

Factors That Affect African American Student Academic Success at FCC

A Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative research study was conducted as a result of goals identified in the Fresno City College 2014 Student Equity Plan (Goal B, C.3). Campus based research in the plan revealed an achievement gap in course completion for African Americans. A part of the strategy to close this gap included the development of deeper inquiry strategies to identify ways to support students in order to close achievement gaps. Specifically, the plan (B.1.1, C.3.2) indicated a need to conduct focus groups with African American students to gain an understanding of the experiences at Fresno City College (FCC) that affect their academic success.

To begin understanding the African American student experience at FCC and assist the campus with addressing the goals of the Student Equity Plan, three focus group sessions were conducted in spring 2015 using questions from the RP Groups *Student Support (Re)defined*. The sessions began with an overall question regarding what helped students to be successful at the college followed by questions related to the six success factors (see Appendix A for exact wording):

- **Directed** – helping students clarify their aspirations, develop an educational focus they perceive as meaningful and develop a plan that moves them from enrollment to achievement of their goal
- **Focused** – fostering students' motivation and helping them develop the skills needed to achieve their goals
- **Nurtured** – conveying a sense of caring where students' success is important and expected
- **Engaged** – actively involving students in meaningful and authentic educational experiences and activities inside and outside the classroom
- **Connected** – creating connections between students and the institution and cultivating relationships that underscore how students' involvement with the college community can contribute to their academic and personal success
- **Valued** – providing students with opportunities to contribute to and enrich the college culture and community

RESERCH QUESTION

In reflecting on the six factors of success, what supports—both inside and outside the classroom—do current African American students identify as important to their success as community college learners?

METHODOLOGY

With the assistance of the Director of Student Activities, SYMBAA counselor, and the lead faculty of African American Studies, announcements were made in classes and at club meetings of the opportunity to participate in the focus groups. A total of 28 students participated in the sessions. There were 11 males, 17 females, and the groups included all age categories, athletes, out-of-state students, students with disabilities, broad range of majors, and students

receiving and not receiving financial aid¹. In each of the three focus groups, the session started with a question about the most important factor to their success (overall), and was followed by a series of questions grouped by the six success factors (directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected, and valued). At the end of each session, they were provided with a short form that asked them to identify the three factors that are most important to their success (Appendix B).

ANALYSIS

The sessions were recorded and a contracted service was used to transcribe the recordings. The responses were first sorted by the order in which the factor questions were asked (overall, connected, directed, engaged, focused, nurtured, and valued). The participant responses often discussed multiple factors at the same time, and the responses were coded into categories using the RP Groups *Student Support (Re)defined* definitions of the factors.

In addition, open coding was used to further identify categories. In “Qualitative Research; a Guide to Design and Implementation” (Merriam, 2009, pg. 204) the author suggests that while coding, researchers should “think of yourself as having a conversation with the data – asking questions of it, making comments to it, and so on”. As the coding progressed, two additional categories emerged, supports to success and racial inequities. Supports to success was further coded with sub-categories; self, peers, family, faculty, counselors, staff, administrators, academic support, finances, special programs, clubs.

At the end of each session, participants completed a form in which they identified what they considered as the three most important factors. The ratings were compiled and a frequency analysis was used to identify the top three factors.

FINDINGS

Discussion of the findings is divided in three sections, Top Three Factors, Supports to Success, and Racial Inequities. The students had many similar positive and negative comments regarding the supports to success. Quotes were selected across sessions and from multiple students. Each quote is followed by an identification of the session, gender, and factor (i.e. “1-F-valued” indicates session one-female-factor).

THREE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS

In addition to the focus questions, at the end of each session, students were asked to select and rate the three factors they thought were most important to their success. The top choice was valued, followed by focused and engaged (Appendix C). Student’s reflections on the top three factors often describe relational experiences involving communication and how faculty, administrators, and peers contribute to the factors.

Valued

Students felt valued when recognized by faculty and administration for their academic success. Having the opportunity to assist peers was valuable. Students felt valued through learning

¹ Gender was collected with observation in the focus groups by the research team and all other demographic data were collected based on the conversations in the focus groups.

opportunities such as community service, which create experiences for students to share their knowledge in an environment outside of campus.

“... during my first semester, during our class **[faculty] told me congratulations because I had gotten the highest score... that made me feel really good.**” (1-F-valued)

“... **making the Dean’s list**, that was a big one for me.” (1-F-valued)

“... it was mandatory for us to do **community service...and it was awesome**, you know, and I got to speak to kids, and I got to help kids.”(3-M-valued)

“**In settings like this [focus group] where you can express things** like, you should do this or that, that actually how students feel valued.” (2-F-valued)

“**[faculty] wanted me to attend this special awards dinner** and he wanted me to represent Fresno City College ... **that’s being like valued.**” (1-M-valued)

“Another time that I kind of felt valued was ... **when my classmates would actually ... come to me for help on things**” (1-F-valued)

Focused

Staying focused was often attributed to the student’s individual ability. When discussing being focused, students also indicated motivation and having a goal as being important to their success.

“**My motivation is to get my doctorate degree.** That’s why I stay focused ... the teachers also interacting with me and other students. That’s why I stay focused” (1-M-focused)

“The one thing that gives me this focus is ... **transferring**” (1-F-focused)

“In order for you to stay focused and in order for you to get anywhere in life, you have to **just cut off all the other stuff** ... you have to have motivation too ... if you’re not motivated and **you come in thinking that college is like high school, you have another thing coming.**”(2-F-focused)

Nurtured

Students shared the importance of nurturing and its impact for students that have lost a parent. The need for mentorship was also expressed when students discussed nurturing.

“... people who don’t have that motherly figure, like me, my mom passed away when I was ten, so even if you don’t have that motherly figure, she kind of fills that void, like she tries to – **she treats all of her students like they’re her own children** ...” (3-F-nurtured)

“**They need to have a mentor program** ... where the students can find a good mentor that can help them ... some of these students here are like, I can’t do this and I can’t do that ... they look at their fellow students and peers to help them

through it ... you got all these teachers on campus ... why can't they be our mentors ... they need to have a leadership program or a mentorship program to where one of the teachers could mentor students" (2-F-nurtured)

SUPPORTS TO SUCCESS

Self

When asked about what contributed to their overall success (what helped them to be successful) students often talked about their personal responsibility. Students reflected that in order to be successful, they must stay focused, take their courses work seriously, attend class, complete homework, and navigate the numerous distractions that can interfere with their success.

"You have to want it for yourself. And you're expected to **be there on time**, you're expected to **do your homework**, you're expected all these things." (3-M-focused)

"I think for me it was being asked to take a semester off because **my grades weren't up to par**. So it was kind of like a reality check as far as my effort or the lack thereof up until that point ... I didn't know what I wanted to do, where I wanted to major in. So I was going from major to major and I feel like that lack of direction affected me in the classroom. Because nothing felt really important; it just felt like something I had to do. So when **I had to sit out the semester** and kind of **collect my thoughts**, and when I came back I felt like things were clearer, in a sense. But also got the realization that **this could be taken away if you don't take it seriously enough**." (3-M-directed)

Faculty

Faculty were discussed repeatedly as a positive and negative influence through course content, one-on-one conversations, and recognizing students abilities and contributions.

"[faculty] and [faculty], they have been very good encouragers to me ... when I hand in my papers, **she will write notes** on there, she will say **'your voice is strong'** and she said **'people listen to you'**. She says **'believe in it and trust in it'**." (2-F-nurtured)

"... [faculty] was able to **relate everything that we were talking about to today** ... he took the time to figure out okay, cool, we're talking about something that happened hundreds of thousands of years ago, but I can relate it to today." (3-M-engaged)

"... sometimes **I'm afraid to go and ask for help**. Because you **feel like they [faculty] are going to talk down to you**." (1-F-nurtured)

"I think it is good for you to talk to your teachers, but like for **my math teacher I can't go to his office because he doesn't have one**. So **I can't go during his office hours because he didn't have it** and just like talk to him how if I have a problem or anything. So it's kinda difficult like especially now if I have any problems with assignments." (1-M-nurtured)

“You walk in, they read the PowerPoint, and you go. And that’s it. And then **students don’t come to class because they’re like: it’s a PowerPoint, it’s on Blackboard, I can just look at it.**” (3-F-engaged)

Counselors

While reflecting on being directed the students mentioned how counselors contribute to their ability to move from enrollment to achievement of their goals.

“she was actually a very good counselor ... **I wanted to plan out the rest of my semesters**, before I got into the nursing program. **She was actually very helpful to help me with that.**” (2-F-directed)

“I have a transfer counselor who I feel like **we sit and have conversations**, like **she really believes in what I want to do** ... like it’s a possibility.” (3-M-directed)

“I’m not saying all counselors are bad, but there are a couple that will tell you ... **to take some classes that you do not need to take.**”(2-F-directed)

Finances

Finances were a concern, especially for students that do not receive financial aid. The students discussed the relationship between financial concerns and the ability to stay focused.

“I don’t get financial aid, either ... my first semester here, I wasn’t serious about school ... **when I messed up, I realized I can’t do it again because I have to pay for college and that kind of made me just focus back on school.**” (3-F-focused)

“I feel like **there should be courses on like money management**, like your first year here ... People don’t have good time management skills when they come to college ... it’s just tremendously hard when you have all these distractions, you know, people coming in and out of your life, relationships, maybe there’s somebody sick in your family, or maybe you’re sick, or you’re dealing with something, or you have a special condition that you’re not too sure about.” (3-M-focused)

Academic Support (Tutorial/PASS)

Student expressed an appreciation of academic support using the Tutorial Center and Pass Program. These programs assist students with staying focused and feeling nurtured.

“What’s helpful for me on this campus is **the supportive centers**. Because I’m terrible when it comes to homework, tests. I’m terrible at it. So I go there and **they’ll break it down to where I understand it** ...” (2-M-focused)

“I feel valued in the **Pass Program** ... **everybody there is willing to help you**, ... not just because it seems like it’s their job to, but because they actually want to ... a lot more people should know about it because you can work on your

homework and actually get help, one-on-one time, and there's like snacks and stuff... it helps you become more engaged for sure.” (3-M-nurtured)

Special Programs

Students expressed the importance of special programs and the impact on their progress and achievement.

“...when I became disabled, I was at home trying to throw a pity party, feeling sorry for myself. But once I started coming to Fresno City College and **the programs that they offered for the disabled** ... that encouraged me more and helped me to put one foot in front of the other. **It gave me strength and encouragement.**” (2-F-directed)

“**Teachers in Idile actually have one on one time.** So that way if you do have questions... you can ask them. So maybe if teachers ... **have more of a one on one time with students** ... that would benefit students more as well.” (1-F-nurtured)

Student Clubs

Students mentioned the importance of clubs in each session. The comments were often related to feeling connected. Club activities provide opportunities for peers to engage in meaningful discussions outside of class and build a sense of community.

“Maybe have **more club rush like activities**” (1-F-connected)

“**I like the club** because it's not just an all-black club. **It's multicultural.**” (2-M-connected)

“So, **getting involved with the club was monumental in my opinion.** Like honestly, if I wasn't involved with the club, I don't know where I would be on the campus. But getting involved in that club helped me out a lot, just with knowing the resources that we have, just with knowing some of the people ... I met so many people through the club, that I felt like **that's our family unit now.**” (3-M-connected)

RACIAL INEQUITIES

To assist in explaining the racial inequities voiced by the students Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a framework for reflection and analysis. In *Critical Race Perspectives on Theory in Student Affairs*, Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton (2007) provide a theoretical framework which may be used to “illuminate racial inequities and hierarchies and to transform colleges and universities”.

CURRICULUM

CRT discusses racial inequities and hierarchies in the classroom through the use of curriculum that “focuses exclusively on White, western viewpoints that render students of color invisible in

what is learned and discusses in class". One students voiced this when discussing an experience in a class.

"Much of the history that I was learning, I felt that I couldn't connect with because I had an issue with what was actually being said. And **to be the one African kid in the class of all Europeans**, and then you start talking about issues that have happened in this country, you're the only person that they can go to. So now **I have to speak for the entire race, which makes me not want to say anything at all.**" (3-M-engaged)

Another student voiced what CRT recognizes as "professors 'own' the curriculum in their classrooms and design it according to their own ontological and epistemological assumptions, which may work against students of color."

"... it's just that we have to understand **if we're coming from different neighborhoods** and different walks of like, then **there might be a different teaching method that would work for us** and not work for other people." (3-M-connected)

MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

What CRT explains as "racial micro-aggressions or subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" was expressed by several students. One student described an incident that lead her to contact the Dean regarding treatment she experienced by a faculty.

"**I know they [faculty] have some kind of racism** in them and **I felt it**. Because **I grew up with it**. So **you know the ones** that, you know, that has **that animosity towards you** ... I had to go to the dean on one of my teachers. I had to go see the dean because she was really rude." (2-F-connected)

HIRING INEQUITIES

Students voiced what CRT recognizes in hiring inequities as "the greatest political power for the most part continues to reside in academic affairs, where fewer women and people of color are found."

"We're just saying that **in our circumstances, every day we see Europeans**. That's just **something that we're conscious of**. People who are European wouldn't be conscious of that because it's just regular people to them; **they just see people who look like them and they're fine**. "(3-M-engaged)

"I wish this school would **hire more African American teachers**. Because **we're outnumbered**." (2-F-connected)

"... honestly, **if we wanted to change** how we connect and feel for the college and if these are the things we want to make sure that happen, **we have to have teachers that look more like we do and understand as we do**... We've been talking about people who look like us, people tend to think that excludes them and then they're not part of the conversation. That's not it at all. We're just saying that **we have a different experience than a lot of people**. So it's just

easier for us to relate to people who are going through the same thing, possibly, to help us out. But we're not saying we don't like another group; we're not saying that people can't offer us anything." (3-M-connected)

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

It is particularly important to use a CRT framework because it "moves beyond an individualistic focus, is respectful of the socio-political realities of marginalized groups, and does not reinforce the power structures in society." An institutional culture that emphasizes this framework will increase our sensitivity to the realities African American students' experience.

"We don't come from the neighborhoods that they [faculty] come from ... **when something like Baltimore happens, we actually feel that. That's part of what we are in our being.** So how could I not be thinking about this during a physics test? Unfortunately, **it was business as usual for everyone else.** So, where that affected the whole community of people, we're walking in the classroom with this on our shoulders. I might not necessarily be thinking about my homework or something like that. But **if we had teachers who cared about those kinds of things, then they could keep us focused** ... hey, this was terrible; we can talk about this. And also, let's make sure you're doing good with your homework." (3-M-connected)

"Because **it's the words that come out of your mouth is what is damaging.** Not your color. It's the words that are coming out your mouth. And they just – **that's what they need to understand, is how to speak to somebody.**" (2-F-connected)

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the six factors of success, African American students identified 'valued', 'focused', and 'nurtured' as most important to their success at FCC. The factors identified by African American students as important to their academic success can be used to inform decisions when determining planning not only for the Student Equity Plan, but also for other institutional plans. Using this qualitative data with other institutional data (Institutional Effectiveness Index, Equity data, CSSEE, etc.) will strengthen our ability to provide evidence to guide decisions. What other questions should we be asking our students? What questions should we be asking of ourselves?

As FCC continues to grapple with the inequities experienced by African American students and other disproportionately impacted groups as identified by campus based research, it is important to reflect on our strengths so we can prioritize and scale up activities that qualitative and quantitative data support. It is recommended to use this report to engage student support stakeholders such as faculty, counselors, student services professionals, administrators, staff and students in conversations about these findings. It is important to reflect and begin dialogue on how to foster a conducive learning environment that promotes students' academic success.

REFERENCE

Patton, L. D, McEwen, M., Rendon, L, & Howard-Hamilton, M. (2007). "Critical Race Perspectives on Theory in Student Affairs" San Francisco: Responding to the Realities of Race on Campus. New Directions for Student Services Vol. 120

Merriam, S. B. (2009). Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Appendix A

STUDENT EQUITY FOCUS GROUP AGENDA

1. Introductions
2. Purpose
3. Protocol
4. Conduct Question & Answers
5. Rap-up



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STUDENTSUPPORT (RE)DEFINED

Focus Group Questions

Success Factor	Question(s)
OVERALL	1. What is the most important thing that has happened to you at the college that has helped you be successful as a student? Why was this
CONNECTED	2. Our research suggests that students who feel connected to their college are more likely to be successful. Still, some students don't feel connected to their college. <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Why do you think that is the case? Why do some students not feel connected to the college?b. What can a Fresno City College do to make students feel connected?c. Tell me about a time when you felt strongly connected to the college.

Success Factor	Question(s)
DIRECTED	<p>3. Our research suggests that students who have a clear educational goal are more directed and more likely to be successful? Do you have a goal for your education?</p> <p><u>If response is yes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What is your goal? When did you decide on this goal? b. Who or what helped you develop the goal? <p><u>If response is no:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. What do you think you need to develop a goal?
ENGAGED	<p>4. Our research suggests that students are more likely to be successful if they are actively engaged in college inside and/or outside of class and feel they are really learning something. Still, some students don't feel engaged in this way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Why do you think that is the case? Why do some students not feel engaged, not feel they are learning something? b. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel engaged? c. Tell me about a time when you felt strongly engaged during your time at this college. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. What was going on at the time? What were you doing? Who were you with? What was that person doing?
FOCUSED	<p>5. Our research suggests that students who stay focused on their goal are more likely to be successful. What has the college done or could it do to help you stay focused so you can achieve your educational goal?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What helps or has helped you stay focused?
NURTURED	<p>6. Our research suggests that students are more likely to be successful if they feel nurtured – that somebody wants them to succeed and helps them do so.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel that somebody wants them to succeed and helps them do so? b. Tell me about a time when you felt somebody really cared about your success or helped you be successful.
VALUED	<p>7. Our research suggests that students are more likely to be successful when they feel valued and that they are contributing something to the college community, for example by being in a club, serving as a tutor or mentor, providing community service, participating or leading in student government or clubs, or playing sports. Still, some students don't feel valued in this way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Why do you think that is the case? Why do some students not feel valued? b. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel valued? c. Tell me about a time when you felt valued at this college, or if you don't feel valued what might make you feel this way.
RATING SHEET	<p>8. At this time, we have one final question for you. Of the six factors that we have found help increase student success, which ones are most important to you? Think through each factor and find the three that you think are most important to YOUR own success. Once you have decided on your top three, give the one that is most important to you a "1" – second most important a "2, and third most important a "3." Then write in the space at the bottom of the page a few sentences to explain why you chose the factor you rated number one to be the most important for you.</p> <p>Thank you all so much for your participation and help with our research.</p>

Appendix B



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WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOUR SUCCESS AS A STUDENT?

Here are six different ways you may feel as a college student – or wish you felt as a college student. We would like to know how important you think they are to your success as a student.

Please think about each one and then do the following:

1. Pick the three that you think are most important to your success.
2. Mark these three with a 1, 2 and 3 to indicate their order of importance to you.
For the item that you marked with a "1" please indicate below the table, why you chose this item as the most important.

	<i>Rating</i>
Connected: You feel connected to the college	
Directed: You have a goal and you know what to do to achieve it	
Engaged: You listen and participate in class and participate in extra-curricular activities	
Focused: You stay on track – keeping your eyes on the prize	
Nurtured: You feel somebody wants you to succeed as a student and helps you succeed	
Valued: You feel that what you have to contribute to the college is valued	
<i>Why did you choose this item as the most important to your success?</i>	

Appendix C

Results - What is most important to your success as a student

Session-Student	Connected	Directed	Engaged	Focused	Nurtured	Valued
1-1			2	3		1
1-2	2			3		1
1-3	2			1		3
1-4		1			3	2
1-5	3			1		2
1-6		3		1		2
1-7		2		3		1
1-8	3		2	1		
1-9	3		1			2
1-10	2		1			3
1-11			2	3		1
1-12	2		1	3		
1-13			3		2	1
2-1	2			3		1
2-2		2			1	3
2-3		2		1		3
2-4		1		2	3	
2-5	1		2	3		
2-6*		1		2		1
2-7*	1			3		1
2-8		2		3	1	
3-1			3	2	1	
3-2				2	3	1
3-3			3		1	2
3-4		3	2			1
3-5	3	2			1	
3-6		3		1	2	
3-7			2		1	3
First Choice	2	3	3	6	6	10
	7%	11%	11%	21%	21%	36%

*Students identified two factors as most important.