

Factors That Affect LGBTQ Student Academic Success at FCC

A Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative research study was conducted as a result of an inclusive effort by Student Equity to considering how Fresno City College (FCC) might better serve our LGBTQ students. The current application processes that is used to gather student demographics does not include an area for specifying gender identity. This limits the ability to disaggregate and further analyze quantitative data that may be used to inform institutional planning. The Q Research Institute for Higher Education (QRIHE) suggests that “it is essential that academia have continued quality research to better serve and address the emerging issues, trends, and developments impacting LGBT people within institutions of higher education” (Campus Pride, 2017).

To begin understanding the LGBTQ student experience at FCC and assist the campus with considering how we may better serve this student population, two focus group sessions, one in fall 2016 and one in spring 2017, were conducted 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 following six success factors (see Appendix A for exact wording):

- **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
- **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
- **Engaged** – actively involving students in meaningful and authentic educational experiences and activities inside and outside the classroom
- **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
- **Valued** – providing students with opportunities to contribute to and enrich the college culture and community

RESEARCH QUESTION

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

METHODOLOGY

With the assistance of the Student Equity Coordinator and faculty advisors for the Spectrum Club, announcements were made of the opportunity to participate in the focus groups. A total of 5 students participated in the sessions. Participants included 3 males, 2 females, and the groups included a range of age categories, majors, and students receiving and not receiving

financial aid¹. In each of the 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 (connected, directed, engaged, focused, nurtured, 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, one additional category emerged, supports to success. Supports to success was further coded with sub-categories; self, faculty, clubs/peers, financial assistance, and safe space.

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 into two sections, Three Most Important Factors and Supports to Success. The students had 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 (see Appendix C). There was not a clear indication of which factor was most important, which may be due to the small number of participants. Because all of the students selected Nurtured as one of the most important factors this section includes comments from the students that inform us of how they have experienced this factor at FCC.

Nurtured

Nurtured was selected by all of the students as one of their top three choices. The students expressed an appreciation of faculty that take time to interact with the students. Faculty that express an interest in how the students are doing were perceived to be nurturing.

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.

“...My **English teacher cared**, because **she sees how stressed some students are taking both English and math**. She gives more time to the class.” (1-F-Nurtured)

“The **English professor I had** here, she was **good at checking on people**, especially the ones she was closer to... **just talking and seeing how it's going. It makes a difference.**” (1-M-Nurtured)

“**There are teachers that do have that nurturing feel. They meet you outside of class.** They **ask how it's going**, but they don't have that time for all the students. I suggest the directors or someone can do something...If there are teachers who **give us the nudge**, I think that would help students become successful.” (1-M-Nurtured)

“In the lab, **the professor comes around and helps us with our computer programs**. If we have any problems, they're there to troubleshoot. I've always felt that they never made us feel stupid for asking a question or for having a silly mistake...**nobody is made to feel bad about or foolish about something simple that they've missed**. So, I've felt that **almost all the professors were very supportive in that way.**” (2-M-Nurtured)

SUPPORTS TO SUCCESS

Self

Students reflected on personal responsibility and how student choices affect their success.

“My opinion is **basically people are zoning out and going through motions of life...** Going to school, getting jobs, going back to school... **some students don't feel engaged because they have so many things going on in their life...**” (1-F-Engaged)

“I feel connected by working at student activities. I wanna transfer as fast as I can. I think **it's the students choice to feel more involved.**” (1-M-Connected)

“**Read the syllabus.** Everything is in the syllabus. I don't know what's happening. People just don't – no matter how many times he (faculty) says it, **some people just aren't paying attention.** Well, **that's not a very good student skill to ignore those things.**” (2-M-Valued)

Faculty

Faculty were discussed as a positive and negative influence.

“Some teacher are just by the books too. **They don't have the time to do one on ones with students.**” (1-M-Nurtured)

“I think connecting with the professors that I had, **developing a personal connection with my professors I think has been important.**” (2-M-Overall)

Clubs/Peers

Students mentioned the importance of clubs in each session. They also discussed how peers and group activities contributed to their academic success.

“...Students need to do clubs to get more connected. I think it takes more freshman a longer time to get used to the sheer number of people here compared to your old high school.” (1-M-Connected)

“I think peer to peer is the most impactful. If you have a topic, and students can just talk to each other, they can get more out of it instead of having a counselor, or teacher. Me, I look at counselors and teachers as my superiors. I respect that and value that, but if I want information about the book store or something... I'll ask a peer.” (1-M-Engaged)

“... (faculty) would occasionally have us break from the lecture and work together just answering questions, just discussing something with the people that were next to me. That's actually how I met one of my friends that I've done something with on the outside. He was somebody that I was sitting next to and we had some stuff in common.” (2-M-Valued)

Financial Assistance

Students commented on the impact of financial aid and scholarships and their ability to be successful.

“ For me, the scholarships helped keep me motivated to stay on board, and keep my grades up. Without a good GPA, you can't get the good scholarships. So, my first year, I was able to get one scholarship for \$1,000.00 so I was impressed with that. But, this year I got three scholarships, and I made \$2,600.00. I was impressed. That made me push myself harder to strive for a better success rate.” (1-M-Focused)

“ Another thing to add is how there's financial aid and scholarships to help. They're always there to help get stuff back together. You don't have to stress out as much to get all this money, and then save to go back to school.” (1-F-Nurtured)

“The Board of Governors Waiver...it's kinda freed me of financial worries in that regard, so yeah, that's helped me stay focused on education itself because I haven't had to work a lot just to pay for tuition.” (2-M-Focused)

Safe Space

According to research conducted by Campus Pride in 2010, LGBTQ students “... were much more likely than their counterparts to consider leaving their institution because of experiencing or fearing physical and psychological harassment, discrimination, and violence related to their sexual identity.” (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). The importance of feeling safe was expressed when the students discussed feeling connected and nurtured.

"I feel like they're not connected because of the environment...**they're trying to find a safe haven to do their education...**For me, I went to **Key to City...it helps students feel connected to it (FCC)**. Students need to take advantage of that. **You can make students more connected by making it mandatory for students to do Key to City.**" (1-M-Connected)

"...there are just so many students. **Maybe have an alternative outlet where students can feel like they're safe** and can do something with themselves... **maybe something outside of clubs and organizations, or special programs.**" (1-M-Nurtured)

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the six factors of success, LGBTQ students discussed the importance of personal responsibility, connecting with faculty, clubs, peers, and financial assistance. The importance of feeling safe was also expressed when students discussed Connected and Nurtured factors. To further understand the LGBTQ experience it will be important to consider how FCC can provide opportunities for students to self-identify and gather additional quantitative data. This will assist us conducting a deeper analysis and identifying possible gaps in student success factors.

As FCC continues to learn from the LGBTQ student experience, 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

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

Campus Pride (2017). Q Research Institute for Higher Education. Retrieved from Campus Pride: <https://www.campuspride.org/research/>

Rankin, S., Weber, G., Blumenfeld, W., & Frazer, S. (2010). *2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender People*. Charlotte: Campus Pride.

Appendix A

STUDENT EQUITY FOCUS GROUP AGENDA

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



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STUDENT SUPPORT (RE)DEFINED

Focus Group Questions

Success	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
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	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? <p><i>Tell me about a time when you felt strongly engaged during your time at this college.</i></p>
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?
NURTURE D	<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?
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? <p><i>Tell me about a time when you felt valued during your time at this college.</i></p>
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	Connected	Directed	Engaged	Focused	Nurtured	Valued
1-1			2		1	3
1-2	1			2	3	
1-3				1	2	3
2-1		1	2		3	
N	1	1	2	2	4	2
1	1	1	0	1	1	0
2	0	0	2	1	1	0
3	0	0	0	0	2	2