

Santa Ana College Student Focus Groups: Brief Overview and Introduction

The focus groups conducted for the current analyses were done during the tail end of the Spring 2015 semester in collaboration with professor and program leaders on campus. Approximately 85 students provided consent and participated in the sessions, providing roughly 8 hours of data. The transcriptions of the focus groups were coded by tabulating the frequency of certain discernible topics/ideas being expressed, highlighting themes/trends using the RP Group framework of Student Support (Re)Defined. The results per domain are described below, followed by additional related domains, conclusions drawn, limitations of the current work, and opportunities for future research.

Directed

The most prominent *Directed* theme that emerged from the focus group coding analyses is that students typically do not have a specific goal in mind upon starting their academic career, but those who receive appropriate guidance early on soon create at least a general plan and direction. The concern noted, though, is that there are often challenges in gaining access to such guidance.

Notable Quotes:

“For me, as well, my goals have changed. When I came in here I was—my goal was to major in Psychology with a minor in Criminal Justice. But with all the clubs I’ve been involved in and everything, I realized that my thing is, like, helping out. So I’ve switched my major to Human Services. So I think the school has had an impact on what major I want to pursue now. I mean, I still want to do Psychology and Criminal Justice, but I change to that, like after, like, I graduate and maybe come back later on in the future.”

“But, um, well my parents never graduated high school, so I never had, like, that guidance. I don’t know. But now my goal is to transfer out...[I came to that decision] by talking to a counselor.”

Engaged

The *Engagement* themes that emerged indicate that the majority of students are not actively engaged in campus activities. Students argue that they have other competing priorities that restrict their availability, yet, there was a consistent theme of concerns expressed by students saying they did not know of any opportunities to engage in regardless. Those who were actively engaged, shared attitudes or sentiments that indicate that they were experiencing higher rates of being *Nurtured*, *Directed*, and maintaining *Focus* than those not actively engaged.

Notable Quotes:

“And it, that program really helps the students who do choose to be part of it. You have the community college sense, and more hence the word, community. Because you’re more involved with the people here at Santa Ana College. And what happens when you’re not in class. I mean, I think that if you’re just a, just a student here, you’re not really getting the full experience of what this campus offers. So getting involved and stuff like the Student Ambassador Program really helps give you a more positive outlook towards your time here. And it certainly did for me.”

“Yes...I think a lot of professors are pretty encouraging about that. Like, keeping, like, oh, it’s like, you guys can talk amongst each other, you know. Ask—ask, um, ask your friend for help, ask your partner for help. And, um, I feel that it’s something that we can utilize, you know. It’s not necessarily—or you’ve—you’re—like this group—you guys go over here. You guys over there and, you know, like telling each person, individually, where to go. But the people do it themselves.”

“Well, it’s just that I’m here to study. Yeah, I think that [it would help me be more involved], the problem is I don’t have time. I work, uh, 40 hours a week. So there’s no time to do it.”

Focused

The *Focused* domain results of the current focus groups are mixed, with roughly half of those who participated in the conversation exhibiting some degree of focus according to their testimonies. Those who seem to exhibit *Focus* are thoughtful regarding their priorities and plan accordingly, while

those who are not yet *focused* may feel distracted by other competing priorities as seen in *Engagement*. The results are limited at this point, due to inadequate questioning pertaining to focus. Moving forward, more intentional questioning will be integrated into the interviews to explore this theme.

Notable Quotes:

“Like some [students] would tell me like, they wouldn't be able to get classes over there 'cause there's so many people going to that type of school and it's just like some people, they're all friends so that they didn't really focus on their classes. They just, uh, focused on more like, um, having fun and whatnot when they were around there 'cause it has -- 'cause it's real close to the beach and this -- and this is -- I -- I feel like OC, personally, it pops in my head, like when I came back here -- came back -- got home from the military, it was just like always a party type of community college school, whatever it was.”

“So my first semester I really didn't [have a goal], I had the chance to go into freshman experience, and sort of have guidance as to what I should take for my career. But I decided against it. And took classes that I thought I wanted to take. But it really didn't work out for me...”

“I've heard friends that they've never seen a counselor in, like, a whole year because of the fact that they can't even get a hold of one, but they're in no programs. Maybe that's why, too. They need to join something.”

“I actually, when I came out of the military, I -- when I was in it, I actually had a goal. I wanted to finish my two years here and then transfer out and get my bachelor's. But, um, so then when I actually came here, actually finished my goal here. Like, I actually finished my two years here and I'm -- now, I'm transferring out so my goal was actually to actually transfer out and try to go to a Cal State or a UC...”

Nurtured

The *Nurtured* analyses show that the majority of students are being *Nurtured* by some member of the SAC community (Staff, Professors, other students). That is to say, students have someone who is actively rooting for them, with a genuine interest in their success and well-being. While the majority argue that they have someone who offers this form of support to some degree, there was a sizeable number of students, roughly 30% of those who responded, who argued that they did not have any experience with someone caring for their outcomes.

Notable Quotes:

“..I met, like, a couple of counselors who, like, I go to see, like, I request to see them who, like, are actually, like, interested in me as a person and more into, like, me being happy and having my own goal then, like, um, telling me what to do and their opinions and stuff..”

“I would because there is a lot of help on campus. I've received so much help, it's incredible, where I felt like I've been babied the whole time here. You just have to -- you just have to really look for it.”

“Yeah, like, everybody helps you out over here. I went to Golden West at first and I didn't even know where anywhere was. No one explained to me. When I came here they told me all the programs that were here and I said I wanted to be a teacher so they enrolled me in it. They had counselors talk to me and from places I wanted to transfer to.”

“I've only had one rude encounter with one counselor and I've been here for a minute so he kind of looked -- he looked at my transcript, right? That's -- and he was basically like, I don't know why you're here. Um, you might as well have just, uh, dropped out and get a job. So, like, he was, like, the only person that was really negative. Other than that, like, I've had many professors that I would consider jerks, but they're really just hard. They're like the type of people I need. I need somebody who will always push me and it's not in a negative manner. It's more of like a constructive criticism.”

“I think the tone that [professors] set when new students come here is--I'm sure you guys, you've heard this a lot. I still get paid whether you pass or not. So that sends a, sort of, it sends a message that they're not really here to help you.”

Valued

The *Valued* results are highly aligned with the *Nurtured* results, with many of the students expressing that they are *valued*, but those who do feel *Valued* are those who feel that staff/faculty recognize their experiences and input. While the *Nurtured* frequencies suggest that someone is recognizing their experiences, one of the opportunities for improvement in this domain is that it is rare that students are offered opportunities to provide feedback to their professors and other staff. Most felt that they were not offered ample opportunity to provide feedback that would help them in their own course work, and felt that if it were offered it would be of great benefit to them. Moreover, specific examples of recent college or district wide policy changes were described as being done without the recognition or even inclusion of student voice.

Notable Quotes:

“..there was one professor that, like, I think it was one whole class period he was, like, all right come in--everyone had set times when to come in and we'd come in and he'd talk about our grade and what we're doing and that's, like, beneficial.”

“Yeah. But, like, I've had better, like, um, situations or feeling better about, like, giving feedback and, like, having that communication with professors who've just been all along the way really, like, um, active and aware and not just, like, talking to you in lectures, but actually engaging you. Like you're somewhat more equals, even though they have degrees and stuff.”

“I feel like before they make, like, a decision back to the whole safety thing, about the whole gun thing, like, before they make such a drastic decision about something being so, like, you know, we all have, like, a very good opinions about that. They should, like, inform the students about this and have well, like, have our voice be heard in such--such a field like that since it's going to affect us in one way or another whether or not--whether or not see it. And it's just, like, they told us, like, after it happened; not before. Like, we could've, like, petitioned against it, even, like, occurring, you know.”

Connected

The *Connected* findings strongly indicate that the majority of students feel a strong relationship with Santa Ana College for a number of reasons. The most common reason is that the college represents the community that they have been a part of their whole life: the city of Santa Ana. The way they perceive this community that they so strongly identify with could be seen as being *Connected* through or as a result of their engagement in various academic and co-curricular activities on campus.

Notable Quotes:

“And it, that program really helps the students who do choose to be part of it. You have the community college sense, and more hence the word, community. Because you're more involved with the people here at Santa Ana College. And what happens when you're not in class. I mean, I think that if you're just a, just a student here, you're not really getting the full experience of what this campus offers. So getting involved and stuff like the Student Ambassador Program really helps give you a more positive outlook towards your time here. And it certainly did for me.”

“I'm really connected with [Outreach], they really sort of gotten me really enthusiastic about actually being involved, you know, in Santa Ana College. And obviously I said before that me being involved here makes me more successful.”

“It's just basically one word, like conformity. Like, you feel comfortable here because, like you said, I'm from Santa Ana High School, Santa Ana District. Like, my entire life, I've lived in Santa Ana my entire 20 years of existence. So I practically knew half of my school that was coming here so it's like I won't feel left out. And then, the fact that I'm Hispanic and there's not -- the diversity here is very minimal. There's a lot of Hispanic people here so I don't feel out of place as well, you know. So like compared to like -- I've been to IVC and I feel in a corner, you know. I -- I feel uncomfortable so that's one of the facts why I chose Santa Ana College, too, because I knew a lot of people who were coming here and I -- it's, like, two blocks away from my house.”

“I mean, once again, like, being in--in a sport I feel like you're automatically part of the community at Santa Ana.”

Services

Students were asked which services they used most frequently, and also the quality of their experiences using them. For the purposes of the current report, only those services that were mentioned most frequently will be discussed at length.

Counseling: Counseling received a high degree of praise, and credit for students' triumphs. Numerous students recanted how an interaction with a counselor helped them maintain focus, directed them to the appropriate path to their goals, and encouraged them through their nurturing nature. While these results prove very promising, several concerns were expressed that present opportunities for improvement. Some of those concerns included length of time to see a counselor, counselors sometimes offering conflicting or contradictory information, and/or discouraging the students from pursuing certain pathways because of perceived inadequacies.

Library: The library was the service that the vast majority of students identified as being the service they use most frequently and are dependent upon. They view it as a place where they can successfully study between classes, utilize computers, print documents, and/or work in study groups. The few concerns expressed were in regards to the rare occasions where there is a high amount of usage of the printers and computers. Also, some were concerned that there are those who use the library and are not mindful or respectful of others therein, speaking loudly and using the space to socialize rather than study.

Financial Aid: The Financial Aid office received various degrees of praise and concern, and in its totality offers the most opportunity for improvement. While several students expressed their appreciation for the services made available to them via the office, there were concerns regarding the staff and information available.

Learning & Math Centers: Both centers were highly regarded, with many students identifying them as their most essential resource on campus. When students were asked if they could only use one service, the most frequent responses were either the math or learning centers. The only suggestion that students could offer was the hiring/assigning of more tutors for particular courses.

Conclusions/Limitations/Next Steps

The current research results suggest that Santa Ana College is successfully fostering or cultivating the majority of the support factors for students. The most consistent and overarching theme is that SAC students feel a strong connection to the campus, with high levels of direction provided, and constant nurturing from caring professionals. The factors that require further exploration in devising an appropriate course of action include how to foster further student engagement, maintaining a higher degree of focus, and finally assuring them that their voice is not only recognized but valued.

The current focus groups were limited in that there were flaws in the script of questions used in the focus groups. Some of the domains were not explored adequately and in turn yielded only a scant number of codes. Our next steps are summarized below.

Opportunities for future research that SAC Research Department intends to pursue include the continuation and refinement of student focus groups, the selective integration of pertinent questions in the Student Satisfaction Survey, as well as focus groups including SAC professors/classified. The triangulation of these disparate sources will allow for the validation of findings to inform critical related action at the college.