

# Factors That Affect Native 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 (FCC) 2015 Student Equity Plan. The plan identifies Native American as a target group for activities to mitigate achievement gaps in access, course completion, and basic skills. A part of the strategy to close the gaps included the development of deeper inquiry methods to identify ways to improve supports for students as they seek to attain their educational goals.

Specifically, the plan (E.1) indicated a need to conduct research with students to help alleviate potential barriers at FCC that affect their academic success. In addition, the FCC 2015 Student Equity Plan asks for qualitative data to be collected as part of the plans evaluation process.

To begin understanding the Native American student experience at FCC and assist the campus with addressing the goals of the Student Equity Plan, two focus group sessions 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 Native American students identify as important to their success as community college learners?

### METHODOLOGY

With the assistance of the Student Equity Coordinator and the Resources for American Indian Needs (RAIN) counselor, announcements were made in classes of the opportunity to participate in the focus groups. A total of 5 students participated in the sessions. There were 2 males, 3 females, and the groups included older age categories, students with disabilities, a broad range

of majors, and students receiving financial aid<sup>1</sup>. 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, two additional categories emerged, supports to success and cultural wealth. Supports to success was further coded with sub-categories; self, faculty, counselors, and special programs. In addition, the students discussed the importance of learning about their culture and the meaning it brings to their education.

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 three sections, Three Most Important Factors, Supports to Success, and Cultural Wealth. 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 (see Appendix C). The number one factor was split between Focused and Engaged. Focused was rated as the number one factor by two participants and as the number two factor by two participants. Engaged was rated as the number one factor by two participants and as the number three factor by two participants. Directed was rated as the number two factor by two participants and number three factor by one participant.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## ***Focused***

Students selected Focused as the top ranking for both their first and second choice. Staying focused despite personal barriers was a common theme.

**"My parents think that schooling is basically a joke...they don't see school as a necessity...I know it's important. I've lived my life, I've had my son, I raised him, looked for work, odds and ends, here and there... I go out there, and it's like, "You have no schooling. You have a high school diploma, but you have no degree." (1-F-Focused)**

**"...working here at the school is actually great, too. I don't have to go that far. But if I was clear across town going to work and clear across town coming to school, I would say that it would have been a little bit more difficult, but you just got to tell yourself, "It's going to be hard at first, but then once you achieve that goal, it's going to be easy flying.." (1-M-Focused)**

**"...I'm trying to figure out, Well, the baby's gonna be born around December...and then we already discussed that I'll have to get classes that are either early morning or late night, or Saturday. So I can see how childcare could just take you away – take away that focus." (2-M-Focused)**

## ***Engaged***

Students also ranked Engaged as their first choice. Students discussed their responsibility and the role of faculty as factors that contributed to engagement.

**"I feel engaged in my class when I participate. You have to participate. You have to raise your hand, you have to ask questions, and I like the fact that a couple of my instructors would actually take time out of their day, their class time, to explain something to you, and that's something that's greatly appreciated." (1-M-Engaged)**

**"...Now, there's younger students in my communication class, they're having a hard time connecting with material ...I think that's one of the main issues. Teachers – I've had very patient teachers; they still try to draw something out that they can relate to but – I don't know, it might just be an age gap problem, and I don't – how do you get them engaged in class is hard." (2-F-Engaged)**

**"I know sometimes when I'm in my science classes, I zone out, and then I zone back in and I'm – I don't even know what's going on, and that's because I wasn't engaged. I think what would help with that is – maybe if the teacher can kinda see – or periodically do something that's not lecturing, even if it's for like, 15, 30 seconds, so that way they can get the attention again." (2-M-Engaged)**

## **Directed**

Directed was selected as the third choices. Students indicated that the Student Education Plan (SEP) was valuable and helped them to understand the direction needed to complete their educational goals.

“...It's **getting to the right counselor, signing a student education plan...I was just wandering around aimlessly**, I was taking classes, I didn't know if I really had anything to accomplish...but having someone like a counselor in a program [RAIN] to...help you pick those classes to attain a degree, is what I'm trying to get at” (1-F-Directed)

“...**having an independent counselor has helped greatly**. I mean **she's got me all set up [SEP], which way I'm gonna go, which relieves a lot of my stress.** .” (2-F-Directed)

“I initially came in thinking **I was gonna do the Health Technology Information program**...while I was going through the remedial part **I started taking Native American**...I didn't make a decision till **this semester to declare that as a major and to go into sociology...it put a fire under me. I started feeling passionate about what I want to do**...I have 20 years' experience in the medical billing field, and I'm real good at it, but I'm not – not passionate in it...” (2-F-Directed)

## **SUPPORTS TO SUCCESS**

### **Self**

Students reflected on personal responsibility and obstacles that can hinder their success.

“It's **cell phones and social media...It's your fault**. Because I could pull out my cell phone and be on it all day, if I wanted to. But I choose not to. **I put my phone away. It's put on silent**; I don't touch it until I'm practically at the bus stop waiting to go home. That's when I look at it, and **I do have a lot of people that are mad, like, "Oh, I was trying to get hold of you." "Well, I was at school. I was in class.**” (1-M-Engaged)

“I try to **stay positive, positive attitude**. I've had a period in my life where I was just negative because I took other people's negativity and I traveled with it, but I don't want that no more...**I can't accomplish my goals if I have that negativity**” (1-F-Nurtured)

“Okay, **well if I haven't talked to my instructor, where am I at? or I don't know where I'm at. I need to find out.**” (2-F-Connected)

### **Faculty**

Faculty were discussed as a positive and negative influence. Students included comments on the influence of faculty when reflecting on connected, directed, engaged, and nurtured.

“...my communication instructor...it took like ten or 15 minutes to explain something...**It just takes that long for me to actually get it, and I'm more of a hands-on person**, so if you were to explain something to me and not show me how it's done, I'm not going to get it. And **what I like about a lot of these instructors, they'll explain it, and then like, "Okay, this is how you do it."** (1-M-Engaged)

“I've been fortunate that **I've had outstanding professors thus far...it was at a pivotal point** because, **I was in remedial [math] and I was already feeling like I didn't really wanna come...and I felt stupid...at 47 and I can't add...It's just – my instructors were just like nothing more than inspirational to me.**’ (2-F-Nurtured)

“...So when **he [faculty] comes off as a jerk...his tone, he'll get a different tone – condescending** I should say. I know that "jerk" is pretty broad. But **he comes off as condescending towards the younger demographic**, and so when that happens – even myself – even though I'm trying to get all As, **I find myself just – not caring what he has to say.**” (2-M-Overall)

### **Counselors**

Students commented on both negative and positive aspects of the role of counseling. The importance of a Student Education Plan (SEP) was discussed often and how it supports their ability to be successful.

““...**my counselor actually set down a goal plan for me: "This is what you're going to do, and this is how it's going to happen, and this is the goals that you need to achieve."...it's like them holding your hand and saying, "It's going to be okay"**” (1-M-Connected)

“**she [counselor] broke it done for me** to show me what I was gonna have to do **every step of the way** for Option A and Option B, she broke that down, and you know **it's been valuable.**” (2-F-Focused)

“**I was struggling a little bit with the counselors...each visit would have a different product at the end.** So yeah, just being jumbled around a little bit with the counseling – **so having a individual counselor with that particular program [RAIN] – like I said, has set my goal on paper...**There's my goal, and I have it. The first two semesters, not so much. I was still floating around – not really sure if I would – need to be here or not. So having that focus there has helped.” (2-F-Focused)

### **Special Programs**

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

“I'm an outgoing student, but **being part of the RAIN Program has helped me realize that more students should be in these types of programs to focus**

**on where they're going and what they want to do**, with the help of the counselor..." (1-F-Overall)

"...I told everyone that I want to go back to college, I'm going to get a job, I'm going to stay out of trouble. I'm going to go on the right road...and **who helped me develop those goals, again, was the RAIN Program, and Federal Work Study helped me achieve those goals.**" (1-M-Directed)

"EOPS and the RAIN program **keep me very focused.**" (2-F-Focused)

"...**one thing that EOPS does** that I don't know if the rest of the school does, and that is the **required mandatory – meetings**. I know that...that right there – pulling us in – **requiring us to come in...gets me in there, and gives me an opportunity.**" (2-F-Connected)

## **CULTURAL WEALTH**

In expanding the traditionally narrow view of cultural capital, Tara J. Yosso acknowledges that "Communities of Color nurture cultural wealth through at least 6 forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital" (Yosso, 2005). The experiences described by students reflect aspirational capital, which "refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resilience is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals." Students discussed the importance of learning about their Native American heritage, expressed a feeling of connection, and a desire to give back to the community.

**"What connected me with Fresno City College is getting involved.** There was a club on campus – it's not active right now, but **Native American Intertribal Student Association, NAISA. And when I joined that, I really got involved**, and I still am." (1-F-Connected)

"...that **(RAIN) actually made me feel connected to Fresno City College**, to where I want to wear their t-shirts, **I want to refer people...**Hey, look, you're from Fresno: **Come to the City College, I mean, they have programs for Native Americans here...so that they can experience the same thing I have experienced.**" (1-M-Connected)

"The **Native American Indian Studies classes have given me the connection** I think, that's helped me wanna be successful in school – given me a platform to where I want to continue and complete...**giving me the connection to my own heritage and culture, and wanting to pursue an education, and go forward, and then give back to my community...**" (2-F-Overall)

"I came into this already knowing what I wanted to...I have experience in the medical field...then **I took this class, Native American Indian Studies, I'm actually gonna do a dual-major.** Do the **American Indian Studies and Nursing**, so – the reason why the – the **American Indian**

**Studies is because of my culture – my history of my background...I wanted to be able to use that in Native American Indian Health.” (2-F-Directed)**

## **CONCLUSION**

In reflecting on the six factors of success, Native American students identified ‘focused’, ‘engaged’, and ‘directed’ as most important to their success at FCC. The factors identified by Native 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. Planning that considers the impact of cultural experiences and includes promising practices that support the cultural wealth of students may help to improve student success. Using this qualitative data with other institutional data (Institutional Effectiveness Index, Equity data, CCSSE, 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 Native American students and other disproportionately impacted groups as identified by campus 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**

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

Patton, L. D, McEwen, M., Rendón, 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

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 8, No.1, March 2005, pp. 69-91.

## Appendix A

### STUDENT EQUITY FOCUS GROUP AGENDA

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



the Research & Planning Group  
for California Community Colleges

### STUDENT SUPPORT (RE)DEFINED

#### Focus Group Questions

<b>Success</b>	<b>Question(s)</b>
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"><li>a. Why do you think that is the case? Why do some students not feel connected to the college?</li><li>b. What can a Fresno City College do to make students feel connected?</li><li>c. Tell me about a time when you felt strongly connected to the college.</li></ol>

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"> <li>a. What is your goal? When did you decide on this goal?</li> <li>b. Who or what helped you develop the goal?</li> </ul> <p><u>If response is no:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. What do you think you need to develop a goal?</li> </ul>
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"> <li>a. Why do you think that is the case? Why do some students not feel engaged, not feel they are learning something?</li> <li>b. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel engaged?</li> </ul>
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"> <li>a. What helps or has helped you stay focused?</li> </ul>
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"> <li>a. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel that somebody wants them to succeed and helps them do so?</li> </ul>
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"> <li>a. Why do you think that is the case? Why do some students not feel valued?</li> <li>b. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel valued?</li> </ul>
RATI NG SHEE T	<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 C

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

Session	Connected	Directed	Engaged	Focused	Nurtured	Valued
1-1						1
1-2		2	3	1		
2-1		3	1	2		
2-2		2	3	1		
2-3			1	2	3	
N	0	3	4	4	1	1
1	0	0	2	2	0	1
2	0	2	0	2	0	0
3	0	1	2	0	1	0