

Focus Group Report for the Butte College Student Success Project

By: Julie Withers
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Introduction

In September 2009, I conducted seven focus groups with Butte College Students. The purpose of these focus groups was to seek constituency feedback that might provide information to support student success on campus. In a two-week period, I met with seven different groups of students, three classes at the Butte College main campus, four classes at the Butte College Chico Center; a total of 148 students.

Each group of students was asked the same seven questions, each open-ended and meant to encourage elaboration and discussion. (Appendix A includes a list of the questions). The overall goal of the investigation was to collect data that would show the student's perspective. The belief is that the students' experiences could give the Student Success committee insight into the specific kinds of challenges Butte College students cope with and how they might additionally support their success in the classroom and in life.

Analysis and open coding of the data occurred several times over several weeks. The goal of repeated data review is to develop analytic categories and "discover" theory (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995 p. 143). Though my goal in this report is not to generate theory, this approach does provide the Student Success Project with a vivid picture of student culture at Butte College and the particular kinds of challenges students face in and outside of the classroom.

Themes

Four themes emerged in the analysis and open coding of the focus group transcripts. The following summary describes the four themes: 1) self-reliance, 2) contact, 3) balance, and 4) frustrated. Part 1 summarizes the themes and includes statements—paraphrased and quoted from

the students in the groups—while part two offers recommendations, focusing on what the students say is working and not working for them at Butte College.

1) Self-Reliance

The theme of self-reliance emerged in the context of questions around how the student “got started” at Butte College, the sorts of challenges the student faces with their coursework, and whether or not they sought help or were given help to meet said challenges. In addition to a sense of self-reliance about their education, there was pragmatism in their reasons for being at Butte College to seek “something better” in terms of opportunity and career. Interestingly, in one focus group I asked the question, “How many of you rely on yourself (for school)?” About half of the thirty-plus students raised their hands. I observe this as a demonstration of the pragmatism and reliance on ones self that develops during a life lacking privilege, where a person feels that their success is solely up to them.

Some comments that illustrate the theme self-reliance include:

- “Got injured at work and they provide training for a different job at Butte”
- “You’re your own advocate”
- “It was something that had to be done.”
- “It’s all up to you.”
- “Time to come back” (to school).
- “If I fail it’s on me.”
- “Wanted to do something better with my life.”
- “No ones gonna take care of me.”
- “I feel school should be all on us—it’s our responsibility to succeed.”
- “Got lost going to my first class. Not fun. Didn’t ask for help, just figured it out.”
- “I was not happy and I hoped coming to Butte College would change my life.”
- “Got laid off”

2) Contact

In contrast to the data about self-reliance, students also spoke of other people and the idea that meeting helpful contacts—other students and with institutional entities on the larger campus—could alleviate some of the stress and fear that comes with student life. In spite of the

fact that students seemed to feel that their academic success was up to them, they also expressed a range of emotions about making contact and connecting to others (in response to questions centered around how they felt when stepping onto campus the first time, who they spoke to, and who helps them with the challenges of school).

The most interesting data suggests that students seemed to find face-to-face contact preferable over technology-based means of communication. In several of the focus groups, students expressed frustration about being treated like “a number” at the same time as expressing a desire to meet with a person for assistance. In several of the groups, students said that meeting with a “human” and being “walked through” processes was far more helpful and alleviated some of their sense of intimidation and feeling “overwhelmed,” “lost,” and/or “nervous.”

Some comments that illustrate the theme contact include:

- When asked how they felt when stepping onto the Butte College campus the first time, several words were used repeatedly: “overwhelmed,” “lost,” and/or “nervous.” Moreover, several students in different classes spoke of feeling intimidated and anxious, some because they had been out of school for several years, others because they were uncertain or anxious about their abilities. These students found that support from other students, family, and face-to-face with campus entities helped ameliorate some of these feelings.
- In many comments students shared that the staff at EOPS were helpful because of the “hands on” way that they “map” things out for them. They seemed to feel sincerely helped. Students also mentioned CAS numerous times as being very helpful and the “Ask Me” project, where faculty and staff volunteers stand in front of buildings and supply students with information such as directions to classrooms, during the first two weeks of each semester. In contrast, there were numerous complaints about counseling services in most of the focus groups. Though a few students said they were helped by a counselor (two at the Chico Center) it was felt by some respondents that: the service they received in counseling was rushed, the student(s) was not treated well (e.g., given the “run-around”), or that they had not been given clear guidance (placed in a class they did not need or not told about specific options).
- About technology-based means of communication, students gave a mixed response. Many said they liked the computer labs and the use of Blackboard in their classes but seemed to want more face-to-face interaction when it came to communication directly related to student support such as, choosing and registering for classes and finding scholarships or job information.

Some comments that illustrate the theme contact in the context of technology include:

- “More assistance filling out forms.”
- “People coming to classes to talk about what’s available on campus.”
- “Stop making everything so technology-based, not everyone has a computer at home or even knows how to use it.”
- “Online orientation, no humans.”
- “It’s nice to be walked through it” (registration).
- “I never did the internet until a year ago.”
- “I grew up in the country; ‘look this up’ is intimidating.”
- “It would be nice to have other options” (than “online” for registration and class selection).
- “Handbook, printed guide.”
- “Orientation online is not that helpful—in person is better.”

3) Balance

Connection and contact with other people seemed important to the students in the focus groups. Balancing school, home life, and work however, created some of the biggest challenges for the students in the focus groups. In all of the groups, students said that time management was difficult. Many felt that their social life was one of the primary reasons that they were challenged in their coursework, friends take up a lot of time. What’s more, many students had primary caregiving roles in their family, caring for parents, helping care for siblings, or parents themselves. In addition, many students said that they work one or two jobs, many stated this was full-time; few students discussed having too much time on their hands.

Students said that not having enough time was the biggest barrier to their success in their coursework. Repeatedly students wearily spoke the word, “time.” A discussion of managing time also ensued, as in “I need to manage my time better” and “why is it hard to manage time?” In two different groups, a student offered two potential answers: “Put what’s important before your social life” and “That’s why we’re here, to work, to learn, to get ahead.” It seemed that some students underestimated the time and commitment their coursework required and needed to learn how to balance the various elements of their lives.

Some comments that illustrate the theme balance include:

- “Time management, I’m a procrastinator.”
- “Keeping motivated, no days off.”
- “Family’s homework and mine.”
- “I take care of my paraplegic sister; I arrange my schedule around her life.”
- “Managing schedule.”
- “Too much fun (‘partying’) in outside life.”
- “Too many units.”
- “Too much travel to the main campus.”
- “All of it is tricky, no free time.”
- “Juggling numerous responsibilities.”
- “Lots of homework.”
- “I have a friend who takes my kids for awhile; overnight so I can get caught up or socialize.”
- In general, students were quick to indicate, “time,” “life,” “family,” and “work” as challenges. In relation to time, they said that they lacked awareness of the workload they could manage and the time their homework REALLY required. Several also said that work took a lot of their time and energy, making it hard to focus in class and while doing homework.

4) Frustrated

Staying motivated and balanced in ones life seemed to place a lot of pressure on the students ability to focus on their coursework, especially in light of the fact that many students felt they could only rely on themselves. Balancing life, work, and school is difficult but it was not the students’ only area of frustration. Feeling frustrated was the result of a few specific problem areas for the students: Financial aid (and money in general), textbook costs, food, services at the Chico Center, and cost of travel to the main campus/parking. Currently, Butte College is encouraging students to carpool by offering special parking stickers. Additionally, the campus is looking to develop a bike path, and is investigating expansion of bus services to Chico.

In terms of money, food costs and textbook costs came up in the discussions most often. Several students also reported frustration with the fact that they had to purchase textbooks their instructor required but never used. They also said that having more used or rentable books would be beneficial. The comments about food came up following a question where students were

asked to imagine that they were a Butte College administrator and to make suggestions to improve the campus. Several students suggested that the college could improve food services because of cost, lack of choice, and quality, re: healthy options.

Some comments that illustrate to the theme frustrated include:

- “Provide a checklist with the financial aid packet...they assume you know what, who, and where they are talking about.”
- “Clarify terms of receiving financial aid.”
- “Having to purchase books that are never used.”
- Distance is a problem, “travel on Butte to ‘B’ line eats a lot of time.”
- “Better food services on the main campus but especially the Chico Center, (re: “the cart”).”
- “Library at Chico Center needs improvement, more services, tables, more than 2 group meeting rooms.”
- Group study area at Chico Center CAS: “The guy who runs it always tells us to be quiet.” This prompted another student to say that CAS on the main campus is great, not the same service at the Chico Center.
- “Decrease food costs” and “Increase healthy choices.”
- “More textbooks on reserve.”
- “Free food days,” (which the associated students has done in the past).
- “Books, required is not always true faculty need to be honest.”
- “Packets instead of books” (cost less).
- “Make titles available to students sooner”
- “Cafeteria is expensive and not very good, fattening and not very many choices.”

Recommendations

The purpose of these focus groups was to collect data that could provide insight into the needs of Butte College students by way of reporting on their life challenges and needs in their own words. The discussions in the focus groups reveal that the students share similar experiences and their comments were helpful in sharing what is working for them on campus and what is not. In terms of what is working, students reported that they felt well supported by EOPS and CAS services and that the “Ask Me” project was helpful. There was a recommendation however, that “someone” look at CAS services at the Chico Center, and it was described on several occasions

as having an environment that was not helpful. In addition, two students suggested that the campus consider recruiting student volunteers for the “Ask me” project.

In terms of what is not working, there are several areas worthy of a closer look. They include: Food services, the use of technology to communicate information, and textbooks. Food is an ongoing problem, cost is high. At the same time, one option might be to expand the choice of food. Many students focused on choice and options, including within the campus bookstore. I recommend further data collection in this area so that students can specifically state their needs.

Besides food, students made some surprising comments about technology. Surprising because the assumption is that all college students are computer savvy and want all their information delivered in an electronic format. Instead, the students suggested that they were not technologically savvy and would like the campus to offer the option of electronic or human interface. Additionally, it did not appear that owning a computer was a problem as much as computer and information literacy. Their comments speak volumes to a growing discontent with “inhuman” forms of communication; the students demonstrated a common sentiment: “can I just speak with a human please!”

Finally, textbooks are a common problem for students. For community college students, whose money is limited, access to textbooks can make or break academic success. Currently, there are new laws pending to ensure earlier release of titles of textbooks so that students can shop for the best price. Moreover, the campus is making an effort to expand a book rental program and encourage faculty to put books on reserve or use texts available online. It would be beneficial to share these efforts with students in order to be transparent and to get their input, there is a sense of despair when it comes to the rising costs of textbooks and communication provides a positive means of meeting that fear.

Conclusion

It is clear that Butte College students negotiate many challenges in their daily student lives. Unlike the pop-culture image of college students—going home to eat food and do laundry, not having to work and having plenty of time for extracurricular activities and social life—these students reported that they had to rely on themselves or were relied on by others. Several stated that their success was entirely up to them. They also recognized however, that connecting with and making contact with other people affected their success on campus. This is why many said that they would appreciate more direct, face-to-face assistance, including the suggestion of peer mentoring (rather than faculty/staff). In some ways, talking school stress over with peers could also help students share ways to manage the unique demands that community college students' balance. Data in this report, taking action on some of the suggestions, plus further input from students in small focus groups may help the student success project strategize new and better ways to accommodate needs.