

Folsom Lake College

Spring 2013 Focus Groups for High and Limited Success African American Students

(Follow up of the Multicultural & Diversity Committee's S13 survey of student and employee climate with regard to cultural diversity.)

As a follow up to the Multicultural & Diversity Committee's S13 climate survey of student and employee perceptions regarding cultural diversity, two student focus groups were conducted during the last week of the Spring 2013 semester aimed at assessing the greatest challenges to success, the strategies used to overcome them, and the most notable success strategies of African American students self-identifying as highly successful or having limited success in college.

The following provides various tips, details and the specific script used in conducting the two focus groups, as well a summary of the information collected during each.

Tips concerning facilitating/moderating focus groups

- 1) It is particularly important to not get caught up trying to be a participant inadvertently imparting their opinions to the questions. The best advice is to stick to the script and not stray from asking the questions and probing when necessary. It is easy to think it is like a one-on-one interview, but it is not. In a person to person interview, there is an opportunity for interaction; doing focus group research the moderator is only there to facilitate discussion and nothing more.
- 2) Set ground rules!
 - a) I can only hear one person at a time, so please don't talk over one another.
 - b) Be respectful of each other (i.e. don't laugh at another person's response to a question or try to be the advising counselor)
 - c) To protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, the information you hear in this group discussion must not leave this room.

Primary Objective of the Focus Group

- To identify the factors which are responsible for the success of the students.
- To identify how they overcame obstacles to their success.

Focus Group Script

Introduction

First, I'd like to thank you for being here today. My name is Yvonne Price and with the support of my colleague Chris Olson I will be facilitating this focus group discussion. Last semester, FLC's Multicultural and Diversity Committee surveyed the student body and today's focus group is one of several follow up activities the group will pursue aimed at improving the success of our students.

Over the next 45 minutes I'll ask a series of questions and hope that you'll answer as honestly and accurately as possible. Then, we'll grab some food and I'll ask the remaining few questions while we enjoy our meal. We're recording the session today to ensure that nothing gets missed. I want to assure you that this anonymous recording will be deleted the instant it is transcribed and your names will not appear with your responses in the transcription.

Before we start, I'd like everyone to be clear on the ground rules for today's focus group sessions. They are as follows.

- 1) I can only hear one person at a time, so please don't talk over one another.
- 2) Let others have an opportunity to participate
- 3) Be respectful of each other (i.e. don't laugh at another person's response to a question or try to be the advising counselor)
- 4) To protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants, the information you hear in this group discussion must not leave this room.

As the facilitator, I reserve the right to move the discussion along if it becomes bogged down or starts moving in a different direction. Interesting topics that aren't relevant to today's discussion will be captured on the white board for future surveys or focus group sessions.

Okay, let's get started...

Results of both 'High Success' and 'Limited Success' Focus Groups

HIGH SUCCESS GROUP

1) What two or three personal characteristics do you possess that you believe are chiefly responsible for your success in college?

Self motivation

Resilience and the ability to analyze my performance and deficits to improve my performance the next semester.

Not so much thinking critically but thinking effectively and being proactive. To be able to anticipate, adjust and adapt to changes in the classroom setting. To be able to flex myself with respect to study time and my schedule.

Effective time management and effective communication to professors. Taking the initiative to be honest about what my objectives are and my determination to learn and to take that really seriously.

Knowing that I can't handle everything, so I need to organize and be realistic because I know I can't do everything.

Work hard and work smarter. Partnering with other students and meeting with your instructor or going to the Tutoring Ctr are ways of working smarter. Also, dedication of time and energy to accomplish your goal.

2) What two or three things about Folsom Lake College do you believe have been especially important to your success in college?

While this is only my first semester, I'd have to say that the professors have been awesome.

For me, EOPS has been the crucial program. I have five children at home and being able to check in with my EOPS counselors that take the initiative for my education, is hugely motivating. When establishing a contract with them and developing an education plan it's really helpful to know that someone else is committed to keeping you on track and helping you accomplish your goals. I need that external motivation and support provided by EOPS. As my EOPS counselor, Katie has been incredible. I love her straight up, honest approach. Single parents often don't have the support they need outside of the college, so having this support when they return to college is essential. EOPS is my family. My experience at Folsom Lake College would not have been very positive if it weren't for the support that EOPS and other diversity oriented groups have provided me. Having a visual presence of those groups is crucial.

Returning as a re-entry student after 20 years, I will echo the importance of EOPS and other support services. The support and encouragement in navigating the college experience and in helping me be accountable and guiding me through my first year here at Folsom Lake College (I'm graduating next week). EOPS was instrumental in keeping me on track and it's been great because I've been able to give that back to other students and encourage them.

I agree that EOPS really does hold you accountable and that's really important. Katie was also my EOPS counselor and she is awesome. She also tells you about resources outside the college, so it's not just internal information she provides. My mom died last October and it's just me and my son at this point, so Katie and EOPS have been my family in terms of support. She's very direct and asks me real world questions about what's going on, nothing superficial. I know that if I'm struggling with something there are people here in EOPS that genuinely want to know how I'm doing and are willing to help me. I think the support system at FLC is really, really good.

I'm not completely internally motivated either, so I've found it really helpful to set up times to meet with my instructors. When I meet with them I feel like I'm making a personal commitment to my education. And attending office hours often results in getting a confidence boost from your instructor which can make a real difference. And once I meet with my instructor I am more motivated to do the homework as I don't want to disappoint them. Having outside commitment to your education is also extremely helpful.

I don't see why people wouldn't be able to be successful here because there are just so many different resources available for them. I feel that everyone is really open here and that instructors really want you to attend office hours. Everything is open and the feeling is that FLC really wants students to succeed.

I find that the calm and serene environment at the college has been very helpful to my success. I've been to other campuses where it's like a bus station with too many distractions. Some of my instructors have been willing to take extra time to work with me one on one which really shows their commitment to student success.

All of the instructors have been very helpful. My calculus instructor has been especially good in getting his message across so all of the students can understand. The library has been a particularly helpful resource for me because it's a calm, quiet environment. Also, because of the intercampus loan capability.

Working in groups with other students allows you to learn from them so that's been helpful to my success.

3) Thinking back to the different problems you have encountered during your college life, what are some of the biggest obstacles you have had to overcome in college?

Taking too heavy a unit load and understanding how much more difficult summer session classes are at just eight weeks. Being willing to open dialogue with the professor you know you disagree with. Communicating with the instructor even when you disagree is really important and I've dropped a course in the past because I was unwilling to do that.

Learning the culture of going to college has been a significant challenge.

Reintegrating into the culture of a college environment has been a big challenge. There wasn't a service here at Folsom Lake College to help me integrate into civilian but especially into campus life after leaving the military.

Working in groups, other students can have different values and virtues which can be challenging. The only way I've been able to be successful in those situations is to adjust myself to be able to work effectively with my group partners.

The challenge I'd had in group work is being matched with students who dragged their feet and were unwilling to acknowledge that their poor performance affected other group members' grades.

4) In your opinion, what do you feel are the needs, challenges, and/or barriers that may impact the success of, in particular, African American students?

That there are so few fellow African American students on campus and even fewer African American faculty and staff, and even fewer African American (and other persons of a "dark cultures") behind the desks at admissions and records, financial aid, and other service areas. Why would potential African American students drive all the way from Rancho Cordova if when they arrive on campus they don't see anyone like themselves, and see very few African American employees and role models. I really feel this needs to change. There needs to be a visual presence and better representation of African American employees and students.

Being singled out in a classroom in which I am the only African American student as though I am qualified to be able to provide the official response for all African Americans. Or, when my fellow students quickly offer to help me out on a particularly hard question because they assume I can't possibly know the answer or am somehow incapable of knowing the answer. Sometimes when this happens I leave class. *(5 students stated they have experienced this)*

There isn't enough cultural outreach, but there isn't enough African American staff to be representative. Seeing African American and "darker culture" students behind the counter and at high levels in the organization is good for us as students and serves as something to aspire to. But even if you do outreach, FLC doesn't have the staff, or at least the representative staff composition, to do it. When black people start to hear that FLC is advocating for increased diversity and they want greater representation of African American students, the way to successfully gain that is to ensure that the line staff, faculty, counselors and librarians reflect that representation.

The way that instructors approach students must be done sensitively to minimize negative impacts on some groups. I had an English professor here at Folsom Lake College whose connotation I might have taken negatively but chose not to.

To feel a sense of belonging particularly for new students coming onto campus for the first time we would want to see other students and employees of color.

If administrators here are committed to the success of the African American students, they should care about our feelings and create and enforce appropriate campus policies. For instance, a group of white males regularly drive around the parking lot in a truck flying a huge confederate flag which always makes me question whether I truly am safe on this campus and the possibility of a hate crime being committed on this campus. Administrators need to take into account not just academic success but also negativity that can affect success at school. I feel like the campus police should in addition to checking whether you have a valid parking permit be telling the students with the confederate flag that this is problematic and must be taken down.

I'd just like to touch upon the lack of the African American community in the student population and for the sense of belonging... there really isn't anything here. I especially feel for the younger students coming here seeking that. As a mom it's different or for an older student because you have other responsibilities, but I feel like when you're in the early stages of coming to college for the first time you're looking for a place to belong and for people with similar interests, and I feel like there's nothing here in that regard for students of color.

When driving out of the parking lot leaving campus the driver of the car that sped past yelled the N word at me and while this happens rarely it adds to the concerns about safety on campus and makes us spend mental energy on processing these events instead of on course material and assignments. There has to be some more visible or concrete or tangible way of making your African American students feel safe and welcome.

It's important to make us feel comfortable, but also to educate other people in the area that this kind of behavior, such as the flag flying from the back of the truck, isn't going to be tolerated, otherwise it's just perpetuating in the cycle. It's also important for the college to acknowledge that bad behavior like the flag and racist comments takes its toll on students who go to class after such an incident and can't focus because he's mad as hell at what just happened.

5) *Specifically, what do you think FLC could do to improve African American student achievement?* skipped

6) *When answering this next question, think about male African-American friends and classmates who have remained in college versus those that have dropped out of college for various reasons. What do you think are the main reasons African-American males leave college?*

I think the relatively recent focus on gender equality has left African American men by the wayside, or made them feel like they're not as important.

It may also be caused by African American men not motivating themselves sufficiently. That without a real father figure or role model there may not be the type of pressure that causes young African American men to be motivated to go to school and be successful. That is, they may not have people in their lives to challenge them in that way.

It may also be the social stigma of African American men having to be the toughest and may lead African American men to feel like they're supposed to be strong and so should not need to ask for help or support on campus when they need it. This can lead to a downward spiral as the deeper you go the more difficult it is to ask for help. It would be helpful to find some way of letting them know that help is available and that they shouldn't feel less-than by asking for help and that there's no shame in asking for help.

Lack of diversity is very likely a deterrent to success for African American male students.

I don't think this has anything to do with Folsom Lake College or the city of Folsom. I think it's a state issue that starts in the household and is an issue that needs to be dealt with far sooner than college. The reason they're not coming to college and succeeding is because they are not going to high school and succeeding in high school. And when they go to high school they just don't have the motivation nor do they have the support to want to go to college.

And many probably aren't motivated to go to college because their families are struggling and so feel the need to work. They may not be able to go to school two semesters in a row because they have to take on another job. And so they're labeled as non-successful but in many instances are just trying to keep food on the table.

7) *Take a minute to think about the ways professors run a course. One instructor makes the course better for you and another makes the experience worse for you. What aspects of an instructor's teaching style or approach most affects your experience?* skipped

8) *Beyond the way the course is designed or how instructors run the course, was there something else that affected your experience in the courses you felt most successful in?* skipped

9) *We know that students are typically more successful in college the more they are "connected" on campus, such as with other students, involvement in clubs, attending "college hour" events, as well as developing relationships and friendships with a faculty or staff member. If you have developed such relationships/friendships with FLC faculty and staff, how and when did they develop?* skipped

10) *On one side of the note card in front of you please write 3 suggestions for how FLC could improve the African-American student experience at this college. On the other side of the card, please write down one piece of advice you could give to a new student taking classes at this college for the first time. See last page for response compilation*

11) *Do you feel valued as an African American on campus? Are you treated with respect and equality?*

Yes, for the most part.

I feel valued as a student, but not necessarily as an African American student.

Yes, I feel I am treated with respect and equality.

12) *As an African American student, do you feel a sense of belonging on campus? Why or why not?*

No, because of the lack of diversity.

I love the campus and think it's a great learning environment.

13) *Are you comfortable or uncomfortable contributing to classroom discussions about racially sensitive issues?*

Yes, comfortable (5), but some students may take the information as a blanket statement of how all African American students feel about a situation. Or, when white students don't check their entitlement and make comments like "oh that's so ghetto."

14) *What activities or campus clubs interest you the most? How important are they to your life at this college? How many do you or have you belonged to?* skipped

LIMITED SUCCESS GROUP

1) *What two or three things do you believe have been the greatest obstacles to your success here at FLC? If you did, how did you overcome them?*

No bus pass during the summer session. The transportation issue during the summer is why I had to choose distance ed classes which are limited and are much harder for those of us that have difficulty in managing our own time as much as online classes require you to do.

Had to withdraw from one of my classes and didn't realize until too late that it would result in my getting kicked out of EOPS. It wasn't clear to me that dropping the class would have such a huge penalty, as EOPS is so important to my success here. It would have been helpful for there to have been further warning before I initiated the drop. I knew that there was a GPA threshold to staying in EOPS and I knew I was okay, but I didn't realize there was another threshold requiring students to be over a certain number of units (I missed it by one unit). A message during the drop process letting students know that this may result in their being dropped from EOPS would be really helpful. I had to drop a class for personal reasons which meant I lost my financial aid. To restore it I had to complete a petition and found this process very difficult in that the instructions don't adequately identify what specific content is necessary to qualify for re-instatement. I submitted the letter and it was denied. Fellow students referred me to the Reading and Writing Lab which was very, very helpful, and so I resubmitted a letter I felt was good but it was also denied. First, it would be helpful if the Financial Aid department automatically referred students to the Reading and Writing lab as a resource. Second and even more important, they should modify the petition instructions to more effectively spell out what must be covered in the petition letter. The letter I wrote with the assistance of the year reading and a writing and writing lab hit every mark spelled out in the letter they sent but was still rejected without explanation as to why. When I met with a financial aid officer they told me they couldn't tell me what to write, which I understand, but they were unwilling or unable to specify what was deficient or not covered adequately in my letter. They did not tell me why my petition was rejected.

2) *What two or three things about Folsom Lake College do you believe have been especially important to your success in college?*

HCD 310 was a really important class for me coming back to college. The college nurse was another great resource who has been willing to serve as a sounding board and has helped me very much (2).

I've really appreciated the professors. They've all been very helpful and willing to help even outside of the classroom (2).

3) *Thinking back to the different problems you have encountered during your college life, what are some of the biggest obstacles you have had to overcome in college?* Skipped – too similar to Q1

4) *In your opinion, what do you feel are the needs, challenges, and/or barriers that may impact the success of, in particular, African American students?*

Being a single parent and not having a reliable family support system to be able to leave your child with to come to class. An African American student I know decided to drop a class because other students were outwardly talking and laughing about her obviously less expensive course materials and equipment than that the other students had. Clearly this was an obstacle and a challenge.

5) *Specifically, what do you think FLC could do to improve African American student achievement?*

A broader support system, perhaps mentoring group of successful African American students, or African American professors, or successful African American business people in prominent positions that you might aspire to. In addition, for there to be more African American students on campus.

6) *When answering this next question, think about male African-American friends and classmates who have remained in college versus those that have dropped out of college for various reasons. What do you think are the main reasons African-American males leave college?*

Being the wage earner, it's difficult to go to school or even look for a job. Both are time consuming and affect your ability to attend class and stay in class.

Especially for younger African American men, their friends may not encourage them to stay in school but instead to get a job. And the younger African American men may not receive the same kind of encouragement in the household.

That is, that not going to college isn't an option. They are more likely to feel that going to college is a plus rather than being something they are expected to do.

African American men don't picture going to college - it isn't a part of the picture they have for their future.

7) *Take a minute to think about the ways professors run a course. One instructor makes the course better for you and another makes the experience worse for you. What aspects of an instructor's teaching style or approach most affects your experience?*

There is a particular teaching style that I've discovered works well for me but it's hard to describe. The best I can do is to say that it builds progressively, step after step, after step rather than another instructor I've taken where the professor dumps the project on us that isn't really connected to anything else in the course and that doesn't really build on anything previously covered (ANTH). I think there should have been more involvement in what the professor wanted from us.

Yes, I had the same instructor and he had a similar frustration. I worked really hard in that class and only got a C. We watched lots of movies and then wrote an essay which wasn't covered in the syllabus and there was no description in any of the materials as to what he specifically wanted in the essays. And when the graded essay was returned, the instructor had provided very little detail about what was wrong or how we could do better. So, at the end of the class I still didn't know whether I was really doing what it is the professor wanted. I found it confusing. I really like it when the homework is on the syllabus so I know what's expected. It's also helpful when the professor puts the lecture summary on a Powerpoint so I can go over the material again after the lecture to make sure I'm clear on the various points.

That one of my professors always took the time to answer questions in such a way that no one felt ignorant or stupid for having to ask the question. His syllabus was very understandable and spelled out very clearly what he expected us to do and he had power point resource files for us.

8) *We know that students are typically more successful in college the more they are "connected" on campus, such as with other students, involved in clubs, attend "college hour," as well as developing relationships and friendships with a faculty or staff member. If you have developed such relationships/friendships with FLC faculty and staff, how and when did they develop?*

I have an awesome connection with the personnel in EOPS, especially Katie who sometimes knows what I'm about to say before I say it. She can direct you in ways that other people don't, and really listens to you. It was because I was an EOPS student that this connection came about (3). She doesn't discriminate. She'll give both an African American and a Caucasian student the same level of respect. She keeps it clear.

It's so hard to get accurate and complete information from people who work at the front desk at financial aid, and it's especially frustrating because if they provide an incomplete or inaccurate response it may be several days or an entire week before we receive a letter indicating that something more needs to be done. When this happens two or three times it's easy to miss an important submittal deadline or to run out of semester. My advice is to skip the front desk and to make appointments to only see the financial aid officers. The people at the front desk often don't know how to find the information even be if they realize they don't know what the student is asking for. In my experience, they are likely to give either a vague answer or simply tell you that everything is going to be OK, which so often feels like a brush off. The people at the front desk should have more answers and know how to look up information to get answers, and to be better trained.

Some of the best connections I've made are with other students in class. That's how I wound up at the Reading and Writing lab when filling out the letter for financial aid. My experience at the Reading and Writing lab was the exact opposite of financial aid because they are totally "on it" and they have no qualms about helping you or finding out answers to your questions. The faculty in the Reading and Writing lab have been very good connections because they're always willing to help.

9) Do you feel valued as an African American on campus? Are you treated with respect and equality?

Not really valued. I haven't had anything happen that was really discouraging, but there really hasn't been anything encouraging either. I do feel that I'm mostly treated equally and fairly, just nothing particularly encouraging. I like the idea of a multicultural center and that should help. In fact, this seems better to me than just an African American Center because I like the melting pot and I find the blend of cultures and experiences feeds me.

My experience has been good. I haven't had any particularly bad experiences. I live in Rancho Cordova so I was a little uncomfortable coming to the main campus where there is a very different demographic, but I'd had no bad experiences here. The reason is that I've had bad experiences shopping in Folsom, so wondered if the same thing would happen on the main campus, but that has not been the case.

I've experienced in the classroom fellow students being mean or disrespectful to other students, not necessarily to African American students, but more often to those that are not native English speakers.

I haven't had any bad experiences.

10) As an African American student, do you feel a sense of belonging on campus? Why or why not?

No. That's what I was referring to earlier that there just aren't enough people of color on this campus, either students or employees, to make African American students feel comfortable. That is, looking around campus I rarely see someone that looks like me, and I virtually never see someone that looks like me in any office or behind any desk. I do feel a sense of belonging and haven't had these kinds of problems.

11) Are you comfortable or uncomfortable contributing to classroom discussions about racially sensitive issues?

I have never run into that issue in any of my classes.

This has come up in several of my classes and is often so awkward I choose not to say anything. There was a real disconnect in especially an Anthropology course I took where fellow students made comments that were just "wrong" (negative). For instance, students asked the instructor about why we watched so many movies filled with people of color and the instructor didn't provide what was the obvious and culturally sensitive response, that is, that much of the world's inhabitants are people of color. This has happened in other classes as well but particularly the Anthro class. That has been the only class I've taken at FLC where I've regularly left class with my feelings a little bit hurt.

I took the same Anthropology class from the same instructor. Most of the people he spoke about and referred to were personal friends and, so it seemed kind of weird. Also that we had to buy his own textbook.

A related issue I'd like to bring up and that happens fairly regularly is where the instructor, or the entire class of students, automatically turn in my direction as the only African American student in the class expecting me to be

able to represent my entire race. This is obviously very awkward, even more so when the instructor pauses significantly for me to provide an answer.

12) *On one side of the note card in front of you please write 3 suggestions for how FLC could improve the African-American student experience at this college. On the other side of the card, please write down one piece of advice you could give to a new student taking classes at this college for the first time.* See last page for response compilation

13) *What activities or campus clubs interest you the most? How important are they to your life at this college? How many do you or have you belonged to?* skipped

The following responses have been compiled from both High Success and Limited Success groups

Q: On one side of the note card in front of you please write 3 suggestions for how FLC could improve the African-American student experience at this college. On the other side of the card, please write down one piece of advice you could give to a new student taking classes at this college for the first time.

How to improve the African American student experience

- More African American staff in student services and instructional support roles
- Create student groups/clubs relating to African American cultural interests
- Higher visual representation of the African American employees on campus
- African American student involvement/recruitment in planning phase of black history month activities
- Motivate students to study and build solid and effective relationships with other students
- Encourage students to work with the teachers and other support groups on campus
- Work with new students by mentoring them and helping them resolve issues about college life experience
- Increasing presence and African American faculty could help motivate more African Americans to come here. In general though, I think the point for this campus is to benefit students as a whole, and as long as discrimination isn't going on, things are great.
- Improve experience in terms of cultural awareness, ethnic and resource center, more ethnic people around campus in jobs
- More cultural awareness or advertisements for supporting activities
- Have a club for students of color (black) that can meet it convenient times
- More students of color working on campus
- More cultural sensitivity classes courses, courses, seminars
- Hire an African American counselor

One piece of advice you could give a new student

- Get to know all of the resources that are available
- Go at your own pace. Don't procrastinate. Don't be ashamed to ask for help. Plan ahead. Take pride in your work. Know that you're capable of any level of success if you dedicate your will to it.
- Meet with a counselor ask and questions. Start on GE requirements while figuring out major.
- Be sure to get on top of registration for classes, but along with that be sure not to overload on units
- Become and develop honesty and openness in your communication
- Ask questions to find out about what support services are available during your college experience