools and CBOs?
- Does your college have a consistent marketing campaign for CE/CTE programs? If yes, what is it and how consistent is the marketing? Monthly, quarterly, or yearly? How is the effectiveness of marketing efforts evaluated?
- Does your college have a mentorship program, events, or other opportunities to connect CE/CTE graduates with prospective or current students from special populations?

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

On behalf of the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges, the San Diego-Imperial Center of Excellence for Labor Market Information (COE) and Regional Consortium commissioned Voltera Corporation[29] to conduct interviews with individuals from special populations, organizations that serve special populations, workforce and economic development agencies, and four-year universities. Voltera Corporation analyzed qualitative information from the interviews to create this Comprehensive Regional Needs Assessment for program year 2021-22. In program year 2020-21, the San Diego-Imperial COE and Regional Consortium commissioned a similar CRNA[30] with UCSD Extension, which Voltera Corporation expanded upon for this study.

ADVISORY GROUP

The San Diego-Imperial COE and Regional Consortium gathered an advisory group to provide overall guidance for this study. The advisory group also introduced the research team to resources and prospective interviewees.

This study's advisory group consisted of:

- Javier Ayala, Grossmont College
- Alexander Berry, San Diego Community College District
- Danene Brown, Regional Consortium
- Sally Cox, Regional Consortium
- George Dowden, Cuyamaca College
- John Edwards, San Diego-Imperial COE
- Jonathan Kropp, San Diego Miramar College
- Rose LaMuraglia, San Diego City College
- Jennifer Lewis, Southwestern College

- Kevin McMackin, Regional Consortium
- Larry McLemore, Cuyamaca College
- Tina Ngo Bartel, San Diego-Imperial COE
- Amertah Perman, San Diego Community College District
- Nichol Roe, Palomar College
- Suzanne Sebring, Regional Consortium
- Efrain Silva, Imperial Valley College
- Al Taccone, MiraCosta College
- Christopher Yerkes, Regional Consortium

On June 8, 2021, the advisory group and research team approved the following research questions to guide the research project:

- What specific actions can the region's community colleges take to support special populations in the community college system? Are there specific examples or promising practices that worked in the past?
- Transportation to their local community college(s) was a prominent challenge identified in last year's report. What can the community colleges or their partners do to address transportation issues?
- The previous report recommended that not only support service providers (e.g., community college counselors) but also faculty members be aware of the special populations' needs. What are some specific ways that the community colleges can better train faculty, staff, and administrators on special populations' needs?
- How can the community colleges market their services and programs to special populations? Are there specific marketing strategies for different populations?
- Are there any stories or case studies from the interviews that the community colleges could use for marketing to increase the enrollment numbers of special populations?
- What types of Career Education (CE) or Career Technical Education (CTE) training programs would benefit certain special populations?

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[29] volteracorp.com
[30] sdccd.edu/docs/ISPT/workforce/docs/SP20-SDIC-CLNA-ConsultationReport.pdf

- What occupations, employers, or industries have successfully employed individuals from special populations? Are there opportunities for future partnerships with the community colleges? How can those types of partnerships be scaled?
- What existing community college programs (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, internships) have been helpful for special populations?

Although these research questions were used to inform the development of the interview guide, not all research questions outlined above were asked in each interview and addressed in this report. The interviews were semi-structured and conversations were allowed to flow naturally. This report reflected priority key themes that emerged across all interviews.

INTERVIEWS

Between June and December 2021, Voltera Corporation completed and transcribed 48 interviews with regional stakeholders, including 24 representatives of special populations, parents, and students as well as 24 representatives from CTE programs, local Workforce Development Boards, and local agencies serving special populations. Voltera Corporation conducted the interviews over Zoom, a video teleconferencing software program. The San Diego-Imperial COE provided Voltera Corporation with a preliminary list of regional stakeholders to interview for the study, primarily community-based organizations that serve special populations. Voltera Corporation expanded the list by sourcing interview participants from their network, and supplemented recruitment efforts through snowball sampling and referrals from interviewees that had participated.

Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to an hour, totaling approximately 100 hours in interviews. After completing the interviews, Voltera Corporation completed a draft report, summarizing findings from the qualitative data. The San Diego-Imperial COE reviewed the draft report, interview memos, and transcriptions before revising and completing this final report.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDES

This section provides an overview of questions used during interviews with individuals from special populations, organizations that serve special populations, workforce and economic development agencies, and four-year universities.

INDIVIDUALS FROM SPECIAL POPULATIONS

The interviewer asks all interviewees from special populations (as defined by Perkins V) the following questions:

1. What is your educational background?
2. Have you ever taken any community college courses?

Depending on the interviewee's responses, the interviewer proceeds to one of the following two sections:

A) Questions for individuals who have taken a community college course
B) Questions for individuals who have not taken a community college course

A) QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE TAKEN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE COURSE

1. Tell me about your experience in the last course you took. What was it like?
2. What did the community college do well to help you succeed in your classes?
3. Did you have any instructors that were particularly helpful, supportive, or encouraging to you?
   a. What did they do differently from your other instructors/staff/administrators?
   b. Was the instructor/staff/admin aware of your ___ status? How did they know?
4. Did you participate in any student support programs (e.g., counseling, tutoring, mentoring, internships) while at the community college?
   a. What do you remember most vividly about your experience?
   b. What was the most frustrating thing about it?
5. How did you get to and from the community college? What mode of transportation was used?
   a. What was easy about it? What was hard about it?
   b. Was there anything that you thought the community college could have done to help you?
6. How do you get to other places in your community?
   a. Do you ever use rideshare (e.g., Uber, Lyft)? Why or why not?
   b. Do you ever use public transportation (e.g., trolley, MTS, coaster)? Why or why not?
7. Have you taken any online courses at the community colleges?
   a. If yes:
      i. What did the community college do well?
      ii. What difficulties, if any, did you experience with the online course?
      iii. How well did the online course accommodate your needs?
      iv. What do you wish would have been changed to make it a better learning experience for you?
   b. If no, what was the main reason?
8. Would you take another community college course? Why or why not?
9. Overall, would you recommend community colleges to friends or family members? Why or why not?
10. What is your job/school status now?
    a. What from your community college experience do you think helped you get to where you are today?
    b. Have you experienced any barriers obtaining a job that was not related to education or training?
11. How do you obtain information about careers and related training programs?
    a. In your opinion, what careers appear to be recession- or pandemic-resilient?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to share about how the community colleges could better support you in your academic and career goals?

B) QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE <u>NOT</u> TAKEN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE COURSE

1. What is the main reason you did not attend a community college?
2. At school or work, did you have any teachers or bosses that were particularly helpful, supportive, or encouraging to you?
   a. What did they do differently from your other teachers or bosses?
   b. Were they aware of your ____ (status)? How did they know?
3. How do you get to and from your job or other places in the community? What mode of transportation do you use?
   a. What is easy about it? What is hard about it?
   b. Was there anything that you think your work or other groups you're a part of could do to help transportation be easier?
   c. Do you ever use rideshare (e.g., Uber, Lyft)? Why or why not?
   d. Do you ever use public transportation (e.g., trolley, MTS, coaster)? Why or why not?
   e. Would you consider attending a community college if getting to and from campus was easy? Why or why not?
4. Have you taken any online learning courses, including in high school?
   a. What was easy about it? What was hard about it?
   b. What difficulties, if any, did you experience with the online course?
   c. How well did the online course accommodate your needs?
   d. What do you wish would have been changed to make it a better learning experience for you?
5. Do you participate in any programs from _____ [examples of special populations service providers]?
   a. What do you remember most vividly about your experience?
   b. What was the most frustrating thing about it?
6. How do you obtain information about careers and related training programs?
   a. In your opinion, what careers appear to be recession- or pandemic-resilient?
7. Have you experienced any barriers obtaining a job that was not related to education or training?

SERVICE PROVIDERS (ORGANIZATIONS THAT SERVE SPECIAL POPULATIONS)

1. What special population(s) does your organization serve?
2. How do you modify your services for different parts of the region (e.g., south county, north county, east county)?
3. Are you aware of any community college programs that also serve this(these) special population(s)?
   a. If so, how did you hear about them and how do your constituents hear about them?
   b. If not, how do you and your constituents hear about other complementary support programs in the community?
4. The region's community colleges conducted a similar comprehensive regional needs assessment in 2020. The previous report recommended that the community colleges offer support services (e.g., counseling) and training to increase faculty members' awareness of special populations' needs.
   a. How has your organization trained internal staff on special populations' needs?
   b. How has you organization trained external stakeholders on special populations' needs?
   c. What can community colleges learn from these experiences to train their faculty, staff, and administrators?
5. According to the previous report, transportation to their local community colleges(s) was a prominent challenge for special populations.
   a. Do you find this to also be a challenge for your organization's clients? Why or why not?
   b. What can the community colleges learn from your experience to address transportation issues?
6. How has the pandemic recovery been for the special population(s) that your organization serves?
   a. Are your clients able to reconnect to careers? Why or why not?
   b. Do you notice any disparity for clients who are also Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) or LGBTQ+?
   c. What are some promising practices that the community colleges could learn from your organization in serving clients who are also BIPOC or LGBTQ+?
7. What high-wage and high-demand occupations or industries successfully employed individuals from the special population you serve?
   a. How did your organization help facilitate that employment?
   b. What can the community colleges learn from your organization's experiences?
8. What types of technical training programs would benefit the special population you work with?
9. Do you know of any success stories of clients who were also community college students?
   a. How did the community colleges prepare them for high-wage and high-demand jobs?
   b. What could the community colleges do better to prepare them for high-wage and high-demand jobs?

WORKFORCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

1. What community programs have been successful in helping individuals from special populations obtain employment?
    a. What (strategies) could the community colleges learn from these programs?
    b. What are some promising practices that the community colleges could learn from serving clients who are also BIPOC or LGBTQ+?
2. According to the previous report, transportation to their local community colleges(s) was a prominent challenge for special populations.
    a. What do you think the community colleges could do to address transportation issues?
    b. What has your organization done to address transportation issues?
    c. How can the community colleges learn from your organization's experiences?
3. How has the pandemic recovery been for special populations?
    a. Are your they able to reconnect to careers? Why or why not?
    b. Do you notice any disparity for individuals from special populations who are also Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) or LGBTQ+?
4. What high-wage and high-demand occupations or industries successfully employed individuals from special populations?
    a. How did your organization help facilitate that employment?
    b. What can the community colleges learn from your organization's experiences?
5. What types of technical training programs would benefit special populations?
6. Do you know of any success stories of individuals from special populations who were also community college students?
    a. How did the community colleges prepare them for high-wage and high-demand jobs?
    b. What could the community colleges do better to prepare them for high-wage and high-demand jobs?

FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITIES

1. Describe your role in the university. Do you work with any individuals from special populations? If so, which ones?
2. Do students from special populations experience unique challenges in adjusting to an undergraduate environment?
3. Does your university have support programs for transfer students from special populations?
    a. What programs successfully help retain students at your campus?
    b. What can the community colleges learn from these programs to better prepare students from special populations for transfer?
4. The region's community colleges conducted a similar comprehensive regional needs assessment in 2020. The previous report recommended that the community colleges offer support services (e.g., counseling) and training to increase faculty members' awareness of special populations' needs.
    a. How has your organization trained faculty, staff, and administrators on special populations' needs?
    b. What can community colleges learn from these experiences to train their faculty, staff, and administrators?
5. According to the previous report, transportation to their local community colleges(s) was a prominent challenge for special populations.
    a. Do you find this to be a challenge for students from special populations at your campus?
    b. What has your campus done to address transportation issues?
    c. How can the community colleges learn from these experiences?
6. Do you know of any success stories about transfer students from special populations?

APPENDIX C: SELECTED INTERVIEWS AND STORIES

The section highlights certain interviews to better understand special populations' needs and acts a resource for the community colleges as they complete their Perkins V Comprehensive Local Needs Assessments. The researchers replaced interviewees' names with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, except for those who gave permission to use their names.

INTERVIEW WITH A FOSTER YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE

As a former foster youth in Orange County who then transferred to San Diego State University, Vincent has had quite a journey.

He knew he would go back to school, because he lived in a foster home and wanted to escape his situation.

"Because if I went to school, I knew I could get scholarships to live on my own and support myself. So that idea was always in my head. The hard part was figuring out how to do it, because there was no one at home who would sit me down and talk about essentials like financial aid, registration, where to turn in essays, and so on."

"I was very lucky that I had a really committed high school counselor who would meet after hours and follow up to make sure I was meeting deadlines. What I've learned from other people is that not everyone finds their person at high school. And if they don't have it at home and don't have their person in high school, it's even more of an uphill battle than I had to face."

One psychological factor which repeatedly precludes foster youth from using available services is the challenge of trusting adults in the first place.

"I wasn't really at a point where I was trying to talk to adults about anything. My parents were adults that couldn't be depended on. If you depended on them, they would disappoint you. And so, I had a hard time even opening up with [my counselor]. I was friends with her daughter, and I had a relationship with her before, which made the connection easier. She helped me make issues transparent since I didn't know anything about foster care scholarships or anything. She really took a lot of her own time to learn because it was her first postulancy. So, she had to learn an entirely new process to apply for everything I was eligible for."

After gaining the support he was eligible for, Vincent worked excessively to make ends meet and study.

"A lot of community college students work while they're going to school -- but I had to work between 40 and 60 hours and go to school at night. Because for me, if I didn't have money, it meant that I wasn't making my car payment, I wasn't making my rent, and so on. There were times where I would have to skip class sometimes to pick up an extra shift. The repercussions of not having money were way more severe for me than someone at a nuclear family, where maybe rent was optional, or they had someone to help with the car."

While Vincent was going to school, he budgeted his scholarship money to pay for a vocational license as a dialysis technician - an idea he had serendipitously, since his friend was a dialysis nurse.

"That's how I was able to get a pretty high paying job, or at least a higher than minimum wage job which let me work a lot of hours."

And in just one semester, Vincent was able to obtain a high-paying job to support the rest of his community college education.

Today, Vincent is a community college graduate, works at a major foster youth support organization and plays a critical role in all its education efforts, and the lives of many other people in foster care.

"With the students I've worked with, I've always insisted they advocate for themselves. To advocate for equity. If they have a unique need, say it, ask what the professor can do about it. And it's worked out well for them every time. It just takes a little bit of putting yourself out there."

INTERVIEWS WITH BRAIN INJURY SURVIVORS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Understanding a person's experiences and capabilities can make a world of difference.

Individuals impacted by a traumatic brain injury grapple with impaired cognitive function, plus the confusion that accompanies a life-changing illness. As Kurt Buske, Executive Director of the San Diego Brain Injury Foundation describes:

"Approximately 2.8 million people are diagnosed with [a] brain injury every year, just in the United States. That's greater than the sum of all new cancer diagnoses combined. After somebody goes through a traumatic brain injury, they often feel like their life has been uprooted, they're completely alone, and they're the only person going through this situation. And so, when folks connect with us, they realize there is a pretty significant community of brain injury survivors, just in San Diego County alone."

After a traumatic brain injury, even the most sensible expert in the field often diagnoses only physical effects. Standard medical procedures often don't tell the story of how much the brain injury survivor's cognitive functioning is impaired, or the implications for their lives.

"[Brain injury survivors] see their doctor, get a brain scan, such as an MRI, and find that there's nothing showing up on a brain scan. Yet, they know clearly that their ability to function, as they did previously, is impacted in a significant way. And so, as an organization, we help take some of the mystery out of these things, to connect folks with a variety of supportive services and resources that exist in our community."

De-mystifying a new, debilitating health condition can have a highly stabilizing effect on a person's psychological well-being. The next step in supporting brain injury survivors after the shock of a sudden cognitive disability is often a new, specialized program, perhaps unique to San Diego, called the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Program at the San Diego College of Continuing Education. The courses are suited to those with recent traumatic brain injuries and those who need more long-term support. Helen, a brain injury survivor who went through the ABI program, found it to be indispensable to restore basic functioning after she suffered two terrible accidents:

"In 2010, I was in a serious car accident, resulting in complex concussions. I did not have the support of ABI at that time. And then in 2018, I was on an elevator and my baggage fell on me. I rolled down the elevator and got a really severe concussion. Then about six weeks later, they diagnosed me with traumatic brain injury. After that, I went back to work for a while, and then I had been off work since then. It impacts my speech, memory, organization, balance, and vision. And then there are limits on my screen time. It's been really socially isolating, and really hard to go through. Then I came to ABI through one of my speech therapists. It's been a really good community building program, as well as educational."

While other kinds of physical injuries, such as a broken leg, can have a severe, acute, and long-term effect on a person's functioning, brain injuries present a different phenomenon; they're ultimately physical in nature (yet invisible to outsiders) and difficult to comprehend, even for close friends. To a healthy person, the loss of one's most basic cognitive faculties is nearly unimaginable. As Helen grappled with disorientation from the injury early on and isolation, she emphasized many times the value of belonging to a community of people who suffer from the same challenges, of people who were also new to their condition:

"When you have a traumatic brain injury, it's invisible to people that don't know you. It just sweeps away the core capabilities you had prior to your injury, as if your competence just gets swept away. Especially for me, language was really hard, as well as not being able to work very hard, not being the high producing performer like before,

and not being able to reach the same level. So, knowing that I'm not the only person this happened to is significant, because in the general population, you don't see people that have these injuries. You don't see their stories. And that's, I would say, one of the biggest challenges: to know there are others makes it more normalized. For the students, and for anyone that's been hurt like that, it's a whole change of self-concept. And in that community of your cadre of students that you're with, there is sometimes like a stir in a class where they'll talk about something and bring up a whole different topic. And you'll realize, 'wow, this person has the exact same challenge as I do, and I'm not alone!'"

"That can get you through those really dark times."

Beyond providing the reassurance of community, specialized training and establishing in brain injury survivors' minds that they truly are not alone, the ABI program also provides new use cases for technology. As survivors often suffer from limitations on screen time — in an age where an ever-expanding set of everyday problems demand to be solved on a screen — the community has embraced automated audio-based reminders instead, as Helen describes:

"A lot of technology out there could help students. Automated assistance makes a big difference. When your memory is shot, which is normal for this type of injury, then having an automated assistant tell you: 'it's time to take your medicine' is very helpful. For me, I would forget to eat; the time to have breakfast, the time to have lunch. And with the hard-of-hearing community, we make phones available to them, because that's what they need to get through their day. So, it makes sense to me that for a person with an acquired or traumatic brain injury, are we able to make those automated systems available to them, so they can continue to live a more normal life? I think that that's been crucial in my improvement: setting up that daily schedule. And I couldn't do that by myself, without the automated assistant telling me it's Tuesday, take out the trash, it's Monday, water the plants, it's 10am, take your pills, and so on. Because of my limited screen time on a smartphone, which most people would use in the non-brain injury world, the automated system has been an important verbal cue."

Discovering new technological aids, building specialized teaching programs, and de-mystifying early trauma by connecting such people with a community of those who are similarly struggling - these are just some of the benefits of focusing support services on the recently traumatized.