

# 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 aid<sup>1</sup>. 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

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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.















## 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"><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 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"> <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> <li>c. Tell me about a time when you felt strongly engaged during your time at this college. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. What was going on at the time? What were you doing? Who were you with? What was that person doing?</li> </ul> </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>
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"> <li>a. What can Fresno City College do to make students feel that somebody wants them to succeed and helps them do so?</li> <li>b. Tell me about a time when you felt somebody really cared about your success or helped you be successful.</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> <li>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.</li> </ul>
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
<b>First Choice</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>7%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>36%</b>

\*Students identified two factors as most important.