‘WE ARE ALL RETENTION OFFICERS’: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS (EOP) AT UC SANTA CRUZ

Ethan Chang

University of California, Santa Cruz

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Student Success Evaluation and Research Center
University of California, Santa Cruz
Email: eochang@ucsc.edu
https://studentsuccess.ucsc.edu/
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“EOP is like a beacon for me. I can't believe how there's a resource at the university that was created specifically to assist students like me who are floating and lost and didn't have a successful role model to look up to.” ~ EOP Student

“One of the things I’m always asking is: how can I make something different? What else can we do? What can we do differently? How can we make sure we’re meeting the expectations of the students?” ~ Oscar, EOP Counselor

I. Report Summary

In the Spring of 2016, EOP leadership expressed interest in better understanding students’ uses and experiences of EOP programs and advising. This report draws on a year-long collaborative inquiry of EOP advising, programs, and services aimed at addressing these questions. The title of this report, “We are all retention officers,” represents the shared beliefs, commitments, and practices among EOP staff, who aspire to retain all students, especially historically underserved students. In addition, “We are all retention officers” serves as a call to action that aims to usher in an institutional culture in which every university worker sees retention as a part of their role and not the sole responsibility of one office. Thus, while this report is specific to EOP, the concrete practices and processes EOP students deem essential to their success bear implications for campus-wide discussions about retention at UC Santa Cruz.

Section 2 draws on 10 interviews with EOP staff and leadership, which I conducted, analyzed, and shared with EOP staff during the fall of 2016. It captures the underlying commitments, theories, and everyday practices that comprise EOP advisers’ daily work. I drew on interview data to co-design a student survey with EOP staff during the winter of 2017.

Section 3 draws on a EOP student survey (N=773) fielded during the spring of 2017. This section synthesizes EOP students’ perspectives of EOP advising and programmatic supports and integrates quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate how EOP students interpreted and made sense of EOP supports. The section is divided into four parts: A Statistical Sketch of EOP Students, Students’ Use of EOP Advising & Services, Students’ Perceptions of EOP Advising, and Students’

1 Pseudonyms are used for all respondents unless otherwise noted.
2 I use the term, “historically underserved students” to refer broadly to students of color, students from low-income communities, first-generation college students, and students who are undocumented. I recognize that the term obscures much-needed specificity in discussing the assets and needs of various student sub-groups, yet use this term for the sake of clarity and consistency in this report given the broad cross-sections of students EOP supports. Additionally, I use this term to write against the “at risk” label; a term that diminishes the role of structural and institutional barriers in explaining education inequities (Brown, 2016). The descriptor, “historically underserved” places the onus on societal institutions and contextualizes how present educational opportunities and outcomes are not the sole product of individual effort.
3 Total EOP student population is 5,983 students. Response rate was 12.91%.
Overall Perspectives of EOP.

Section 4 brings EOP advisers’ and students’ perspectives into conversation. I discuss two main findings in detail: how students’ confusion about EOP services do not reflect an oversight on EOP staff’s part, but rather, strategic decision-making among EOP staff as they navigate how to best serve students within under-resourced and understaffed organizational contexts; second, how despite minimal resources, EOP advisers’ enact a praxis of “cultural humility” that students recognize and value. I elaborate on how cultural humility serves as a useful lens for interpreting the alignment across EOP advisers’ commitments and practices and students’ experiences of EOP. What follows is a summary of key findings and a list of recommendations based on these findings.

Key Findings

Finding #1: EOP Advisers enact commitments and practices that reflect “cultural humility,” which EOP students interpret as essential to their success. Cultural humility refers to lifelong commitments to self-evaluation, critique, and curiosity in working with historically underserved communities (Tervalon and Garcia, 1998). Rather than striving to acquire a set of traits about students (e.g., as in notions of “cultural competency”), EOP advisers enacted cultural humility in an ongoing quest to learn from and work in partnership with students and to help them succeed. Students who reported frequently attending EOP advising reported experiencing these key practices in the range of 83-96%. One student’s expression of what they found most helpful about EOP advising exemplifies this theme: “I get to open up and discuss about both my academic and personal issues. Together me and my adviser are able to tackle the problems and come up with solutions.” These key practices (outlined in Section 3.3) are instructive for broader efforts to support historically underserved students.

Finding #2: Demand for EOP is greater than programmatic and advising capacity. Both EOP advisers and students expressed concerns about limited resources. EOP advisers are often booked two- to three-weeks in advance. Receiving support in times of need can be difficult for many students, and roughly half of student respondents shared their EOP adviser was not accessible during walk-in hours. Again, the words of EOP students are helpful: “Sometimes it can be hard to set up an appointment with my advisor just because they are in such high demand and short on staff.” Resource constraints permeated the everyday retention efforts within EOP’s offices.

Finding #3: Many students consider EOP a “lifeline” and as essential to their success at UCSC. Roughly 85% of students answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” in responses to the prompt: "If I could repeat my college experience, I would still choose to participate in EOP." Likewise, 86% of respondents mentioned they would encourage a friend to utilize EOP services. As one student summarized, “Without the physical, emotional, and financial support given to me by EOP, I would not be graduating this June.” Across student responses, themes of student resiliency and efficacy emerged in connection with students’ access to key EOP supports and services.
Recommendations for EOP

**Re-evaluate communications and outreach strategies to clarify both what EOP offers and how students can access services.** Many students did not adequately understand what supports were available at EOP and how to access them. Re-vamping how EOP translates its multi-faceted support services might facilitate students’ understandings of EOP and identify additional points of entry for students. Specifically, EOP might consider ways of engaging students who are not a part of the Bridge program and who do not have institutionalized channels for connecting with an EOP adviser. Renewed outreach efforts, however, must be in constant conversation with an honest assessment of EOP resources. Simply expanding students’ awareness of EOP services will mean little if, students who discover EOP services, are subject to even longer waiting periods and abbreviated advising sessions. Opportunities for collaborating with the Division of Student Success and designing long-term (e.g., 10, 20, 30 year) plans to more adequately resource EOP offers one potentially fruitful basis for scaling outreach and support.

**Create channels for student-input and student-driven workshops.** When asked if there are any services students wished EOP provided, many respondents were not shy in offering recommendations. These recommendations provide critical insight into potential areas of need as well. Many suggestions were resource intensive, such as, a food pantry, laundry flexis, 24/7 study spaces, support with course materials, housing assurances, and expanding TLL to more applicants. Other suggestions were more time-intensive, including requests for more workshops, gatherings, and ways to cultivate an EOP community. Yet others were more modest requests that EOP might implement soon, including: granola bars at the coffee station, a microwave, free printing units across campus, or longer ARC hours. Developing ongoing channels for two-way communication between EOP students and staff might refine and contribute toward more responsive EOP programs and services. Efforts to include undocumented students in AB540 programming, especially amidst a nationalist anti-immigration Trump moment, offers one instructive example of how student-driven workshops can quickly adapt to student needs and policy contexts, which many student respondents expressed great appreciation for.

Recommendations for the Division of Student Success

**Promote practices rooted in “cultural humility” that can expand institutional commitment in service of all students.** While this report is specific to EOP, it offers some insight into what a broader institutional climate might look like that emanates from practices of “cultural humility” (Tervalon & Murray Garcia, 1998). A key conceptual shift that has long been a core commitment in the fields of medicine and public health is an emphasis on “humility” in place of “competency.” Rather than encouraging staff and leadership to be “competent” in another’s culture (e.g., diversity certificates), efforts to identify practices that promote ongoing learning from students of diverse cultural backgrounds offers one way to assure longterm, dynamic, and responsive student support services. EOP staff collectively enacted a praxis of “humility” that places their roles in service of students and in mutual relations of trust and care with those students who frequented their offices. Students’ recognized and appreciated these efforts and interpreted EOP as a dependable space of belonging on campus. The Division might explore how to integrate
“humility” into organizational processes, particularly in ways that can help to challenge deficit views of historically underserved students.

**Conduct an equity audit across Student Success support units, which examines existing processes and practices available for staff to learn about historically underserved students.** One institutionalized feature of EOP’s design is an approach to students’ stories as the curriculum—as the very basis upon which decisions for students are made. As the introductory quotes suggest, EOP staff repeatedly asked: “How can we make sure we’re meeting the expectations of the students?” And while EOP reminded me that “there’s no secret sauce,” they intentionally organize practices the promote cultural humility and afford staff opportunities to constantly learn about student needs, hopes, and aspirations. An “equity audit” across Student Success units might ask what existing processes and practices are available for staff to learn about a rapidly changing student body at UCSC. Implicit in this recommendation is a suggestion to humanize students as more than numbers in an enrollment roster, but as real people with lives, hopes, fears, and dreams.

**Recognize that staff retention is student retention—find ways to recruit, value, and retain quality advisers.** If retention is a key student success initiative, then retention of student success staff is also a critical, but often overlooked lever for accomplishing this goal. Not only did students consider EOP staff and advisers as essential to their progress and retention at UCSC, they also acknowledged how a growing student body, limited number of staff, and frequent turnover of advisers inhibited their ability to check-in with trusted, caring adults. While further research concerning the factors contributing to adviser turnover is needed, this study raises questions about the labor contexts of Students Success support staff and how to organize for and retain caring, qualified, long-term professionals that students deem essential to their success.

**Promote ongoing research to develop dynamic, Student Success units on campus.** This collaborative research project produced a mix of intended and unintended results. While it accomplished its proposed aims by providing evidence to inform strategic decision-making, it also affirmed and validated the everyday labors of EOP staff. Research served as a means of inviting EOP staff into broader discussions of institutional change and ways of supporting students beyond immediate, day-to-day tasks. Further efforts to construct practitioner-research models at various Student Success units might offer opportunities to cultivate buy-in across campus, provide opportunities for staff to engage in pressing questions relevant to their own work, and join in ongoing conversations about how students experience and interpret their efforts to support them at UCSC. In addition, the Division might explore how to promote research that goes beyond the distribution of reports and that assists Student Success units in implementing research and enacting actionable, research-driven priorities.
II. EOP Advisers’ Perspectives

Of EOP’s array of programs and supports, advising is a core component and emerged as the focus of our analysis. This section outlines the beliefs and commitments that inform the everyday work of EOP advisers and staff in supporting student success and provides essential context for the questions we were most interested in asking students in the student survey.

2.1 - EOP Advisers’ Beliefs and Commitments

Three shared beliefs underscore EOP advisers’ daily work: a sense of social justice and advocacy, an interest in establishing a sense of belonging for students, and a holistic approach to understanding students’ needs and aspirations within and beyond schooling.

Social Justice & Advocacy. Many EOP staff made sense of their work within broader historic struggles for access to quality social and educational opportunities. Several EOP counselors expressed a commitment to justice through the term, “advocacy.” Khaled clarified the meaning of “advocacy” by remarking, “It means to go above and beyond in a system that doesn’t.” Khaled situated intra-institutional barriers in higher education within broader contexts of social injustice, such as neighborhood segregation, health inequities, and inequitable K-12 learning opportunities. Advocacy constituted one pillar that guided his work as an adviser; a commitment that EOP staff echoed in their narratives about the challenges historically underserved students must overcome to be successful at UCSC.

A key component of EOP counselors’ commitment to advocacy entailed undoing deficit narratives that blame young people for their own failings. EOP staff described the meaning of advocacy in multiple ways. For some, it entailed working directly working with students to give back to “populations who are most marginalized.” For others, advocacy involved forging cross-campus coalitions to establish and expand webs of support for EOP students. Oscar elaborated on this dual approach to advocacy: “I’m making sure that they [students] know they belong here. But also just making sure that they have people on this campus that can relate, people who are going to listen and you know, point and ... not always make it something negative: what they’re not doing.” For EOP advisers, counseling entails re-articulating students sense of self from deficits to assets. It also involves validating students’ experiences on campus not only through one-on-one sessions with EOP staff, but through expanding networks of institutional advocates across campus.

Sense of Belonging. As alluded to in Oscar’s statement above, EOP counselors sought to construct intentional spaces where students feel a sense of belonging. Several EOP counselors explained that a central part of their work involves assuring students they have a right to be at UCSC and that they are not “imposters.” EOP advisers’ work can be interpreted as a way of offsetting exclusionary forces built into the fabric of the university, such as, a curriculum, staff, or faculty that does not reflect their everyday realities. For instance, many staff related stories in which EOP students had to explain to professors that they speak English, or that financial aid is
not accessible to all students, especially, undocumented students. Nate offers a helpful summary of students’ experiences of exclusion as tied to student success and retention.

Yes, there’s an issue with faculty and staff that are just insensitive to people that are different form them. They haven’t had an experience where they have had to be conscious of that and it’s definitely negatively impacting students. Yes, there are some students that are in academic difficulty and leave, but more so, I think students leave because they don’t feel comfortable, they don’t feel supported on campus, they go to places and are shut down. And it’s like, ‘I can go someplace else and get a better experience.’ Or, ‘I can be someplace and be closer to home, or go to a community college where these things are less of an issue.’ So I think that is the number one thing I’m trying to address and working with some folks to try to address.

Notably, experiences of othering are not confined to campus interactions, but extend well into the campus community. EOP staff described students’ sense of unease navigating the community, such as students having to defend their legal status while using public transportation, or being surveilled in restaurants or in different neighborhoods throughout the campus community. In contrast, EOP staff identified EOP programs and Ethnic Resource Centers (ERCs) as spaces of belonging.

Yet, in addition to feeling “pushed” out of a university and unwelcome in the broader university community, EOP counselors explained that students also feel “pulled” back home. Instilling a sense of belonging entails assuring students that they should not feel guilty for pursuing their college degree. Saúl elaborated on students’ sense of guilt and how establishing a sense of belonging informs his retention work.

It’s a lot of responsibility [back home]. So them being here, you have to give them a lot of, kind of like, positive... positive reassurance I think is the word I’m looking for. ‘You’re here for a reason, you’re here so you can help your family. You’re here so that you can better yourself and better your community.’

Likewise, Alexis described how some undocumented students feel guilty for attending college since their older siblings did not have the benefit of state laws that would have allowed them to pursue higher education. Like Saúl, she described a key component of her work as cultivating a sense of belonging: “So really just reassuring them that they do have a right to be here at this university and that’s priceless.”

**Holistic Advising.** As this latter emphasis on family responsibilities suggests, EOP counselors shared an interest in understanding students’ academic and personal lives. Holistic approaches recognize the multiple worlds students navigate within and beyond campus—whether this pertains to students’ struggles to pay rent, their pursuits of multiple part-time jobs, or their efforts to cope with family challenges. Two counselors explained holistic advising using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Again, Nate’s explanation is helpful. He re-constructed questions he might ask a student to explain his understanding of holistic advising:

Have you been sleeping? Eating? Especially if a student has been stressed. You know if they say, ‘It’s been rough?’ Okay, ‘Tell me about that. Tell me what’s been rough? What are some of the things on your mind outside of academics and how can we address some of those things that you can focus on your studies?’ And once we get through that, then we can talk directly about, ‘Okay what’s going on in class?’

Several other EOP counselors described holistic advising without explicitly naming it as such. For instance, Khaled related a story of a student, Julian, who felt an enormous sense of guilt on the anniversary of his father’s death. As an undocumented student, Julian was unable to travel to
Mexico to attend his father’s funeral. He considered leaving UCSC and appealed to Khaled, “Can I continue here?” In their counseling session, Khaled listened and helped the student identify a “will to fight” as a key attribute that Julian could leverage to persist and obtain his college degree. Khaled understood holistic approaches as central to his efforts in retaining Julian and a key component of his daily work.

2.2 - EOP Advisers’ Practices

Like college and department advisers, EOP advisers focus on key academic skills, such as helping students navigate campus resources, developing time management and study skills, or constructing short and long-term plans. For the purposes of this brief, I do not focus on these advising practices since they more readily register within traditional advising approaches. Instead, I focus on four practices that stem from EOP counselors’ core beliefs. These include: holistic listening, empathizing, intruding, and developing students’ self-efficacy.

**Holistic listening: what students say and embody.** Often, college advising is interpreted as a one-way transfer of knowledge from institutional agents to students who lack the knowledge and skills to navigate institutional settings. While EOP counselors engage in this important exchange of information, **EOP counselors emphasized how holistic listening — both to students’ stories and to students’ tone and body language — constituted a key advising practice.** For instance, when asked to walk me through an advising session with a student, Saúl explained, “And a lot of times it’s not even what you say, it’s just listening. So being quiet and just noting their body language because sometimes their body language says more about who they are than what they can say.” He added that students might be reticent to share intimate stories about the personal challenges they face, or may simply feel overwhelmed. During these times, listening can be the most effective practice.

Listening thus serves as a way to practice holistic advising and a way to honor the multiple challenges that weigh on students’ shoulders. Omar elaborated on this point:

So definitely a big part is listening to the story. Although we can delve into academic issues, delve into non-academic issues, hearing the story, and what I would call are the presenting issues... and try to get more information as to the underlying issues of the student’s case. And so, listening is a big aspect. Omar explained that simply attending to academic needs rarely provides an adequate account of students’ lives, and worse, can obscure the root causes of students’ academic struggles. Interestingly, EOP counselors’ insistence upon listening sometimes surprised students. Oscar recounts,

[... ] a lot of them start talking about class and then I stop them and say, ‘How are you doing?’ I try to take a step back to really check in with the person and see where they are just so that you know... I feel like it’s important to know where someone is before you start talking about everything else going on in their life.

Oscar describes EOP advisees not as students, but as people: “to really check in with the person.” Listening thus represents a way of attending to EOP students as full human beings.

**Empathizing & disclosing shared experiences of marginalization.** Several EOP counselors drew
upon experiences of marginalization as a basis for advising students. **EOP counselors explained how disclosing their experiences navigating college while balancing family, social, and financial obligations established a basis of trust and empathy with students.** For instance, Alexis explained that an essential part of her practice entails, “letting them [students] know that you’re not just an EOP advisor who has never experienced this.” She described how her experiences of micro-aggressions in college, encounters with insensitive professors, and efforts to navigate financial hardships served as key advising strategies to cultivate relationships with students. Alexis emphasized that by sharing the challenges she faces and continues to face offered a way for students to connect with her as not merely an adviser, but as a person too. Similarly, Oscar described retention in deeply personal terms, recalling the hardship of seeing friends pushed out of college. Like Alexis, Omar leveraged personal experiences as an advising resource. “I let the students know that I hear them. Whether or not that’s telling my story, ‘Look this is what it was and how it’s going to be and these are some supports.’ Describing different things that I’ve done.” For Oscar, listening and empathizing through shared experiences are complementary practices that can support students in need.

**Intruding as a means of affirming.** By listening and connecting with students, EOP counselors establish a foundation of trust that is required to inquire about students’ lives. **Omar described “intrusive” practices as essential to his advising approach, which entailed efforts “to understand all the pieces to supporting and partnering with them [students].”** Probing provides a way for Omar to access underlying issues students may be reluctant to talk about. Beyond questioning and probing, Saúl offered a concrete illustration of non-traditional types of intrusive advising practices he and his interns utilize to support students.

It’s like we care too much, so we’re always there. Again, the student is away from their home so like we’re pretty much like a second family for these students. We’re [a] second resource and we really try to be intrusive because we care. Whether that means we’re waiting for them outside of class in case they’re not showing up to another class. Or, that we’re texting them about ‘Hey, why have you been absent?’ And they’re like, ‘Um wait, who is this?’ And we’re like, ‘Hey this is Saúl from the EOP office.’ Or, ‘Hey I’m available on Tuesdays from 3-6 can you stop by at that time?’ You’re not asking to meet with them, you’re saying, ‘Hey, come meet with me.’

Saúl’s intrusive practices reflect an effort to enter into students’ lives, particularly during times when students may be reticent or unwilling to seek support services they may need, or not recognize exist to help them. Saúl added that intruding does not entail calling students out, but opening an invitation for them; what Nate also described as “normalizing practices of seeking help.”

Importantly, Saúl outlined competing schools of thought in opposition to this intrusive approach. Rather than interpreting intruding as a form of “coddling,” Saúl noted, “It’s not babying them. We’re just teaching them how to be independent.” This sentiment echoes Omar’s reflections regarding the unique needs of first-generation college students. Omar explained, “scaffolding is important to someone who can’t talk to their parents who majored in psychology or whatever.” Intruding is part of a milieu of practices that EOP counselors utilize to initiate a broader series of supports for students in need.

**Developing students’ agency and self-belief.** Often, counselors’ articulated scaffolding in
parallel with efforts to develop students’ sense of self-efficacy and self-belief, defined as efforts to allow students to exercise their agency and be their own advocate. Oscar described the importance of teaching students “how to be their biggest advocate,” and added, “We give them the tools and show them how to use them. We do leave it to them to use those tools. They know where to go and who to talk to if they need that support.” Similarly, Alexis noted,

I think it’s really important to teach students to advocate for themselves because once you do graduate, and after UCSC, you’re left on your own and you have to navigate and it’s a sink or swim kind of thing. As a counselor, trying to instill that, being an advocate for themselves and being persistent and providing that support is crucial.

Like Oscar, Alexis added that instilling a sense of self-advocacy entails identifying tools, next steps, and other resources, for students to pursue independently. Developing students’ self-efficacy also involves a pedagogy of formative checks for understanding. Oscar added that checking for understanding provides a means of “Letting them know that they are equally responsible for the work that we’re doing.” Likewise, Tyrell concludes sessions by asking students, “How are you feeling at this moment? What are you thinking? What do you think you need to do?” While unique cases require immediate follow-up, he explained that, in general, “Students, you want to put the ownership in their hands too. It’s like this is a partnership and I think a lot of EOP students they know that [... ] we’re going to advocate and fight for you, but you also have a role in this and a part and follow up your end of the deal.” Thus, counselors may occasionally take the lead in employing intrusive practices to recruit and involve students, yet, utilize techniques that cultivate students’ abilities and willingness to take ownership over their own academic and professional futures.

III. EOP Students’ Perspectives

Absent from our account thus far is a sense of how students utilized and made sense of EOP advising and supports within the contexts of their everyday college lives. This section delves into EOP programs and advising as students understand and experience these services. To contextualize students’ perceptions of EOP, however, we begin with a descriptive analysis of students’ holistic challenges and needs, including self-reported measures of financial hardship, food security, and working hours.

3.1 – A Statistical Sketch of EOP Students

Roughly 4 out of every 5 EOP students reported experiencing financial hardship. Consistent with EOP staff members’ interpretations of the root causes of students’ challenges, students consistently reported financial hardship across each sub-indicator. For instance, students were equally worried about having enough money to meet financial needs (75.68%), as they were about handling financial costs of college (69.99%), or reported that it was a financial strain to purchase essential resources for courses, such as books and supplies (70.25%).

4 I used two methods to analyze student responses of financial hardship. One approach averaged student responses across the three prompts and tabulated all students whose total percent average was greater than or equal to 4 (i.e., students who on average reported “Agree” or Strongly Agree”). This statistic was 81%. I also examined student prompts individually and, instead of averaging scores across three prompts, tabulated
In addition to financial hardship, **roughly 15% of students experienced some type of food insecurity**. These students reported that they either “Frequently” or “Always” did not have enough money to get more food (15.91%), cut the size of skipped meals (18.63%), or did not eat a meal because there was not enough money for food (12.55%). Measures of food insecurity emerged through suggested services students provided, such as:

- “granola bars, or some sort of small snack station for the students who don't [sic] have food.”
- “Meals…. Maybe money? I can’t hardly afford textbooks and frequently have to choose between textbooks and food.”
- “I wish EOP would provide a place healthy food was available on campus 24 hours a day.”

Although statistically speaking, food insecurity did not emerge as pressing of an issue as financial hardship, the prompts for food insecurity reflect very specific and felt hardships. To put this in perspective, even if we take the low-end of food insecurity measures, a little over 1 in every 10 students report “Frequently” or “Always” deciding how to secure food.

A final measure of EOP students pertains to **work hours**. About 2 out of every 5 students reported working 0 hours / week (39.08%). Yet, against narratives of laziness, many students wrote that they were either “unemployed,” or “looking for a job.” Other students noted: “I wish more services were available during the summer and helping with jobs too.” Another student shared, “I have [had a job] before I transferred but I found with the difficulty of a university and my mental disabilities, I haven't been able to work.” Additional research is needed to understand the factors contributing to students who are not working. In addition, only 1 in every 5 students are working in the “sweet spot” of 12-15 work hours (18.19%). At the other end of the spectrum, about 1 in every 20 students reported working more than 20 hours / week (5%). One student elaborated on how issues of over-work and food security were intertwined and interconnected:

> I'm pretty much on my own when it comes to supporting myself, and I just wish there was some way that the school could help me with my difficulties affording and making food for myself. I work 3 jobs and have to take out loans, yet still find it hard to afford (and prepare) adequate food for myself. I just wish there was someone who could help me with that.

As the student’s response indicates and as mentioned prior, additional research is need to better understand students’ motivations for work and how it impacts students’ personal and academic lives.

### 3.2 – Students’ Use of EOP Programs and Advising Services

Understanding the multiple and diverse needs of EOP students, patterns of students’ use of EOP services tended toward the lower end of the spectrum. Most respondents selected “None” or “A few times” to report their involvement with EOP, as indicated in Graph 3.2.A below. Yet, usage rates need to be interpreted in context of existing EOP resources and capacities; that is, even when considering the small fraction of EOP students receiving services, staff and students share

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how many students answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” for each prompt. I then developed a composite percentage for students who answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” for all three questions, which amounted to roughly 59.25% of students. This latter score obscures attention to students who may have reported Strongly Agree or Agree on two, but not all three measures. Thus, I chose to report the first statistic.
an appraisal of EOP as overburdened and under-resourced (see Section 3.3 on advising wait times, limited resources). For now, it is important to note that over half of respondents reported having never attended a counseling (55%), or peer advising session (63%). For the Chromebook Lending Program, students reported much higher rates of non-use (90.25%).

Graph 3.2.A – Students' Use of EOP Advising & Services

![Graph 3.2.A – Students’ Use of EOP Advising & Services (N=773)](image)

3.3 – Students’ Perceptions of EOP Advising

Since roughly half of the student respondents reported never attending an advising session, the analysis in this section focuses only on those students who reported moderate (“A few, 1-3”), or high (“Several, 4-7,” or “Many, 8+)” rates of attendance.\(^5\) **Overall, students experienced advising in ways that cohered with how advisers articulated their own work.** Students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a list of key advising practices drawn from Teasley & Buchanan’s (2013) study of advising practices and adapted in consultation with EOP advisers’ own interpretations of their essential practices.

**Students who frequently attended advising reported that they “Agree” or “Strongly agree” with each listed practice in the range of 83% and 96%** (Graph 3.3.A). For instance, 96% of

\(^5\) That is, examining advising practices across all students including those who never attended advising yields results that understandably trend toward the middle, since over half of respondents answered each prompt, “Neither agree nor disagree.”
students reported that “My EOP adviser is concerned with my overall development.” On the lower end, 83% of students agreed with the statement, “My EOP Adviser and I work together as a team.”

Students who attended advising a few times reported that they “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” for each practice in the range of 64% and 73% (Graph 3.3.B). For instance, 67% of students agreed that “My EOP adviser helps me to be my own advocate.” Meanwhile, 73% reported, “My EOP adviser listens to what I have to say.” These findings suggest that students who attend advising at more modest rates do not perceive key advising practices at quite the same rates as students who attend more frequently. Again, more research is needed to inform both who returns for more advising and why. Overall, these scales suggest that students recognize and experience key advising practices even if only participating at modest rates.

Graph 3.3.A – Students’ Perspectives of Advising Practices - High Participation
Aspects of EOP Advising Students Found Most Helpful

These graphs provide a general overview of students’ perceptions of advising, yet do not offer insight into what students interpreted as most, or least helpful in their advising sessions. Students’ written responses are helpful in this regard. In response to the open-ended prompt, “What aspects of EOP advising do you find most helpful?” many students reported the essential role EOP advising played in terms of academic support—helping them with time management, developing four-year plans, constructing a manageable course load and healthy work-life balance. In addition to academic advice, students expressed appreciation for the resources EOP counselors helped them to identify. Although the question asked specifically about EOP advising, many students also reported that they found the resources housed within EOP helpful, such as: the Textbook Lending Library (TLL), free printing, free coffee, and information about upcoming events, workshops, or tutoring opportunities.

Focusing on comments that pertained specifically to EOP advising, four interweaving themes emerged from the data: care & commitment, relatability & empathy, holistic advising, and dependability.
Care & Commitment. The most prominent theme in students’ responses reflected students’ perceptions of staff members’ care & commitment. This theme reflected students’ sense of comfort with and recognition of EOP advisers’ commitment to their success. Often, responses resembled what one respondent described as “heart-to-heart support.” Students expressed how EOP advisers sincerely believe in their capacity to be successful at UCSC. A few student responses help to illustrate this point:

- “I like that they go the extra mile to make sure that their students are properly taken care of. I see the commitment that they put forward. It is truly inspiring. I am so grateful to have them here on campus.”
- “Having advisors that actually care about you and are willing to help you at any time you may need them. Other places on campus are rarely/never helpful.”
- “The advisors believe in me and see potential in me, and not in a fake way.”

Relatability & Empathy. Often, themes of care and commitment were interwoven with students’ appreciation for EOP advisers’ relatability & empathy. While associated with themes of care and commitment, relatability & empathy focused on statements in which students specifically reported advisers’ sensitivity to the challenges they faced. Students spoke what it meant to consult an adviser who deeply understood them, as in the sample of responses below:

- “EOP advising is helpful due to the fact that you have people who were once an EOP student, struggling in your shoes.”
- “You have people that are from similar background and gone through struggles as you. Everyone is willing to help when something is wrong.”
- “They know about our situations and are culturally sensitive.”
- “They’re understand [sic] mentioned because they’ve actually have just gone through what I’m going through.”

Holistic Advising. Again, these themes are difficult to disaggregate, but themes of care and commitment and relatability and empathy created space for what many students identified as EOP advisers’ willingness to listen to their thoughts on “academics” and “life itself.” Holistic advising pertains to students’ sense of being respected and heard as a person beyond their lives as a student. Students’ words help to clarify the meaning of this theme:

- “Every issue, from the smallest things to the biggest things, no matter if it is academic or personal or anything in between, is always treated as important and valid and time is taken to make a plan to resolve it. Being able to talk to my academic advisor not only about my classes, but about how I’m also doing emotionally.”
- “Willingness to work with your situation, no matter how convoluted it is.”
- “The fact that EOP makes sure that students are doing well, physically, mentally, and spiritually.”
- “The open space to talk about things that matter and are important to me are helpful. Also my counselor is supportive and cares about me as a person so I [sic] doesn't feel like a meeting.”
- “I get to open up and discuss about both my academic and personal issues. Together me and my adviser are able to tackle the problems and come up with solutions.”

Dependability. A final theme that intersects with these features of EOP advising pertains to students’ perceptions of EOP advisers’ dependability. Often, students mentioned feeling assured just knowing that EOP advisers were available for them in times of need. As one student shared, “EOP Advisors and mentors really have my back.” Others spoke more broadly
and referenced “having someone to talk to” or “just having an advisor to go to” as a sense of comfort and assurance. Several students’ responses help to illustrate this point:

- “The simple fact that EOP advising exists is very helpful and that they are privy to the type of situation that I am in helps a lot as well.”
- “Knowing that they’re there for me, even when I don’t use the help as I should.”
- “Just knowing they are there if needed is a comforting notion.”
- “How personable and relatable the counselors make themselves seem to someone coming in for advising. EOP in my opinion is literally oozing with resources so I feel like I can always find someone in a time of need.”

Notably, although this question asked students to describe the most helpful features of EOP advising, several students elaborated on the reasons why they have yet to attend a one-on-one counseling session. Students shared an array of explanations—from not feeling a need to seek additional supports, to not knowing how to navigate and request an advising session. Although many respondents expressed appreciation for EOP’s helpful newsletters, others expressed confusion over their EOP eligibility status and how to contact an EOP adviser. For instance, several students shared they “didn’t know EOP advising was a thing.”

**Aspects of EOP Advising Students Found Least Helpful**

These concerns segue into students’ responses to the prompt, “What aspects of EOP advising do you find least helpful?” Although many students shared that they could not think of anything that was not helpful, concerns tended to reflect three shared themes: *confusion, staff availability & scheduling difficulties*, and *staff turnover*.

**Confusion.** Several students reported that they did not know how to access EOP services and/or what they might acquire from connecting to EOP. Students who did receive information mentioned that they found it difficult to “understand how it [EOP] works and how I can use it.” Several students even shared that taking the survey helped identify EOP advising services. For students who did not participate in Bridge, discerning how to get paired with an adviser emerged as one specific challenge. Themes regarding a lack of outreach and resources also melded with those of confusion, as evident in a few responses included below:

- “I’m not sure. I would have liked to know more about EOP my first year because I didn’t know all the benefits of being part of EOP.”
- “Not ensuring that all EOP affiliates are aware of the resources provided by EOP, including advising.”
- “I don’t know how to reach out to an advisor, I am discouraged that when I go in there I won’t get as much support as other EOP students that actually do have a direct advisor.”

**Staff availability and scheduling difficulties.** Others cited challenges with staff availability and scheduling difficulties. “They are always booked” remarked one student, echoing a theme that was widely shared across student responses. Students offered accounts of having to make advising appointments weeks, and even months in advance. Interestingly, students were hesitant to complain as they empathized with what they perceived as an office that is understaffed and overworked. Take the following comments, for example:
• “I know they are understaffed and that they are pressured to see as many students as possible; therefore, sometimes it is difficult to have appointments sooner than I would need them.”
• “Sometimes it can be hard to set up an appointment with my advisor just because they are in such high demand and short on staff.”
• “Limited numbers of advisers. Student population is ever growing, especially in recent years.”
• “I feel EOP should increase in staff. Why? The advisers there are given a huge load of work and because of that, advisers are only able to attend to every student for a short period of time.”

**Staff turnover.** These conditions of EOP Advisers’ overwork contribute to what students identified as patterns of staff turnover, which were particularly detrimental to students who had developed trusting relations with an EOP adviser. Given students’ sense of meaningful and deep relations with particular advisers, they felt especially impacted by what one respondent called, “the ever changing staff.” One student’s response helps to illustrate this point:

> How hard it is to schedule an appointment, it is extremely understaffed and impacted. It takes weeks if not months ahead to schedule an appointment. Also, personally my counselor has changed like 5 times in my 3 years here. So each time its irritating having to introduce myself to an advisor, that connection or relationship is lost.

Likewise another student shared that after two advisers left UCSC, she found it difficult to build a relationship with another adviser.

Graph 3.3.C below captures some general patterns of accessibility across various sub-groups who reported high, moderate, and no participation with advising. **For those who attended at least one advising session, about 1 in every 2 students reported that their adviser is not accessible during walk-in hours.** This rate drops to 1 in 4 for students who have yet to attend advising. Students who reported frequently attending advising also reported that they were able to navigate making appointments with advisers; this in contrast to about 50% of students who did not attend advising perhaps in part because they do not know who to turn to for support. Notably, despite EOP advisers’ expressions of not having enough time with individual students, 90% of those who attend advising frequently, and 72% of those who attend a few times felt they were given the time they needed. This finding suggests that even within 10-15 minute windows, aspects of holistic advising are possible.
3.4 – Students’ Overall Perceptions of EOP & Recommendations

When reflecting on their overall experiences of EOP, students offered overwhelmingly high appraisals. Roughly 85% of students answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” in responses to the prompt: "If I could repeat my college experience, I would still choose to participate in EOP." Likewise, 86% of respondents mentioned they would encourage a friend to utilize EOP services.
Open-ended prompts help to elaborate why students responded to the prompt this way. Many students referred to EOP as a “lifeline.” As one student remarked, “EOP helps so much, I don't know how I would survive college without it.” Others described EOP as “an open hand always reaching out to me.” This EOP student added, “They are one of the few groups of students and faculty on campus that know what it's like to feel the financial and psychological/emotional stresses with being an Undocumented Student in college.” Similarly, other students elaborated on how essential EOP was throughout their college journey. Notably, the only misgivings students expressed was not having utilized EOP earlier or more frequently. The following captures a sample of these student perspectives:

- “EOP is a big family, it’s always nice to have a group that is able to support you and motivate you to succeed. I have received help that has not only allowed me to continue my years at this university, but it has taught me that I do in fact belong here. EOP has allowed me to meet people that I look forward to be [sic] friends for the next several years. EOP is just great over all, I cannot think of a bad thing to say about it that would change my answer.”
- “Hell yeah! Excuse my language. But I would definitely participate in EOP bridge program, because I was able to get a sense of what classes were going to be like a week before I started school, and I was also paired up with an amazing mentor whom I have a strong connection with.”
- “EOP has been a support mechanism that not many people are allowed to have and knowing there are people striving for your success makes everything rewarding.”
- “Without the physical, emotional, and financial support given to me by EOP I would not be graduating this June. I was barred from UCSC after my spring quarter my freshman year. During the summer I appealed and got connected to EOP and the Undocumented Student Services, with the mentoring I received and every resources I took, I managed to get my grades up, and have received Deans Honors various times.”
• “EOP was the very first resource on this campus that I heard about from a counselor in high school. I am thankful to have heard about it so soon, and now that I am in my last quarter here, I can't even count all the times EOP has been there for me in educational advice, mental stability, financial hardships, and even the legal immigration issues with my mom during my second year here.”

Notably, of those who answered, “Neutral” a common refrain was not knowing about, and consequently, not actively participating in EOP. In other words, there were few students, who marked “Neutral” who had participated in EOP. This finding again bears implications for EOP’s communication and outreach efforts. Consider the following explanations students provided when reporting “Neutral”: “I am neutral because I have never went to an EOP event or utilized it”; “I chose ‘Neutral’ because I haven't made use of my resources at EOP quite yet in the college experience.” These comments suggest that students reporting “Neutral” are not dissatisfied with EOP, but only lack participation and engagement with EOP to offer an honest appraisal.

**Students’ Recommendations**

A final question on the survey asked students to supply recommendations for services they wish EOP provided. In response to this theme of confusion, many students encouraged additional outreach and services. Several students offered ideas of workshops or socials where students might learn more about EOP, subunits, and peers connected within EOP.

• “I wish EOP had some social events so that new students can get to know the program.”
• “I kind of wish there were meetings once a quarter or month where we can get to know all of the people affiliated with EOP.”
• “Maybe an outreach program where we can see EOP involved more around campus and reminding students that there are resource for people that share similar struggles or come from different backgrounds and just it being a nice little reminder that you are not alone.”

Students offered an array of other content, workplace, or population specific workshop ideas. Several students mentioned that it would be great to have STEM specific workshops. Others expressed interest in additional undergraduate research or even GRE prep workshops. Another subset of workshops focused on additional legal aid and services, particularly with DACA. A final category focused largely on socio-emotional and psychological supports. Here, potential collaborations with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff might offer a way to invite students to receive additional support. These supportive circles, however, spanned an array of ideas, including: healing circles, creative spaces, dog de-stress days, EOP hangouts, stress relieving workshops, video game nights.

Beyond workshops, students offered several recommendations for additional services EOP might provide. Not surprisingly, most of the recommendations pertained to additional resource requests. While some recommendations were resource-intensive suggestions (a massage chair, money stipends, or spending passes), others identified ways of building on existing programs. These suggestions included: food pantry or meal-tickets, housing stipends or support, exam fee waivers (e.g., GRE), laundry flexis, conference travel stipends, homework access codes, or funding for EOP related projects. Still other students shared suggestions for more modest requests that EOP might be able to implement in the near future, such as: granola bars at the coffee station, a
microwave, other free printing units across campus, longer ARC hours. Again, not surprisingly, many students who were not accepted into TLL expressed concern and frustration with the process. As I discuss in the following section, student concerns are also staff concerns that emanate from organizational contexts of minimal resources.

Other less central, but notable issues concerned the remote location of EOP offices, repetitive intake forms that some students wished could be digitized, and workshops that were not particularly helpful for their unique needs.

IV. Discussion

Understanding Students’ Awareness of EOP: Factors Constraining EOP Outreach

It is important to consider students’ reported lack of understanding of EOP within contexts of minimal resources at EOP’s disposal and leadership’s strategic efforts to not frame students as “broken” and in need of EOP’s services. One of the most vocal frustrations students shared pertained to the Textbook Lending Library (TLL) support. These students felt that it was an unfair policy that required them to maximize their loans in order to receive compensation for textbooks. This feeling of unfairness, however, is a shared one: EOP staff are equally distressed and daily grapple with how to equitably resource students within under-resourced contexts. Natasha, the TLL program director spoke at length about the emotional work in choosing who gets access to TLL resources. When asked what her vision of TLL might be, she shared,

It [Textbook Lending Library] should be its own center with its own library. If a student can’t afford their textbooks how are they going to pass their class? And then it goes into retention, how if they can’t pass their class, they can’t graduate. So it’s like, yah it’s like, it’s the foundation for them to succeed. And it’s kind of heartbreaking seeing all of these students struggling financially and they can’t even get into a program because there are other people that struggle worse than them. So it’s like, I kind of think it’s horrible having to compare each other to find the neediest of the needy. (emphasis added).

As Natasha’s narrative identifies, student success work is morally fraught, or as she put it: “it’s kind of heartbreaking.” Natasha’s testimony offers insight into the emotional labor that staff endure as they aim to support students acquiring the basic resources they need to be successful.

Currently, messaging for TLL is confined to the email listserv. As Natasha admitted, “We can’t publicize it [TLL]. We couldn’t do it if all the students were able to apply. We would crumble.” Natasha’s explanation contextualizes how messaging is not an oversight or neglected issue on EOP’s behalf, but rather, a strategic decision rooted in assessments of EOP’s resources and capacity. Yet, given students’ frustrations with not knowing about EOP, staff and leadership might consider alternate, more transparent modes for communicating EOP’s resources to all students, then documenting wait-lists, and using that data as a basis for jointly advocating for more resources. Of course, this alternative is not without costs and must be considered in relation to EOP’s existing resources—both in terms of books and TLL staff—and potential unanticipated costs and frustrations students may experience.
An additional complicating factor pertains to EOP’s interest in not framing students through deficit lenses. Upon reading-out this report with staff, EOP leadership shared concerns about messaging and the importance of “Not telling students you’re broken, we’re going to fix you, come by the repair shop.” This complicating factor clarifies the messy politics inherent in messaging to students in need. Additional efforts around clear, transparent, and asset-based ways of framing students are required.

A similar approach to messaging might be applied to advising, particularly targeted at the 50% of students who have not attended advising. Acknowledging that several EOP counselors felt “impacted” by the increasing number of EOP students at UCSC, advising might benefit from clearer messaging, which in turn, might provide a more accurate appraisal of students’ (in)access to resources. Additional research might form the basis for what several staff envisioning in an EOP office that included more staff and more robust academic and social programs.

**Notwithstanding issues of how resources shape messaging, it is also worth noting that several advisers acknowledged the challenges of navigating student online portals.** For instance, several EOP counselors tried to manage increasing student appointments by exploring ways to make online information more accessible. Nate referred students to the website, but lamented its complicated interface:

> I think another thing is this hidden curriculum thing is widespread. [...] It has to do with the way the website is laid out, the way degree requirements are outlined. You know if you want to find information about particular things and maybe you don’t have time to schedule a meeting with an adviser and just see on a website, it’s not clear. The verbiage is really complicated. And I have two degrees, and sometimes it’s really complicated for me to decipher.

Nate’s testimony indicates that it is not just about expanding access to information, but also translating that information in ways that are accessible to students. Nate also aspired to create accessible interfaces steeped within a culture that “normalized practices of seeking help.” Nate’s analysis resonates deeply with concerns students identified. Additional research might explore student-centered approaches to outreach and engagement—for instance, by beginning with students’ everyday uses of digital or social media and exploring how EOP might enter these spaces rather than creating alternative, institutional-centric channels. Other research might examine what students know about EOP, how they came to know about it, and the potential barriers to seeking help.

**“We are all retention officers”: from “cultural competency” to “cultural humility”**

Although EOP staff considered theories of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007) and validation (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Nora, Urick, Coercer, 2009; Rendón, 1994) as fundamental to their work, “cultural humility” offers another way to theorize the repertoire of practices and commitments that emerged in advisers’ narratives and in students’ assessments of advising sessions. Cultural humility is a frame that has been pioneered in the fields of medicine and public health in response to an increasingly diverse pool of health patients. Tervalon and Garcia (1998) first conceptualized “cultural humility” as a means of moving beyond notions of “cultural competency,” which assumes that
“culture” is a finite body of knowledge (p. 118). They advocated for a power-sensitive notion of “cultural humility,” which they defined as, “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the patient-physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and nonpaternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (Tervalon & Garcia, 1998, p. 123). Replacing language of “patient-physician” with “student-university staff” (i.e., advisers, staff, faculty, and other institutional agents charged with promoting the success and retention of students at UCSC) offers a basis to promote individual and organizational change. The strength of “cultural humility” as a concept rests in its commitment to meeting the dynamic needs that communities (in this case, students) define as most urgent. Rather than specifying a set of traits or list of knowledges to be acquired about students, cultural humility emphasizes a set of processes and practices that cultivate opportunities for students to articulate their needs and for staff to advocate and work toward addressing those needs. Hook and colleagues’ (2013) 12-point measures of cultural humility offers one useful basis for exploring what cultural humility looks like at the level of concrete practices. Given the absence of “cultural humility” in discussions of higher education, it also provides a basis for UCSC to pioneer and institutionalize equity-oriented processes.

The overwhelming alignment between what EOP advisers’ identified and what students perceived is summarized in the graphic below:

**Graphic 4.1.A – Conceptualizing EOP Advising as Enacting Cultural Humility**

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6 Their scale includes the following indicators (negative scale items, 3, 6, 8, 10, 11): Is respectful, (2) is open to explore, (3), assumes he/she already knows a lot, (4) is considerate, (5) is genuinely interested in learning more, (6) acts superior, (7) is open to seeing things from my perspective, (8) makes assumptions about me, (9) is open-minded, (10) is a know-it-all, (11) thinks he/she understands more than he/she actually does, (12) asks questions when he/she is uncertain.
Cultural humility offers a way to consider these commitments and practices collectively. Further, cultural humility is evident in EOP advisers’ existing theories and practices—listening, working together, empathizing, encouraging, assuring, helping to advocate, expressing concern, listening (to name a few). As this study demonstrates, students experienced these practices and felt cared for, heard and respected, and importantly, felt committed to succeeding at UCSC.

**Institutional commitment.** Last, cultural humility offers a way to advance what many EOP advisers described in seeking to build “institutional commitment” throughout the university. Several advisers helped to develop a definition of “institutional commitment,” which I interpreted as, the degree to which the institution and members of the faculty and staff are committed to serving and providing equitable learning opportunities for all students, particularly historically underserved students. One EOP counselor’s words are helpful in developing this notion. He noted, “Again, successfully supporting these students is everybody’s job, and we play a role in that and have some depth and expertise given that’s our focus, but we want everybody to have a part in that.” Another adviser, Tyrell, envisioned a university culture in which “We are all retention officers.” He stated,

> It’s everyone from the facilities person to the president to be a retention officer, I would say. So your job is to retain every single student; not a certain population of students, but every single student. It’s your job. You’re charged. So when people are not aware of issues that face undocumented students or underrepresented students... you’re charged with all students and you’re not doing your job.

Tyrell developed this idea of a “retention officer” by describing how ongoing multicultural awareness might be included in every university employee’s job description. He envisioned the university providing meaningful opportunities and resources toward these ends. Again, reflective of EOP’s interest in ongoing development and learning, Tyrell humbly explained that learning about students of color isn’t just for white staff and faculty. He added, “you’re never at a certain point, but need to keep learning about people of color, who are still learning and growing with their cultural competencies.” This is humility in practice.

Implicit in Tyrell’s words (and other EOP advisers’) was a perception of a lack of institutional commitment at UCSC. Of concern is that the second highest means by which students found out about EOP was from college advisers (33%). While this can be interpreted as a mark of successful collaboration across units, it can also be viewed as a lack of institutional commitment—a way of tasking EOP with the responsibility of serving historically underserved students. As one EOP adviser summarized, “I think there’s an assumption about what EOP is, and so I think the campus’s way of addressing the needs of these students is just sending them to EOP as if that’s the... you know, we’re going to fix everything. We’re miracle workers as if we’re going to make everything work out.” Additional research is required to explore whether the phenomenon of “Go to EOP for this” is enacted in constructive and caring ways, or as a means of shirking responsibility for historically underserved students in need.

In sum, cultural humility offers one conceptual basis for developing institutional processes and practices of shared interest and commitment to the changing needs of an increasingly diverse
student body. As Oscar articulated, “How do we get everyone to share in a larger goal of supporting students?” Again, while EOP leadership repeatedly emphasized that “there’s no secret sauce,” this report suggests that cultural humility offers a contingent metaphor and preliminary set of practices that might help the University foster a collective commitment to the holistic needs of all students.
References


