



August 2017

Bringing Student Voices to Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design *Findings From Student Focus Groups at Two California Community Colleges*

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the staff, faculty, and administrators who worked with us to set up the focus groups, recruit participants, and communicate findings from the focus groups to campus constituents. We are grateful to Linda Collins and Kristina Palmer of the Career Ladders Project for their input and review.

Suggested Citation: Dadgar, M., Smith-Arillaga, E., Buck, D., Sinclair, B., Fischerhall, C., & Brown, K. (2017). *Bringing Student Voices to Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design*. Oakland, CA: Career Ladders Project.



CLP

Introduction

Between March and April 2017, Career Ladders Project (CLP) staff facilitated 16 focus groups with a total of 137 students from two mid-size urban California Community Colleges. The goal was to help the two colleges integrate student voices into the inquiry and design of their guided pathways framework. The summary of findings from each college's focus groups were presented to that college's faculty, staff, and administrators to inform their guided pathways inquiry and design process. This report highlights the main themes that emerged from the focus groups to help other colleges seeking to learn from student voices as they engage in inquiry, design, and implementation of the guided pathways framework. In addition, the Appendix includes the interview protocols we used, which can assist colleges in creating their own focus groups.

Recruitment, Facilitation, and Analysis

Student recruitment was conducted differently at each campus, but at both schools, the process reflected faculty and administrators' interest in reaching a diverse cross section of students, including those who were full- and part-time; day and evening; seeking transfer, an associate degree and/or a certificate. Effort was made to include students coming directly from high school as well as those transitioning from alternative schools or adult education, bridge or on-ramp programs, as well as students participating in different learning communities. These students also varied in their choice of subject matter, from liberal arts to social sciences to career technical education (CTE).

To ensure such diverse representation, additional methods were used to recruit students for the focus groups. For example, faculty and staff reached out directly to some of the students. At one college, a campuswide invitation was emailed to all students, inviting them to sign up for one of the focus group slots. At the other college, faculty in courses with a broad representation of students (such as evening sections of Psychology 100 and Business 100) allowed class time to be used for focus group discussions.

The Department of Planning, Research, and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE) at both colleges provided us with information about most of the participating students, including their demographics, educational goals, dates of first enrollment, and credits earned.

The focus groups were run by a CLP facilitator, and no faculty, staff, or administrator was present during the conversations. Students were assured that none of their comments or quotes would be attributed to them in our report. Student focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, and the results were coded and analyzed. To help with recruitment, students at each college were told that findings from focus groups would be used to make improvements for students. In addition, to thank the students for their time, they were offered refreshments and bookstore gift cards.

Students were asked what their process had been in selecting majors and choosing courses, what resources had been helpful in navigating their college experiences, and what other related help they felt they needed. When time allowed, students were also asked if they knew of anyone who had dropped out of college and why that individual had left. For the list of focus group questions (focus group protocols), see the Appendix.

FINDINGS

In this section, we summarize the main themes from the student focus groups and, where possible, include examples and student quotes to amplify those themes. Generally, quotes we chose to highlight reflect a shared sentiment among students.

I. Many students find choosing a major to be challenging.

Many students had difficulty selecting a major upon entering community college and attributed this to factors including a lack of clarity about their career goals, an inability to identify their strengths and interests, unfamiliarity with career exploration opportunities on campus, and not knowing how different majors connect to possible careers.

Generally, we were able to arrange students' questions about selecting a major into the following categories:

- a. What are my career options? How do I get more information about those careers and about whether I'd be successful at those jobs, or enjoy them?
- b. What are the different types of jobs to which various majors would lead?
- c. Is the major I am pursuing "practical," in terms of my ability to find a job with a decent salary later on?

In an attempt to choose a major, many students said they tried out a variety of classes. While some students didn't mind this process, others felt they were "wasting time and money." Some students shared that taking different courses at the very start of college helped them know what they did not want to pursue as a major field of study. However, the majority of students said that sampling various courses was not helpful to them.

The following quotes from students reflect common themes in response to questions about selecting a major upon entering college:

"At least for me, it was a lot of not knowing where to go. Like communications. Okay, where do you go from there? Do I become a professor? Do I work in TV? What kind of jobs do people have? It sounds corny, but are they happy in those jobs?"

"I know a lot of people who have been here for five or seven years, and they switched their major so many times, and that is why they are here for so long...and I think that happens so often because there isn't really someone to sit down with them and say, 'Here, these are your strengths, these are careers that would be really good for you, and these ones aren't.' So, that's why they keep jumping around..."

"I was thinking of having actual externships instead of waiting until you're done with your course to do it, like having externships for each major to be able to see what people do."

"...there is a [web]site or two that I wish I had known [about]...it basically lists all these careers, and how much they're growing, and how much the top and bottom earners are, and what are important aspects of that job or careers in that [field]. And I think if I'd been able to look at that more, that would have been more helpful instead of waiting six years [to] do it."



In the focus groups, students listed several ways colleges could better support them in their pursuit of choosing a major and discovering how that major connects with various careers.

Students suggested the following resources to help them choose a major:

- a. College events and activities that include:
 - Guest speakers
 - Daylong seminars, workshops, and career fairs
 - Shadowing/ internship/externship opportunities early in their programs
 - Opportunities to network with students who have similar interests
- b. A course that provides an overview of different majors and how they link with careers
- c. Opportunities for incoming students to take tests that help them clarify their career interests, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality test or the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) career assessment test

II. Choosing courses and getting into the right ones is often challenging.

We asked students how they went about deciding which courses to take each semester and what worked well or needed improvement when it came to signing up for them. A common theme was that the courses they needed were often full.

“I think also if there was a [clearer] path for people who had decided on their majors, there wouldn’t be such an overflow in classes... If there’s a clear-cut path for what classes you should be taking, then [the college will] understand the ratio of students taking classes...”

The majority of students said they had sometimes been unable to enroll in a class they needed and had to face a frustrating waitlist process that failed to prioritize students who required the course to complete their studies. Many students also shared that there were limited time slots for the classes they required or that the courses weren’t offered during the semester when they needed to take them. Sometimes class times conflicted with students’ work schedules.

“That’s what I planned, to come and get everything done in two years, and then I’ll transfer out, but it’s kind of hard because when you’re working and trying to go to school, it’s not that easy when most of the classes you have to take are during the daytime...”

Another common theme among students was selecting courses that wound up not counting toward their degrees. Most students felt they had, at times, mistakenly selected courses because of a lack of clarity about which ones counted toward their majors or which courses fulfilled multiple requirements for their majors. Many students remained unsure about the course requirements for their majors even after visiting with a counselor. Some students commented that they had to meet with several counselors to find one that knew their program well and could speak to the course requirements.

Some representative student comments included:

“... I feel like I did as well [as I could], not knowing that there was a class that would have met both requirements that I could have taken, and I just didn’t know about it.”

“I found it really hard to find classes because I’m a big fan of not wasting time. So, I was like, ‘I’m not going to take anything I don’t need to take.’ It was really hard.”

Not all students found it hard to select the courses that counted toward their program requirements. For example, students in specific CTE programs felt their requirements were clear, and said they always were able to register for the courses they needed. Students in the cosmetology program also seemed to avoid the class sequence confusion and enrollment challenges that other students faced, and they felt a sense of community because they went through the program as a cohort. They shared that, because they had a set series of required courses, it was clear to them which ones they needed to take each semester, and that they were always admitted to the classes they needed.

III. Students value support services when they can access them, but many are unaware of the wide range of supports available.

Students who were able to take advantage of campus resources and services found them helpful. Some examples of resources that students valued include: learning centers, disability resource centers, career centers, transfer centers, tutoring centers, and learning communities, as well as financial support, scholarships, free tuition, and transportation. At the same time, many students felt their schools could do a better job of referring them to and raising awareness about these services. Many of them said it had taken a long time for them to discover these supports, and others said they weren't aware of them until others in their focus group mentioned them.

"I found out about a lot of resources after the third or fourth semester, and I'm like, 'Wow. These exist. It's too late for me to join that now.'"

"And I never knew there was this special English class..., and it's a whole operation, like a small little microorganism that is operating where actual English professors are tutoring students to write papers. And it's all organized, and they have a section that's just all quiet room, lots of computers, and then they have a section where you can talk, and they're tutoring. And it's like, I had no idea these little gems were in this school. So, I think a big thing for me is every time I find some gem, it's like I never knew this was here, and so I don't know if it's because they just say the class description, but they don't really say what the environment's like or how does it work. I don't know. It's just [that] getting information, I've noticed, has been really challenging."

"People just come in and out, and of course they're not going to run into these services...because they're not looking at bulletin boards or their email, they're just trying to get in and out...."



IV. Students would prefer to see the same counselor every time and would like to see counselors who specialize in their area of interest or major.

Even though we did not explicitly ask students about their experience with counselors, students discussed the topic extensively. While many students said they found counselors to be helpful, there was quite a bit of variation in students' perceptions about the quality of support their counselors provided. Many students mentioned that their counseling appointments were too short to get the information they needed. Another common concern was that counselors have limited specialized knowledge in a specific subject area and, as a result, weren't effective in helping them with critical tasks like career exploration, choosing a major, or understanding the content of specific courses. Several students said they wished they could see the same counselor every time so that they did not have to "reinvent the wheel" when seeking advice from someone new. Others thought having counselors assigned to a specific subject area or department would be helpful.

Some students also found that when it came to getting advice about careers or specific courses in a program, information from instructional faculty complemented what they had learned from counseling faculty.

The comments below are reflective of students' thoughts and counseling experiences:

"The counseling was great, the information they gave me and all that, but the time you have to talk to them is very limited. You barely get like 10, 15 minutes...sometimes you have to wait for a week to get an appointment."

"...my first year here, I just rotated [among] so many different counselors...It was hard for me to just get one concrete thing..."

"I was thinking about the [idea of having] counselors who are almost specialized in a certain area...a counselor for the science department, a counselor for the art department, a counselor for, let's say, kinesiology. Or, it could be broader, or more general. I feel like that would be a lot more helpful,... so that they can take time to kind of see the classes in those areas, so that [counselors] can help the students better, and that way, the students can be guided toward a more specific route rather than such a broad route where they'll waste time."

"Yeah. Since I've been here, I've met three counselors. The first one's probably the one that was the most helpful. The other two knew about as much as I did about the program... They told me, 'Okay. Well, which one of these classes do you want to take?' And all [the course catalog is] showing me is the code and the class. I'm like, 'Okay. Do I close my eyes and pick one, or...?'"

V. Students yearn for a sense of community and peer connection at their colleges. They also seek culturally relevant curricula and diversity in their educational experience.

A theme repeated by many students was the importance of community at their schools, and how it contributes to their morale and sense of belonging. Conversely, other students said they felt a lack of community in their college experience and yearned for it. As with the topic of counseling, we did not ask

students in the focus groups whether they felt a strong connection to their college communities and peers, but the subject emerged nonetheless.

Students expressed not only a longing for community, but also for a connection to other students to gain support and advice, and especially to peers with similar career interests or majors. Some students were interested in peer-to-peer mentoring, saying it would be inspiring and helpful to hear stories and get support from students ahead of them in college, and to have candid conversations with them about the college experience.

Representative student comments included:

"I feel like one of the biggest things that's missing is a celebration of culture. Not just ethnic culture, but, I mean, even within each major there's a certain kind of unity. If we're able to create those kind of spaces at events rather than just [in] offices, and have that kind of network and start building them off each other, I feel like that would promote education, in general, and [having] students stay on campus..."

"But something that I would find helpful is to have a club that's dedicated to a specific major. Maybe having a sociology club or a nursing club where you can kind of come together and share ideas and share different internships that you see that would help someone else, and to kind of have a friend that's going on the same path, so you guys can kind of balance out and then help each other, be like, 'Oh, you're taking that class? How was it? Should I take that class as well?' Stuff like that."

"One thing that would help me, I think, is to set up study groups...or even [to have] a classmate that is at your level to help you along—somebody you can communicate with and deal with to try to keep you motivated."

"...when I joined student government, I felt like I was surrounded by people who had similar goals and a similar drive, especially with regards to transferring, where we wanted to transfer, and just an overall sense of motivation. And I felt like I had these people to help me to figure out how to get to where I wanted to go, which was really beneficial, but I didn't even know that we had a student government until last semester."

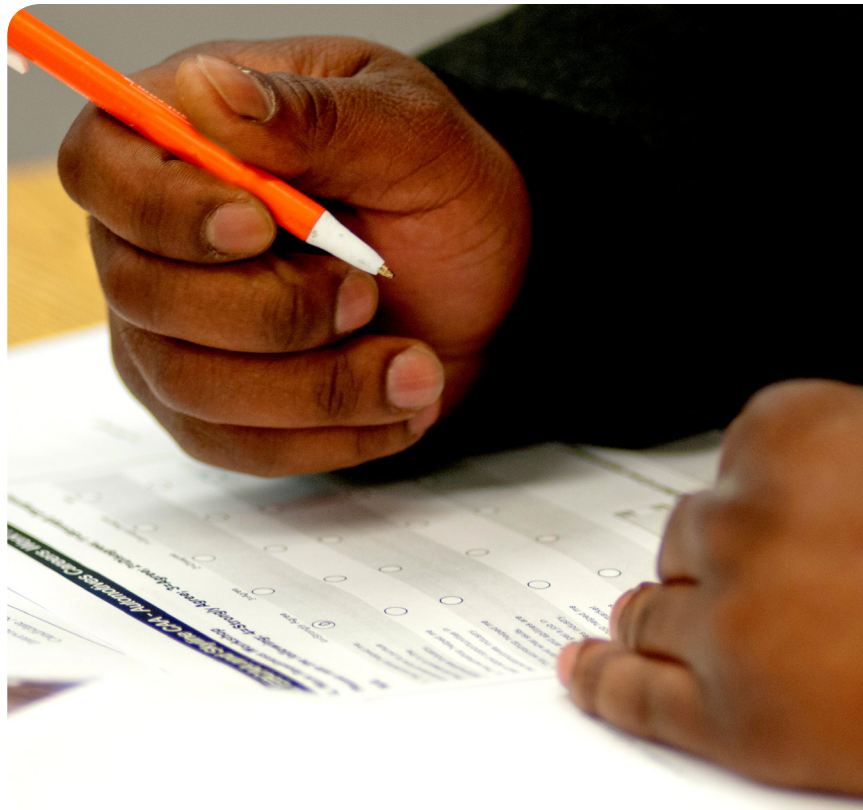
Some students talked about their appreciation for belonging to learning communities, where they found helpful resources, mentoring, and culturally relevant curricula. But several mentioned that they wished this experience with culturally relevant curricula and other resources could extend beyond their specific learning communities and be incorporated into all subject matter and their entire college experience.

"...through my learning community I got to know about so many resources here on campus..."

"I wasn't even going to go to college until [name of learning community] reached out for me. So, that's one thing. It's the reason I'm here. And then, two, when I first signed up for college, I was like, 'What am I doing? This is so not my thing.' I've never been good in academic systems and stuff. And then I came here, because you have to have a once-a-week meeting. And everyone in the club was really helpful, and that was a good support system within itself."

"I remember the first day of my first English class I was going to sign up for. The teacher asked us, 'Everyone write down on your paper like what do you want out of this class.' I remember saying, 'I want to read a book by an author of color because I never got to do that in high school,' ...and then [I] saw our books were about some white guy climbing Mount Everest ...and then I went to the bookstore, and I saw that this one other teacher was teaching about mass incarceration... I changed to take that class..., but I wish that this had happened sooner, and I wish that it happens more often."

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

To summarize, some actionable findings for colleges, from the student perspective, include the need for:

Guidance in choosing a major and understanding its connection to various careers

- Many students said they were not prepared to identify a major field of study at the beginning of college because they lacked knowledge about the careers they could attain by pursuing particular majors. Students in the focus groups recommended that the colleges provide an introductory course on career exploration that would include information on choosing a major. They also suggested that their schools invite guest speakers on the topic and provide workshops, hands-on opportunities, internships, and job fairs. Students felt these activities and resources would help provide them with a better, more tangible understanding of their career choices, the subject matter required, and the salaries they could expect in those jobs, as well as offer them opportunities to discover which careers they would find fulfilling and enjoyable.
- Students who had visited their college's career center felt they had benefited from tests like the MBTI and the SII as a first step toward clarifying their career interests. They suggested incorporating these tests into an activity or a class that all students would automatically participate in upon entering college.
- Students wished they had more information about how various majors are linked to different careers, as well as about salary ranges for different careers.

Clearer course sequencing and more course availability

- Students expressed that they are not always able to enroll in the courses they need when they need to take them, and that the wait list process is frustrating.
- Many students have taken one or more courses that ended up not counting toward their majors. They also were unaware courses could fulfill more than one requirement.
- When students were clear about course sequence, they no longer enrolled inadvertently in classes that might not be optimal for their progress toward a degree.

Better awareness of support services and counselors with academic specialties

- Existing supports, including the various resource centers, are extremely helpful to students.
- Students wished they had known earlier about available resources.
- Students wanted to keep the same counselor throughout college, and also recommended that counselors be specialists in specific programs or fields of study.

A sense of community on campus and peer-to-peer support

- Students longed for a stronger sense of community on campus.
- Students felt peer-to-peer connections, mentoring, and study groups would be inspiring, especially if organized by major or area of interest.
- Students felt they greatly benefited from being part of learning communities, especially to hear about resources and to receive mentoring and peer support.
- Students wished the diversity and culturally relevant curricula that were part of their learning communities could be found throughout their college experience.

Appendix: Focus Group Protocols

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. We have been asked to include student voices and experiences in discussions with your college's leaders and faculty about how the college can better serve students.

Would it be OK to record the conversation, so that we can capture your ideas as you present them? As we write this up, we will not be using your names. We want you to know that we think everything you have to say is important, and we are here to learn from you and your experiences here at College X.

We would like to hear from everyone, whether your experiences are similar to or different from others.

Focus group questions

Introduction

1. Let's go around, introduce yourself, and please just tell us a little bit about why you decided to go to college.

Choosing a major

2. How many of you have chosen a major already? How many of you feel you have not made a decision about your choice of major yet? (Look for a show of hands, say the number out loud for the recorder)
3. Let's begin with those of you who have decided on a major already. How did you go about making that decision?

Probes:

- How long did it take you to choose a major?
 - Have you changed your major along the way? (Look for a show of hands from people who changed their major multiple times)
 - What was helpful in exploring what your interests were?
4. For those who have not decided on a major, how do you think you will go about making the decision?

Probes:

- How much do you know about your areas of interest? What other information do you need to make a decision?
5. What do you think the college could do to help you and other students decide on a major early on?

Choosing classes

6. How do you decide which courses to take?

Probes:

- Do you know which courses you need to take next semester? If not, how will you find out?
- Where can you get the most helpful information on which courses to take every semester?
- What has been your experience in choosing courses? Can you usually register for the courses you need?
- Are you able to get the advising/counseling that you need?
- What do you think works well when it comes to choosing your courses every semester?
- What do you think could improve?

Closing

7. Do you know anyone who has had to stop or drop out before finishing their program? Why do you think that happens?
8. What kinds of things can the college do to help students overcome their biggest challenges and stay in school?

Now, we are close to the end. We have talked about a lot of things. Let's take a moment to think through what might be most important when it comes to helping more students hang in there and finish their programs of study or degrees. Let's go around and share any final thoughts you may have on this—maybe something we talked about, or something that just occurred to you.



Design: Aaron Miller | Mike Nicholls | Roy Robles

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The Career Ladders Project works with community colleges and their K12, university, community, workforce and employer partners to improve educational and career outcomes. We foster these improvements through research, policy change and strategic assistance to colleges and their partners.

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