



# Student Perspectives on Western Michigan University's Navigator Network

June 2026

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Student Affairs

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## Background

WMU's [Navigator Network](#) is a collaborative effort by Merze Tate College, Multicultural Affairs for Students, Student Affairs, and Financial Aid. The network includes approximately 24 peer navigators (the number varies throughout the year), four student success navigators, and seven navigation specialists. Their work includes (1) individualized outreach to students; (2) events to promote students' sense of belonging, health and wellness, learning and sense of purpose; and (3) crisis management. Professional staff focus on fitness and wellness, academic success, financial literacy, engagement, and belonging.

The Navigator Network is funded by WMU's Empowering Futures Gift. This small, qualitative study is part of the overall Empowering Futures evaluation. The Empowering Futures evaluation team designed the study to gain insights about experiences and perspectives of students who have engaged with the Navigator Network's services.

## Methods

In March 2026, we emailed 400 students randomly selected from 854 students who interacted with the Navigator Network at least twice during the 2025-26 academic year. The email invited students to participate in a 5-question semi-structured interview regarding their experience with the Navigator Network and offered them \$15 in Dining Dollars as compensation. Thirteen of 400 (3%) of the students contacted accepted the invitation and completed interviews, which lasted 3-14 minutes, averaging 7.5 minutes. Student employees from Student Affairs and the Evaluation Lab conducted and analyzed the interviews.

## Limitations

We do not recommend making broad conclusions about the Navigator Network based on the findings in this report. The findings solely represent the experiences of 13 students based on the five navigators who supported them.

When defining the population from which to draw our sample, we excluded students who interacted with navigators only once or not at all, assuming that they were unlikely to have sufficient experience to provide informed perspectives. Selection effects may also have influenced participation. Students with particularly strong experiences—positive or negative—may have been more inclined to respond to an interview invitation than those with less impactful experiences. Similarly, students who chose to engage with navigators multiple times may have been more

likely to have had neutral or positive prior experiences than students who did not reengage.

Although we cannot generalize based on the 13 interviews, they do provide valuable insights into students' experiences, perceptions, and perceived impacts associated with their interactions with specific navigators.

The remainder of this includes summaries of each interview and six overall takeaways.

## **Interview-by-Interview Summaries**

The interview summaries focus on the description of the interviewees' experiences with the Navigator Network. The summaries also describe the socioemotional support and culturally relevant or culturally responsive elements of the navigators' work. The interviewees' names are replaced with pseudonyms

### **Russell**

Freshman, Haworth College of Business

Russell described the Navigator Network as easy to access and especially valuable as a source of personal connection. As an international student, they emphasized how meaningful it was to have a navigator who checked in often, felt like a friend, and made the campus feel less isolating. Russell met with Maddy Mularski, a Fitness and Wellness navigator, Michelle Brown, a case management navigator, and Tim Smolenski, a Multicultural Affairs for Students (MAS) navigator. Russell reported that the navigators offered grief support, motivation, confidence, and persistence during a personally difficult period.

### **Serena**

Junior, College of Aviation, transfer student

Serena mainly used the Navigator Network for help to resolve an account hold and financial aid confusion immediately before classes began. What stood out most for Serena was the navigator's quick responses, clarity, and ability to reduce panic during a stressful moment. Serena worked with Nesha Nesbitt, a Student Success navigator, and described that they came away feeling reassured that WMU had people and systems in place to help students. Serena suggested more text, email, or virtual communication options instead of relying so much on phone calls.

## **Michelle**

Senior, College of Education and Human Development

Michelle spoke very positively about navigators as highly personal, student-specific mentors rather than generic staff members. They highlighted how Jordan "JoJo" Johnson (MAS) and Tim Smolenski (MAS) supported both career development and event planning, while also making Michelle feel genuinely seen and cared for. Michelle suggested culturally responsive mentoring, describing the importance of guidance from a Black professional who understands their lived experience. The navigators helped Michelle feel like an individual, not just another student. They suggested that the navigators have greater visibility around campus, so more students can put faces to their names.

## **Lauren**

Junior, College of Aviation

Lauren described their experience with the Navigator Network as easy to use, efficient, and clearly tailored to their own goals. Lauren appreciated that the meetings with Maddy Mularski (Fitness and Wellness) were interactive, practical, and did not waste time. Lauren requested more clarity up front about which services or sessions were available for free.

## **Ashley**

Senior, College of Education and Human Development

Ashley had limited direct exposure to the broader Navigator Network but spoke very positively about Tim Smolenski (MAS). Ashley described Tim's upbeat attitude, approachability, and the sense of inclusion he created through both casual interactions and his role with an RSO. For Ashley, the navigator experience strengthened their sense of community and belonging. Ashley recommended better marketing of events and opportunities.

## **Tatiana**

Freshman, Merze Tate College

Tatiana connected their positive experience largely to Jordan Johnson's (MAS) first-year experience class and to a later one-on-one conversation. Tatiana described Jordan as someone who made college feel less intimidating, created a fun and welcoming environment, and helped Tatiana feel they had someone on campus they could rely on. Tatiana described acquiring life skills, reducing their sense of isolation, and feeling a deeper connection because Jordan was relatable in race, background, language, and style. Tatiana

reported that text communication was easier to respond to than email or phone calls.

## **Charles**

Junior, College of Health and Human Services

Charles described a short but positive experience of a fitness assessment with Maddy Mularski (Fitness and Wellness). What mattered most to Charles was that the fitness assessment process was straightforward, professional, friendly, and delivered what it promised.

## **Hannah**

Sophomore, College of Education and Human Development

Hannah viewed the Navigator Network as one of the most helpful campus resources for adjusting to college life. Maddy Mularski (Fitness and Wellness) stood out for her high inclusivity and responsiveness to a disability-related safety concern. Maddy thoughtfully adapted exercises to ensure safety for Hannah's chronic medical condition. Hannah reported feeling welcomed and supported rather than left to figure things out alone. Hannah asked for more navigator check-ins, as the Navigator Network only followed up once.

## **Chloe**

Junior, College of Education and Human Development

Chloe described the Navigator Network as helpful, largely because of the support coming to them rather than having to seek it out first. Chloe especially valued check-ins about grades and having someone quietly monitor their progress and look out for them. Chloe met with Tim Smolenski (MAS) and stated that they did not need intensive support, but still found the relationship meaningful as a source of connection and reassurance. Chloe recommended making meeting links and contact pathways more immediate and visible.

## **Melanie**

Senior, College of Health and Human Services, transfer student

Melanie gave a strong endorsement of the Navigator Network, describing Tim Smolenski (MAS) as exceptionally resourceful, proactive, and generous. Melanie emphasized tangible support from the navigator, particularly with resources and referrals to locate rides to campus and scholarships. Tim also provided encouragement around personal projects and parenting responsibilities. Melanie linked the relationship with the navigator to feeling

grounded, motivated, and persistent even when school and parenting felt overwhelming. Melanie requested better meeting reminders.

## **Leslie**

Senior, College of Health and Human Services, transfer student

Leslie reported that Noemi Mendez (MAS) created a safe, genuine, and culturally affirming space, which Leslie said, as a first-generation college student, was especially appreciated. Leslie explicitly tied a sense of comfort and confidence to meeting a navigator who looked like them and made asking questions feel safe. Leslie also described how quickly one conversation opened the door to many more resources, people, and events, ultimately helping Leslie build social confidence and feel a part of a campus community.

## **Alisson**

Junior, Haworth College of Business, transfer student

Alisson described the experience with Maddy Mularski (Fitness and Wellness) as easy, caring, and affirming. Alisson especially appreciated the quantity of attention Maddy provided and that Maddy was genuinely interested in their success and didn't give a generic response. The interaction increased Alisson's trust in WMU navigators, and it reinforced that transferring to WMU was the right decision.

## **Anna**

Senior, College of Health and Human Services, transfer student

Anna met with Noemi Mendez (MAS) for resume help and described the interaction as student-centered, thorough, and encouraging. Anna reported that the navigator continued beyond answering the immediate question to connect the student to additional opportunities, such as a hiring event. Noemi made Anna feel that future support was available and attainable. Anna described Noemi as a particularly meaningful resource because of their shared connection to the Latino community and experience. Anna suggested making the Navigator Network's offerings more visible and easier for students to understand.

## **Six Takeaways**

Across the 13 interviews, we identified six key takeaways about students' experiences with the Navigator Network. In the following discussion, we feature a verbatim quote from the interviews that exemplifies the takeaway in the students' own words.

## **1. The navigators provide socio-emotional support, not just a service.**

Across the 13 interviews, students repeatedly described the navigators as people who listened to them, reassured them, encouraged them, and helped them feel less isolated. In several cases, this support extended beyond academics into helping them with grief, stress, motivation, self-confidence, and persistence. These interviewees did not experience the Navigator Network as solely a referral mechanism; rather, they report experiencing the Navigator Network as a human relationship with a navigator that helped stabilize them emotionally.

*I lost my father last year and it was difficult for me like to talk about that to people, and my navigator really helped me with that, and it's become just more easier [sic] for me.*

## **2. Navigators help students make sense of the university in practical, actionable ways.**

Interviewees valued navigators for helping them understand what to do next, where to go, and which resources to use. That included financial aid, account holds, scholarship opportunities, job preparation, student organizations, academic check-ins, fitness planning, and general campus navigation. The strength of the Navigator Network for these interviewees is that it turns a large and confusing institution into something more manageable and actionable.

*I was just expecting to get answers, but she was like, "You know what, let me write these down or let me send you these emails."*

## **3. Navigators provide culturally responsive and identity-affirming support.**

Several interviewees described feeling more comfortable, more understood, and more willing to engage when the navigator shared and understood aspects of their identity, background, or lived experience. For Tatiana, this was the result of culturally responsive teaching by the navigator during the first-year experience course. For Michelle, Leslie, and Anna, the navigators served as culturally affirming mentors or advisors.

*I really felt like he [Jordan from MAS] was talking to me ... I know he touched the Black kids in my class ... He's also from where I'm from.*

#### **4. The Navigator Network helps students move from isolation toward belonging.**

Many students reported that the navigators they worked with helped them feel welcome at WMU, more connected to peers, or more willing to participate in campus life. For some, the relationship became a catalyst into a larger network of events, organizations, friendships, and confidence helping them build a social and emotional foothold at the university.

*You connect with one person, but then so many doors open.*

#### **5. Proactive outreach matters; many students need support before they know how to ask for it.**

Students often appreciated that the navigators initiated contact, remembered them, checked their grades, sent them information, and followed up. Several interviewees suggested that this kind of proactive contact reduced anxiety and made them feel wanted, noticed, and worth supporting. Rather than waiting for students to self-advocate, the Navigator Network seems most effective for these interviewees when the navigators initiate the communication.

*I never had to reach out. Someone always reached out to me.*

#### **6. The areas for improvement include enhanced visibility, reminders, and digital access.**

The 13 interviewees were overwhelmingly positive. They consistently requested that the Navigator Network become easier to see and easier to use. They asked for clearer information about what navigators can help with, more text or email contact, easier meeting links, stronger or more reminders, and a more visible campus presence.

*Making it [Navigator Network] more known. Who specifically for what, and where they can go to in regard to the Navigator Network.*

### **Summary**

These 13 interviewees suggested that the Navigator Network was most effective for students when practical guidance, socioemotional support, and culturally responsive relationship-building operated together. The story is that navigators help students solve problems and feel known, capable, and more connected to WMU.

## Appendix: Interview Protocol

Welcome! Thanks for meeting with me today.

How's your day going so far?

I'm [name, role]. And I'm conducting interviews for the Navigator Network.

The Navigator Network is a team of professionals and students who connect with students to help them throughout their time at WMU. The Navigator Network is focused on making it easier for you to access student support services, meet your needs, and ask questions.

We are conducting these interviews to find out how the Navigator Network is working, and your feedback will be used to help understand and improve the Navigator Network.

There are no right or wrong answers, and you are free to skip questions, take breaks, or end the interview at any time. We want you to feel comfortable saying both good and bad things about the navigator and your experience.

We won't ask you about the specifics of your Navigator Network meetings, so you do not need to disclose specific details about the topics you discussed with the person from the Navigator Network. Our interest is in what you experienced with the navigator and what the Navigator Network can do better.

Also, we are recording these interviews, so I can accurately get what you say and so I don't have to frantically take notes. We will compare your responses to those of others who interact with the navigators. We will remove your name and the names of others you mention, and we'll delete this recording once we transcribe your interview. Your participation in this interview is confidential and your responses will not be shared with any identifying information. Are you alright with all of that?

Lastly, to thank you for participating and to reimburse you for your time, a few days following this interview, we'll add \$15 in Dining Dollars to your account.

Do you have any questions for me so far?

So, to start... It looks like you've met with [navigator name] in [month/semester] – we're hoping you can tell us about your experiences with them.

1. Overall, how would you describe your experience with the Navigator Network?
  - a. [Prompt] Sounds like it was positive, negative, in between, etc.
2. What stands out for you about the experience?

3. How helpful, if at all, was that interaction for you?
  - a. What made it helpful or not helpful?
  - b. Is there anything that would have made it [even] more helpful? [Include "even" in the question if they said it was helpful; omit if not]
4. How did your interaction with {Navigators(s)} affect your experience as a WMU student, if at all?
  - a. If needed – consider any impacts on your decisions, feelings, understanding of resources, or anything else that seems relevant to you.
5. Is there anything else you'd like to share that would help the Navigator Network improve its interactions with students?

That was my last question.

Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences with me and the Navigator Network.

You'll receive \$15 Dining Dollars in your dining account within the next few business days. You won't get an email, but you can look up your Dining Dollar balance in the online portal. I will share a link in the chat. (<https://www.sais.wmich.edu/BuyDining/>).

Do you have any questions for me?

Do you have any suggestions for me as I conduct further interviews?