



Widening the Circle of Belonging

College of the Redwoods
Eureka, CA

April 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

What if colleges thought differently about who belonged in college? What if they prioritized reaching students in even the most remote reaches of their service area? What if colleges made every effort to provide incarcerated individuals with the same attention, love and support as all other students?

In Northern California, the College of the Redwoods is rethinking who belongs in their educational community and taking its offerings into a place that most colleges choose not to operate: Pelican Bay State Prison — a “supermax” institution in Crescent City, CA. These efforts are one part of a deeper evolution that is underway at the college to institutionalize Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) approaches as a means to improve student success rates. This evolution includes ambitious efforts in student services, human resources and faculty professional development all aimed at putting the college on a trajectory that fosters a deeper sense of BMWP for students.

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

- 1 **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**
- 2 **Increase awareness of BMWP**
- 3 **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success.**



College of the Redwoods campus
(Photo by College of the Redwoods)

College of the Redwoods

LOCATION:

Eureka, CA

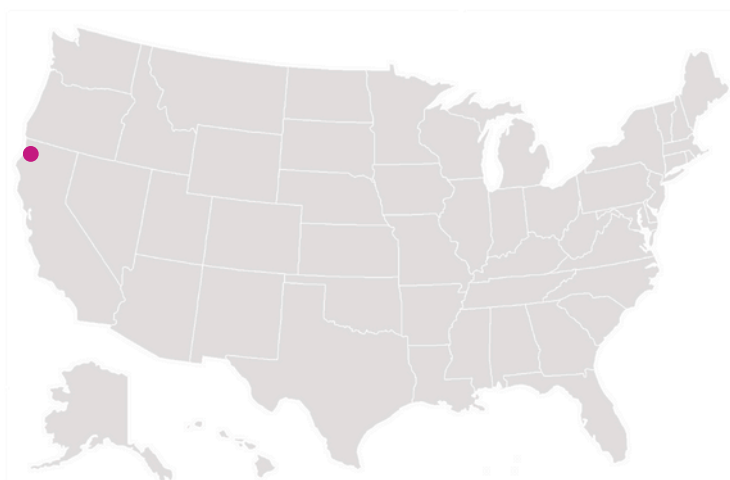
INSTITUTION TYPE:

Public 2-Year

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

4,260*

* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. [College Navigator](#).



Policy and Practice Highlight

This document contains several **policy and practice highlight** callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

Context

The College of the Redwoods (CR) comprises multiple campuses in Northern California. The college maintains two campuses: the main campus in Eureka, one in Crescent City — approximately 95 miles north in Del Norte County — and the Klamath-Trinity Instructional Site which is located on the Hoopa Indian Reservation about 60 miles northeast of Eureka. The college is a self-described “hidden gem, up in the trees” offering a wide variety of in-person and online degree and transfer programs with the backdrop of the state’s lush redwood forests.

Along with community partners, CR has been a leading institution in improving student transitions from high school to college and career. CR hosts Academy of the Redwoods — an early college high school that provides early postsecondary access. CR has also been a leader and core partner in the Del Norte and Tribal Lands Opportunity Youth Initiative, hosting the Summer Youth Training Academy where leaders from community-based organizations are instructors and young leaders receive hands-on training in areas like Youth Media, Health Career Pathways, Youth Entrepreneurship and Youth Organizing.



Early career exposure and learning opportunities can help students develop a clearer sense of purpose.

CR is currently led by President Dr. Keith Flamer, who has served the college community for over seventeen years in a range of leadership roles. A US Marine Corps Veteran, Dr. Flamer has made community partnerships and fostering diversity priorities during his tenure.

Unlike most public biographies that take the standard approach of listing degrees, bonafides and accomplishments, Dr. Flamer’s bio acts as a values statement:

“President Flamer believes that it is critical to embrace diversity and remain sensitive to the needs of all students. He supports the success of those who may be differently abled or who experience social, cultural and economic orientations and backgrounds different from those experienced by faculty and staff with whom these students interact. He firmly believes that diversity is strength—and that multiculturalism is something to be celebrated, promoted, and cherished.”¹

Describing his goals, Flamer names an intention for the college to be, “hyper-focused on what the community needs are. Not just in terms of what academic programs they want, but what they need us to offer so students can be good folks in our communities.” Evidence of this approach is abundant at the college. CR’s journey toward policies and practices that foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose started more than two decades ago and is now bearing fruit. The path has included thoughtful hiring and training for administrators, faculty and staff; engagement with everyone in the college community from the board of trustees to students to employers and other community members; patiently reworking the college’s guiding policy documents; collaborating with local tribal partners and - crucially - widening the circle of who belongs in college far enough to encompass people incarcerated at Pelican Bay State Prison.

A deliberate journey

For Ruthe Rhodes, Associate Dean of Career Education and faculty in the Community Studies and English departments, it is not possible to identify a specific point in time when the college's evolution began. Rhodes sees the CR journey as deliberate, but describes CR as “a college in process — a multi-cell organism made up of some really dedicated human beings working in different ways to help students reach their goals.”

Rhodes points to a multiplicity of current structures and strategies that are the fruit of CR's transformation journey — strengthening hiring and faculty development systems to ensure CR employs a diverse and well-supported group of professionals; a strong basic needs center to promote student safety and wellness; the college's recent decision to join the Institute for Evidence Based Change's Caring Campus Initiative; their deep and sustained collaboration with tribal partners that has yielded, among other things, a \$30 million federal “cradle-to-college” partnership led by the Yurok Tribe.²

Although college leaders may not have used the terminology, CR has always had policies and practices aimed at helping students develop a strong sense of belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose. One recent example is the college's work around assessment and placement reform starting in the 2010s. After overwhelming evidence — assembled by the RP Group, the California Acceleration Project and others in the state — demonstrated that college placement testing was disproportionately harming low-income students and students of color, CR became an early adopter of efforts to eliminate or significantly overhaul its placement processes in both English and math. These changes were eventually codified statewide via the 2017 signing of AB 705.



Participants in the CR Mentoring and Leadership program -- a partnership between Career Education and the Multicultural & Equity Center

Reflecting on this time, Rhodes shared that CR's changes to their placement processes, "woke up everyone in the English department. Faculty started asking, 'What are our success and retention numbers? Who is passing the first time?' And, 'What are my numbers when I disaggregate the data [by race/ethnicity] on my classes? Who is successful and who is not successful?' And 'Is there a connection between the fact that these folks indicated that they're Native American or African American and the success rate in my class?'" These conversations set the stage for other local and statewide initiatives including guided pathways — an equity-focused framework that provides students with a clearer understanding of their purpose and a more structured, supportive path to their educational and career goals.³



This type of faculty inquiry makes clear that the college was taking seriously its role in helping all students succeed. It also created a "permission structure" that allowed faculty members to talk openly about the intersection of race and student success. This type of dialogue can lead to practices foster student belonging by creating a shared expectation that all students get the support that they need.

A new master plan and becoming "a home away from home"

Another notable step in the college's BMWP journey was the development and 2022 adoption of the college's Education Master Plan. The plan is meant to guide the college's actions through 2032 and act as, "an anchor to which the College's fiscal, annual, enrollment management, and human resources planning processes will link, as community trends change, and emerging needs warrant revisions."

Two of the six themes identified in the plan relate directly to BMWP — one focused on establishing stronger wraparound supports and another focused on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Both themes contain multiple strategies that reflect BMWP constructs — efforts to strengthen students' first point-of-contact to create a deeper sense of belonging; improve alignment of counseling and advising services; ensure that students in rural communities have equitable access to computers, internet, printing and tutoring; eliminate biases in all institutional practices and take systemic action to eliminate barriers to equity.

If policy is an embodiment of intention, then CR's Education Master Plan portrays a college with strong intentions to improve equity through practices that foster BMWP. Now two years into implementation, Rhodes confirmed that intention is being followed with aligned action. "We are using the language of equity in almost everything we do," Rhodes shared. "It's one of our guiding principles. When we look at writing or revising a policy, we always try to apply an antiracist lens."

Action is also visible in the college's approach to staff development. Leaders knew that building and sustaining a culture of antiracist inquiry would require a real investment of time and money. In the 2023-24 academic year, the CR Academic Senate's Multicultural and Diversity Committee led an effort to bring in a team from the University of Southern California's Race and Equity Center to deliver a year-long faculty training program focused on the importance of equity-focused inquiry and continuous improvement. The training - known as the Equity-Minded Teaching Institute - engaged over 30 faculty members and provided them with concrete tools they can use to "walk the talk" around racial equity in their pedagogy. All participating faculty received a stipend to acknowledge their added effort and, in addition to their work with USC, the college organized working sessions for faculty to support each other.

There's also the real investment of resources the college has made to build its first-ever Multicultural & Equity Center (MEC). Established in 2018, the Center is, "a safe place for cultural expression, cross-cultural learning, access to college and dignity resources, and social justice work opportunities." Current Center Director Dr. Kintay Johnson describes the MEC as, "the home away from home for students on campus. Students know if you come in there you've got community and people who are there for you. It's the place where students can be vulnerable and can say what their needs are."

The MEC's origin story is one of student dreams becoming reality. In 2017, a group of students conducted a participatory action research (PAR) project to study factors affecting retention rates of underserved groups at CR. The research team — composed of eight undergraduate student researchers, one graduate student and one methodologist — focused specifically on understanding how the college could better support students who identified as Indigenous, African American, Latinx, LGBTQ+ and English as Second Language (ESL). Researchers surveyed students, conducted in-depth interviews and made observations on two CR campuses as well as Shasta College in Redding, CA. The recommendations from the report touched on a wide range of topics — better signage to help students navigate services, investing more deeply in mental health, widening library access, increasing "diversity related and diversity exposure cultural sharing type events." The report was well received by college leadership and ultimately led to the formation of the MEC.

Among other efforts, the Center currently employs seventeen paid Student Ambassadors who serve as critical liaison between the Center and the student body. Students give frequent presentations in classrooms all across campus to raise awareness and normalize support services offered by the college and, in a reversal of the traditional higher education power structure, Ambassadors lead training on multicultural awareness for CR instructors.



Students playing an ambassador role to help other students learn about and access campus services can help foster a deeper sense of belonging.

Supermax belonging

Pelican Bay State Prison is located in Crescent City, CA — squarely in the CR service area. The facility is known as a “super-maximum” (or “supermax”) security prison — a designation given to prisons that offer the most secure level of custody to incarcerated individuals who are classified as the highest security risks.⁴

First established in 1989, Pelican Bay administrators and guards built a culture of dominance over the men incarcerated at the prison, relying frequently on holding men in long-term solitary confinement — including an unthinkable 20-year stretch at the prison for one incarcerated man, Todd Ashker.⁵ These actions led men at the prison to organize and mount the longest prison hunger strike in California history where nearly 29,000 men stopped eating food served to them by staff members. The strike endured for 60 days until state lawmakers agreed to hold legislative hearings on conditions at the prison. Strike participant Brian Quintanilla shared that, “our protest showed how the power of unity was able to change an inflexible mindset.”⁶

Although the conditions at Pelican Bay have changed since the hunger strike, the prison remains a place of incarceration — a space intentionally designated and defined by othering, disconnection and isolation from the broader community. Making inroads through education has been a long process and it started with development of a shared belief that the CR community must include Pelican Bay.



Pelican Bay Scholars

Rory Johnson is a CR dean who helped build the Pelican Bay Scholars program that now serves over 1200 students at the prison. “Pelican Bay State Prison is embedded in our community, for better or for worse,” Johnson explained. “The institution is there and it dominates the landscape. And inside that institution are all of these men who are part of our population. They don't want to be there, but they are there. And I think the [transformative] step was us looking at those men and saying, ‘they are part of our district. These men deserve the opportunity to be educated in the same way that anybody else in our community does.’”

Johnson describes the legislative foundation that allowed CR to formally enter into partnership with the Prison. Prior to 2014, community colleges in California were prohibited from collecting revenues for classes and educational programs that were not “open to the public.” Due to the status of incarcerated individuals at Pelican Bay and prisons across the state, classes could not be held in an open way, which foreclosed any hope of operating a sustainable educational program in the prison. **Passage of SB 1391 changed this dynamic**, giving College of the Redwoods and community colleges across the state to collect funds for operating programs within prisons and creating a new grant program to encourage new partnerships between the state Department of Corrections and the state’s Community College Chancellor's Office.



SB 1391 expanded educational services in prisons across the state of California. By allowing incarcerated individuals to engage in education, it serves as an example of how state policy can create conditions that foster greater belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

CR leaders knew that they wanted to walk through this new door that had been opened by the state, but they didn’t know what the program should look like. CR leadership started talks with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and, after about six months of dialogue, CR was able to begin working with the men who were incarcerated at Pelican Bay.

“That was quite a process,” Johnson shared. “Students need to understand what it is that's being offered and they need to know what it's worth. Where's the inspiration to pursue something if you don't know what that thing the college is offering and how that connects to what you're interested in? What is psychology? Sociology? Social work? Communication? Business? What does that mean? **It took us a couple years to really hone in on what they were interested in.**”



The patience with which CR worked with incarcerated students is important and reflects their commitment to ensuring that students connect deeply with their purpose as a part of their educational journey.

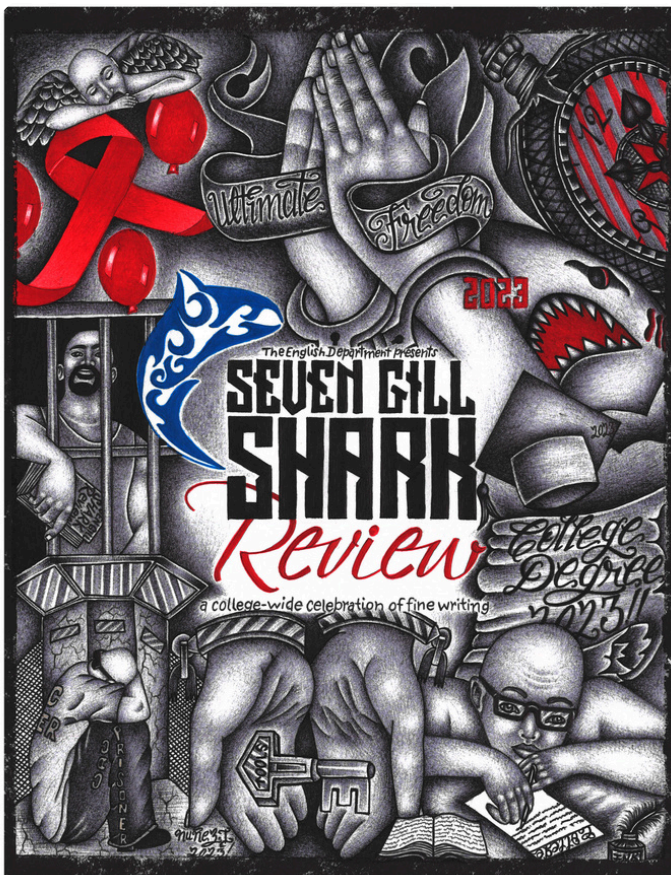
Elaborating on what it was that kept them at the table, Johnson describes a deep conviction: “We had this belief that we needed to be offering our programs to everybody. Whether it's at Pelican Bay State Prison or up in Hoopa [on the Hoopa Valley Reservation], these are communities that don't have good feelings about traditional education and don't always believe that it's for them. **And we need to learn why they feel that way before we do anything to help them to figure out what it is they want from their experience.**”



By prioritizing and examining the root cause of student feelings, the CR team is creating conditions that facilitate student belonging.

Among the highlights of the college's work with the men at Pelican Bay is the publication of the 2023 edition of the college's annual literary journal, called the Seven-Gill Shark Review. Until quite recently, the journal only accepted submissions from students on the college's main campus in Eureka. In 2021, for the first time, the English department opened submissions to all students district-wide, which led to the first edition that included submissions from four students at Pelican Bay. In 2023, the journal deepened its partnership with the Pelican Bay Scholars program even further when English faculty member Ashley Knowlton invited a group of twelve students — all men incarcerated at Pelican Bay — to serve as the editors for the upcoming edition of the journal via her English 36 Literary Magazine Production course.

Knowlton describes how it was difficult, but not impossible, for them to navigate the complexities of the situation. Because the incarcerated men couldn't make contact with other students in different areas of the prison or the outside world, Knowlton played a facilitator role as the instructor of the course — anonymizing student submissions and communicating out decisions once Pelican Bay scholars had completed their review. When the publication was released, Knowlton organized a reading, hosted by the English 36 student editors at Pelican Bay, inviting college faculty and staff into the prison. The event included select incarcerated students who had their work featured in the 2023 edition to attend and celebrate the accomplishment.



Cover of the 2023 Seven Gill Shark Review

While the journal is a point of excitement for Knowlton, she's quick to point out that their work with scholars at Pelican Bay runs much deeper. "Of course I have a syllabus and a schedule, but after I go over my spiel, we have a collaborative, norm-creating session where I ask, 'what do you guys want to get out of this experience? What do you want to experience? What do you hope for in this class?'" Knowlton and her students use these conversations as a jumping-off point to create classroom norms and to document their community agreements on posters that hang in the classroom environment.

In addition to creating a positive classroom culture, the documents created by the scholars also disprove a common stereotype that educating people while they are incarcerated is dangerous to educators.

“There’s always this idea that [the students] are dangerous,” says Knowlton. “Or because I’m a female I’m going to be put in a vulnerable position. And typically that’s not the case at all. Typically students are just grateful for having [educators] in there offering these programs. Messing that up is the last thing that they want to do.” Knowlton has found that Pelican Bay scholars — like other students — want to belong to a community where they can learn, belong and grow together.

Coalescence and repair

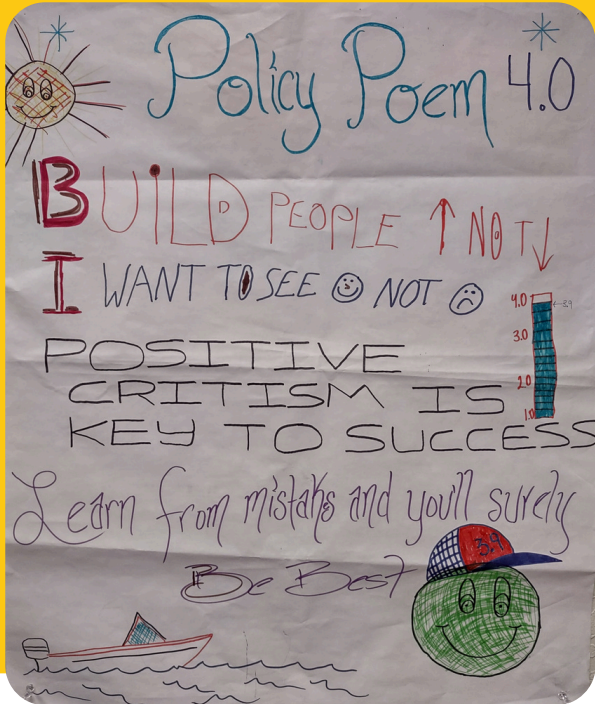
Organizations improve when the people who work there have a common understanding of their goals, know that they are making a valuable contribution, and feel a sense of safety to express themselves.⁷ By this standard, College of the Redwoods has made an impact and is on course to make more significant improvements in student outcomes.

Leaders describe the college’s work as evolving and incomplete, but alive and possible.

“I don’t think we’re there yet,” Rhodes says. “I don’t think we’ve coalesced yet. We’re constantly building a culture. One training cannot trigger the whole change, but we have people in leadership now who want to see systematic, institution-wide change.” Johnson’s comments echo this sentiment of continued development. In his view, the college is striving to be, “comprised of and designed for the community that students live in. I think we have been doing a better job over the years of actually becoming that — becoming an institution that’s about the community. That intention has always been there, but it’s more deliberate now.”

Reflecting on the totality of CR’s journey, Rhodes feels that, “all of these things [that the college is doing] are part of a bigger story. It isn’t about the Pelican Bay program, although that’s a good part of what we’re doing. It’s about a critical mass of people who are activated. It’s about relationships that have been changing gradually over time. It’s about young people who are joining us in planning the future of the institution. That’s the story I see.”

Students at the college will benefit from all of this activation and transformational work that the college is doing. Dr. Flamer and his team know that their efforts will help students cultivate a deeper sense of belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose. This can then translate into improvements in persistence and completion at the college and, ultimately, improved economic security for CR students and their families.



Classroom norms poster made by Pelican Bay Scholars



Pelican Bay Scholars graduation ceremony

Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Dr. Keith Flamer, Dr. Kintay Johnson, Ruth Rhodes, Rory Johnson and Ashley Knowlton for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

End notes

¹ College of the Redwoods (2024). [Office of the President - Welcome](#). Accessed on September 16, 2024.

² Evidence of CR's commitment to tribal partnership is abundant in its work with the [Hoopa Valley Tribe](#), the [Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation](#), the [Yurok Tribe](#) and other tribal partners. In addition to the [2021 grant](#) from the US Department of Education, the college has started development of a dedicated Native Resource Center and entered into new MOUs with the Yurok Tribe, the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribal Education Agency, the Wiyot Tribe and other partners to affirm goal alignment and partnership parameters. For more, see CR (2023). [College Matters: CR Works to increase tribe's access to education](#).

³ California Community College Chancellor's Office (2024). [Guided Pathways](#). Accessed on September 16, 2024.

⁴ Mears (2006). [Evaluating the Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons](#).

⁵ NPR (2014). [How 4 Inmates Launched A Statewide Hunger Strike From Solitary](#). Accessed on September 17, 2024.

⁶ Quintilla, Brian (2023). [The Two Months I Didn't Eat: Inside the Longest Prison Hunger Strike in California History](#). Accessed on September 17, 2024.

⁷ Burkus, David (2023). [What Makes Some Teams High Performing?](#)