

Opportunities for developing a sense of community in the Student Services Center

A summary of the “stack ranked” priorities developed by the Guided Pathways Workgroup on Student Services Center

Background: the new Student Services Center (SSC) provides a rich opportunity for the college to welcome students, convey the message that the college cares about them, and help students feel that they belong at Santa Monica College. As the college redesigns its academic programs and student services, ensuring that students feel that part of the college community will help them stay on their chosen path. Based on input from students about their needs and desires, the workgroup identified the following priority areas for building community in the Student Services Center.

Communication Plan: Students are largely unaware of the SSC’s purpose, with some referring to it as “the Darth Vader building.” Various communication methods will be used to inform students and the entire college community (external and internal) about the SSC’s services, generate excitement as various service areas move in, and provide practical information during the three move-in periods. Methods include banners on Pico (largely for the community) and facing the rest of the campus (for students/staff); digital messages (eblasts, SMC Go, digital displays in cafeteria/library/CPC, website splash page/FAQ, Canvas notifications); hardcopy pieces (postcards, bookmarks distributed through the bookstore, library and other areas), and verbal messages delivered via department meetings, faculty (delivered in class), and Associated Students meetings. Communications will also inform the college community about the SSC grand opening, slated for early Fall 2019.

Outlets in congregating areas: one of the most often cited requests from students is for outlets to recharge their electronic devices. The corridors on each floor of the center is refurbished with seating areas, and presumably plenty of outlets have been planned for students to recharge their devices as they recharge their minds and bodies or collaborate with other students, but if not, the college should consider means for students to do this.

Refreshments/Coffee Cart: Along with adequate seating, having coffee or other simple refreshments can greatly add to students’ comfort and sense of belonging. Socializing over a cup of coffee or tea is an effective way to stimulate conversation and collaboration and establish a sense of community. Beginning on the first day of the SSC’s operation, a simple, self-serve beverage cart, at least for the initial months of the Center’s opening, will enhance this feeling of community. We also feel strongly that students should be able to have food/beverages inside the building as it is part of the culture of several key student service areas and essential for establishing students’ comfort and sense of community.

Comfortable Outdoor Gathering Spaces (Courtyard/Atria): Students prefer congregating outside and need spaces where they can work and study, whether on their own or in collaboration with other students. The SSC has concrete benches planned, but as open space and budgets allow, the students would be better served with umbrella tables, like those near the fountain at the north end of the Quad. Having a table and multiple seats invites conversation and is more functional for studying, using laptops,

etc. In the future, a permanent facility consisting of a sink, concrete (washable) tables and canopy should be considered for SMC's Farmer's Market, housed on the south side of the SSC.

Student Greeters: Having peer students (e.g., President's Ambassadors) available to welcome students to the center and guide them will help students feel welcome, convey the message that SMC understands their needs, and reduce the intimidation that a first year, first generation or disproportionately impacted student might feel when walking into the SSC for the first time. This will be an ongoing expense (at least \$6000/year to provide support during the first four weeks of Fall and Spring semesters and first week of intercessions, plus additional funding if support is needed beyond that).

Digital Signage/Directories: Along with referrals gained from staff, students will gain confidence if they have access to adequate and informative way-finding in the form of directories, whether digital or static. In addition to the kiosks planned for the first floor, the digital monitor content should inform students but not overwhelm them with too much information. Displays need to be changed regularly remain relevant and fresh; Marketing/Community Relations, in coordination with the Student Services areas of the Center, should develop the content. In addition to relevant content, effective placement of the digital monitors also needs to be considered.

Orientation on the SSC Functions/Customer Service Training: The SSC is an immense, three story, ~115,000 square foot building containing a wide array of student services, some of which will be collocated for the first time. Ensuring that students are served in a way that makes them feel empowered to ask about and seek out services will require training to ensure that staff and faculty are knowledgeable about where services are located and the appropriate referrals to make. The City of Santa Monica has a Customer Service training program, but the college should consider developing a training program specific to the SSC functions and needs of students.

Curated Visual Messaging: Images of students and alumnae would provide a visual reminder of why students want to be at SMC, helping them identify as students, and thus, as members of the SMC community. Freestanding banners, like those in the 1510 Pico conference room, and large photographs used by the SMC Foundation in past fundraising campaigns would, with context, serve this function.