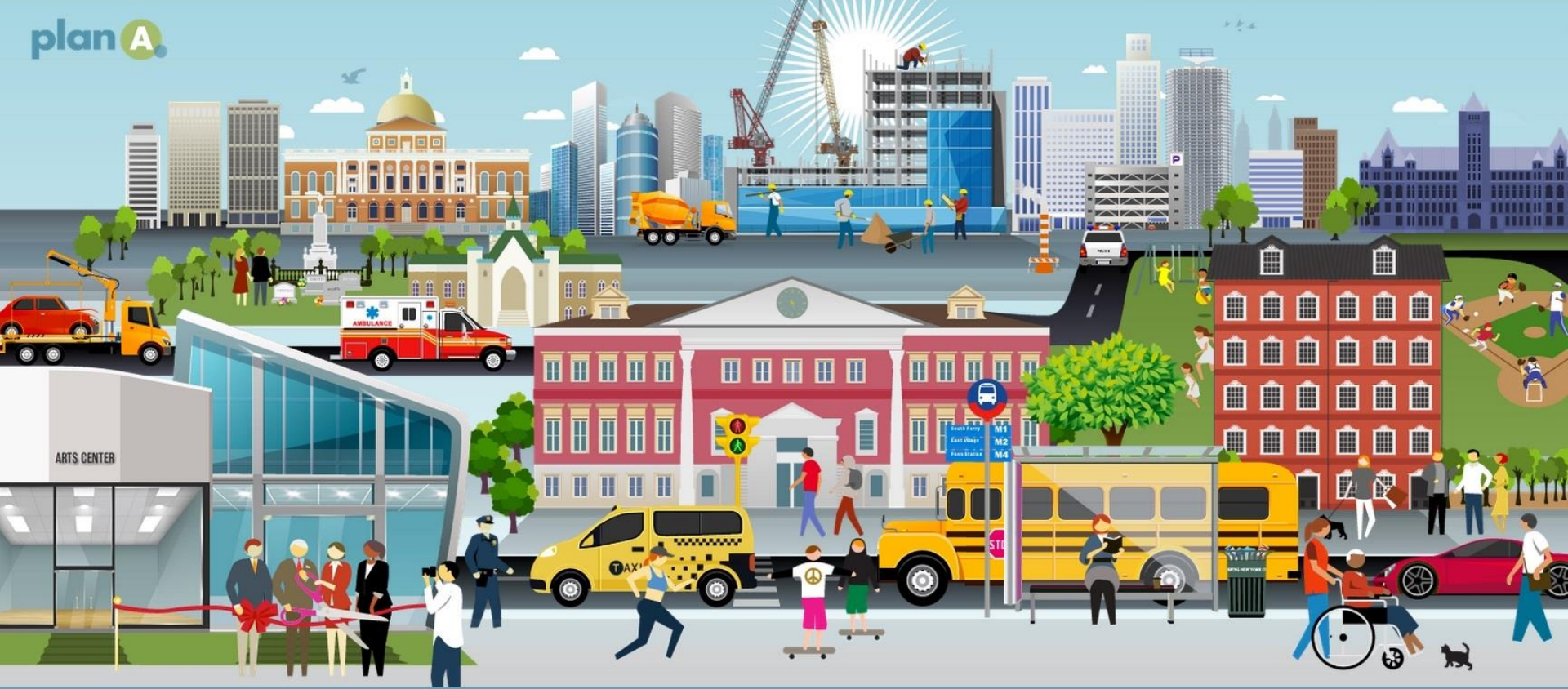




Planning for nonprofits and philanthropy

Westchester Community College Foundation

WCCF Feasibility Study Board Information Sessions Research Excerpt - C O N F I D E N T I A L

March 24 & April 3, 2025

Qualitative research is an important tool for uncovering a range of perspectives on, and perceptions of, an organization and its constituents' interests or needs. For the Feasibility Study, Plan A conducted qualitative research in the form of a series of in-depth, confidential, one-on-one interviews with a cross section of current and prospective donors in order to test the draft Case for Support, the likelihood that they would contribute in response to the Case, and the level of support they were likely to provide. We took detailed notes during these interviews which we then coded for recurring themes.

We present the major themes that surfaced from the interviews here in a particular format. The major themes are presented as a summary—in our words—in shaded boxes at the top of each slide, followed by a series of italicized quotes pulled directly from the interviews, for illustrative purposes. At times, the quotes are congruent with one another; in other cases, you may see conflicting ideas. However, all of the quotes reflect a theme that repeatedly surfaced across conversations.

During our WCCF Board Information Sessions, we will share the list of interviewees whose quotes are included here. We will then touch on the themes briefly before we present our report and recommendations, which are built largely in response to our research findings.

Those close to WCC tout its successes and reputation, particularly under Dr. Miles' leadership. Donors are proud of their affiliation. Still, there's a sense that WCC is not as widely known or appreciated as it might be by the community at large nor by Westchester's wealthiest.

I am a Westchester resident and until I started working with them, I had no idea what a gem of a community college it is; they are so above and beyond – even the campus is so beautiful. I think there is more work to be done around the community [awareness].

Anybody that knows about it thinks it is terrific, but not enough people know what is going on. The case is important and easy to make once you get somebody to listen. How you get people to know about it is a question.

It is certainly not on the radar of students in a place like [our town]; my peer group might not understand the value of community college and what it can do, even though it is right up the street. I suspect one of their hurdles philanthropically is reputational; you have to get the word out and explain the narrative.

The big challenge is Westchester; there are incredibly wealthy donors who do not support things in Westchester. Raise more awareness and have them more involved. I started with the salons – they had students at every one so people could see who they are serving.

To their credit, people in the business community feel they can reach out to the President, Belinda Miles; it's not like this person in a golden tower you don't see or isn't involved.

Interviewees were asked to articulate WCC's value proposition...and many clearly "get it." They are sold on the value of a community college. But the political climate should be considered as we work to frame the argument at a fraught time.

It is about giving a student "a life" – making them economically self-sufficient and putting them on a path.

The value proposition is that it is cheap! Other poverty organizations are dealing with entrenched problems; you try to solve one and you have to solve another. But at WCC, just showing up means that they are ready...The outcome is very measurable!

We are moving into a time when diversity is starting to become a bad word. The college will have to be mindful of the language they use when asking for funding for the individuals in this demographic. It cannot look like an affirmative action program. It cannot look like something other than we are looking to help the people in this community and help people local to this community get jobs in these industries. There will be those interested in the diversity pieces. Some donors may feel that they don't want to fund something that is geared towards a specific gender or ethnicity.

For people who care about our community it is an excellent investment.

WCC has had a number of programs focusing on immigrants. That has always been a good story to tell. It will be difficult to say how successful that will be going forward.

When I was growing up you were steered away from community college; you were encouraged to get a four-year degree. But that has changed. Now it is seen as a smart move; get your Associate Degree and live at home and then go for a four-year degree.

Members of the business community see support for WCC as an investment in the future of their own companies and the county. They need employees who have the skills and experience to hit the ground running – and who will stick around because they have local roots.

Employers are hungry for students – particularly ones in their backyard who can hit the ground running.

I see the value proposition as potential workers coming out who actually know what I as a company do...and are ready to start day one without extra training. I would hire somebody out of that kind of program.

The retention part for me is huge. I have hired countless people who have relocated [to Westchester] and then they are over it and move back to where they lived. As an employer there is always the risk of somebody leaving, but if somebody is from the community it is less.

The healthcare system in Westchester County has just exploded. I cannot tell you how many meetings I sit in that people say we need local trained people...They may not need advanced degrees...It is hard to get people outside the area who have to travel in.

WCC provides employees for local businesses; if there is a collaboration, businesses can help set the pathway that benefits the businesses.

I want to make sure the professors are not determining the right curricula – but that it is being set in large part because of what the companies are looking to hire. I want [the college] to be teaching the right stuff to the students coming out so every one can get a good job when they leave.

Donors are convinced that a gift to WCCF is a smart investment with a big “ROI” – an opportunity to impact individual lives and benefit the community of which they are a part. The opportunity to interact with students is especially appreciated.

My experience with WCC in terms of philanthropy is that I think you can change the lives of students when you help them to be able to afford WCC – make it affordable...; for every student I have ever spoken to at WCC it is a life changing experience. That is what makes it such an honor to be giving.

It is critical for your own benefit to have people around you be able to support themselves and have a decent life and feel good to be an American. There is no question that it benefits every single person that lives in Westchester. This is not a difficult case to make – if you can get to them.

[For some donors] the value proposition was: I relate to those students; I see myself there, before I was successful. [For others] it's about being passionate about education. Philanthropy is about more than the money; it is about engagement, often, and they are good at that.

Philanthropists are going to be hit up more than ever to fund absolutely everything. But education would be pretty high on my list. And you have inflation, and cuts, and even wealthy people may be worried about how much money they can give away... If it were me, it would be exciting to hear about the corporate environment; their seeing value and an investment in their backyard seems like a very important thing.

This campaign has to move forward; it's not a question; it's really about how it is packaged and what goal is set.

For some people it would be recognition, but I would hope it would be because it is the right thing to do. Just providing that basic education for people to succeed, for a lot of people that's enough.

The draft Case for Support was, to some, a “kitchen sink” of programs and initiatives that raised questions about the College’s ability to deliver on the campaign’s promise. Various initiatives had appeal to one or another interviewee; some just want to fund scholarships.

The college needs to identify the top priorities. What do you need to absolutely have to get it off the ground and make it work and understanding what the funding looks like.

Focus on one area and knock it out of the park. Look at what they did in Rockland with Subaru. Lean in, go big, stand up and do something. Make it “the” place where you can do something specific. Look at the labor market briefs and then go for a big gift. Pepsi should give them \$5 million for an engineering program and then agree to hire the graduates. Where are the jobs? Go big on one thing and then fill the gap...but figure it out based on where are the jobs. We shouldn’t just educate people but encourage them to stay here.

The purpose of WCC is to serve the underserved kids who primarily come from poor or immigrant families; whatever you do, serve them! Don’t lose track of its population. It’s pretty clear that you can do educational related things, like life sciences, to specifically serve this population. Like what they did with food services, it was a direct and logical way to do it.

Some can’t afford the \$5k tuition and to the extent my gift can help a student get in and get an education and get a good job getting out – that is money well-spent. Easier to give it into a scholarship rather than building a building or giving it to the faculty to learn a new subject. Those are legitimate expenditures, but it is easier for me to rationalize giving it to scholarships.

A strengthened Case for Support would use hard numbers to justify why particular areas of investment were selected, demonstrate confidence in their projected costs, and articulate why WCC believes the proposed investments are pivotal to long-term student success. The capacity to sustain these investments over time was of equal concern. And some worried that major investments in specific fields – particularly those that require significant capital investments for equipment and technology – could quickly become outdated.

My first thought was how do I know that the things they are identifying are actually going to be valuable with the world changing as rapidly as it is? How do I know that I trust their metrics?

They need to give data. “Hospitals need X right now. They are hiring 50 therapists a year and we don’t have them. We are importing them from other places. Commuting in, etc.” Be ready with that information.

This felt like a solution looking for a problem rather than a problem looking for a solution. I want to see the demand and understand that rather than we need to set a target and figure out what we are going to spend it on.

Those areas where we talked about the industries that are going to be in need of employees – do we have any stats on that? How many hospitals?

The \$5M figure for peer advisors for students. Why do you need \$5M for that?...I want clarification on all the figures. \$1M, \$2M, \$3M – those are initial costs; who is picking up all the continuing costs?

It is worth noting these additional concerns and points of resonance shared by particular interviewees.

I absolutely think the professional development for the staff and faculty. This cannot happen unless you have trained individuals and enough of them to be focused on this. Too often this is run by half a person and no budget. That is not going to work.

How many students have insecure housing and food? Don't get too wrapped up in the sexiness of the programs you are offering; meet basic needs. That's why I was excited by the food services program I saw at WCC.

WCC's mission is not to meet the perceived need of Westchester's businesses.

The case forgets to say: you have to create critical thinkers; students shouldn't just know how to operate in a film and tv lab, but also operate in a sophisticated environment; read and write; offer an opinion on a script. I think we have to be able to say: what does it mean to be a graduate of this institution? Do they have good thinking skills?

I think that the experiential learning is very soft – that may be difficult for non-board members or people not involved with education to understand – scholarships and buildings are clear.

What's the secret sauce for WCC? Sometimes people treat poor people or people who are struggling like they don't deserve interesting and creative courses. I would be interested in looking at which are the programs that can embed the liberal arts and critical thinking so that there is more joy in the learning; the students will benefit from intrinsic motivation – not just fixing the air conditioner, but fixing the HVAC problem. Being the person who knows how to solve the problem is going to bring students back to staff.