

Focus Group Report

Spring 2020

Introduction

The Porterville College Office of Institutional Research conducted a pair of focus groups on March 5th, 2020. These groups focused on a set of questions, previously discussed with various groups on campus, including student services and Data Team, that were designed to elicit specific feedback on questions that the college is currently experiencing and attempting to address in its student success and equity work.

The first focus group had a total of eight participants and the second four. Both groups went well and gathered important information, though the former seemed to be a richer discussion (focus groups are usually 6-12 participants, so only four is a rather small one).

There were four main substantive questions in the focus groups, though two others were included for introduction and summary. A review of the responses and discussions of these four questions is provided below, followed by a summary and recommendations going forward.

We note as an aside that these groups were conducted shortly prior to spring break and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic closure. The results were not affected by the pandemic or the college's response.

1) Compared with high school or anywhere else you might have attended, what has your classroom experience at PC been like?

(Probe: are instructors different, teaching, expectations, technology, facilities)

Asked to contrast their classroom experience at PC with their experience elsewhere, such as high school, students were positively effusive about the college, and especially the faculty. "I fit here," one commented. Another stated "the teachers go out of their way..."

Students tended to draw this contrast in terms of the difference between high school and college and the approach college offers in providing them both flexibility and autonomy. Because they have some control over the classes they take, and the majors and future careers they choose, the classroom experience thus feels "more engaging." Speaking specifically about science courses, but also in general about the college, students agreed that the experience was more "hands on." A couple of specific comments make this point:

"High school wasn't very challenging, so I was disengaged. I was so bored."

"In high school, they tell you what to do and if you do it, you get the grade."

2) You may have heard that the college is changing how students are placed in English and math classes What do you know about that?

(Probe: What have you heard, who have you heard it from, what's confusing, how has it affected decision-making for the current term and for spring)

This question was in reference to substantial changes to the placement process as response to AB705, a recent law that sought to revise how students enter English, math (and ESL) classes at community colleges. The implementation of this law essentially ended remedial education at Porterville College, with students funneled directly into transfer-level courses, often with support for those who are identified as needing it.

We included this question to get a sense of what students knew about the change and how accurate their information might be. What we learned was that students were virtually oblivious. "I have no idea" was a common response and nearly all students in the groups were unaware that a change had been made in procedures, or nearly so. Upon prompting, a handful of participants had heard occasional comments from faculty suggesting that they could enroll in a different class than previously believed, but were unaware of the background and had little knowledge that a policy change had taken place, statewide or locally.

Speaking of the placement process, students who had arrived prior to the change stated things like "I was told to take Accuplacer." Those who had taken Accuplacer prior to the change considered it unreliable as a placement test, with some noting that counselors had overridden the placement recommendation from Accuplacer.

Comments made during the ensuing discussion suggest that students are used to prescriptive procedures used in the K-12 system and tend to view placement recommendations, whether coming from teaching faculty or counselors, as directives. Students communicate with their peers about some things, but none mentioned having heard from older siblings about a different placement process.

The focus group discussion on this question would suggest that while efforts to educate students might not have been widely successful, they might also be of limited necessity. Students were not confused about placement; they simply accepted whatever faculty and advisors told them as the process, with little knowledge of what might have been the case in the past. A better use of time and resources might be to work to ensure that placement and other processes are as accurate as possible. As students take recommendations quite literally, the college should take great care to ensure that they are as informed as possible regarding all of their choices.

3) When you are taking a class and have difficulty with the material, what do you do?

(Probe: who do you go to for help, what college services are you aware of)

This question was designed to gather information on how much students know about college resources, such as tutoring and related services and how they get this information.

Upon first hearing the question, some students quickly mentioned Googling resources and asking friends. But as discussion ensued, it became clear that most were aware of resources provided by the college especially those at the Learning Resource Center, such as tutors, mentors, and other services such as faculty office hours.

Students had heard of these services from a variety of sources. Among those mentioned were:

- Course syllabi
- The college web site
- The JEC Center
- Instructors (in class and out of class)
- Counselors
- Emails about services (possibly from the Financial Aid Department)
- Tables set up in quad the first week of classes
- Clubs
- Other students

Some students spoke of going to office hours, but also about when they, or their classmates, are reluctant to do so. Some spoke of being more comfortable attending office hours of a faculty member they know better, such as one from whom they have taken multiple classes or emailing with the instructor before attending office hours.

Students were quite positive about tutoring, but some mentioned similar experiences of feeling intimidated. Said one, "you're struggling with a subject...they're very strong in that subject...I felt like they (the tutors) were annoyed with me."

Students were also aware that some faculty, particularly in English or math, either mandate or incentivize the use of Learning Center resources.

Most students were also aware of PASS leaders (supplemental instruction) and how they help.

Most comments on tutoring services were quite positive, but students would like to have tutors available in more subjects. Their perception is that tutors are generally available for English and math, but less so for other subjects.

- 4) We wanted to ask a little about textbooks. We do student satisfaction surveys, and we noticed that while a majority of students are happy with their textbooks, they don't like them as much as they used to. Overall satisfaction with textbooks declined from about 71% a few years ago to 53% in our most recent survey. Do you have any ideas about why this might be and what we should do about it?**

(Probe: what has changed over time, how do you experience textbooks in your classes, etc.)

A wide variety of experiences were expressed regarding textbooks. One theme involved price. The cost of textbooks has risen in recent years. Multiple students commented that they did not get their financial aid disbursements until 2-3 weeks into the semester (something the Director of Financial Aid states is not common) and that instructors often know this, adjusting their assignments accordingly. Students were aware of other resources for paying for textbooks, such as the EOPS and Foster Youth programs.

Students also mentioned a number of practices on the part of either textbook creators or some faculty that make their experience with textbooks frustrating. Among these:

"Teachers cover the chapters word for word."

"Have to buy the textbook just to get the access code."

"Bought textbook, never used it."

"I showed up the first day and he said 'you don't need the book'"

Multiple students, particularly in subjects like math, were bothered by needing textbooks only for an access code for software required for the course.

Faculty practices included either the prescriptive use or complete non-use of textbooks, both of which tend to make the purchase seem to be a waste of money. Students did not ascribe these to all or a majority of faculty, but are frustrated nonetheless when they occur. Students also describe faculty using textbooks in positive and nuanced ways, reviewing and commenting on what they felt was important, and providing additional context where appropriate.

Students also described additional resources they used for textbooks. One was the Lending Library, which several students praised, though some were unaware of its existence. Some students expressed that they'd like to see the Lending Library have more copies of some books and some focus group participants knew that it was important to get to the Lending Library early to successfully get priority.

Students also mentioned Open Online Resources and other separate technologies, particularly Cengage, a proprietary online publisher of digital course content. Focus group members who use Cengage spoke positively of it as a source of course material and as a money saver.

Ultimately, as regards textbooks, the issue seems to be that with rapidly changing technology and options, both students and faculty have many options and both will need to continually evaluate what will work best for the needs of their courses.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The focus group participants were engaged and highly appreciative of the opportunity to participate and engage. Multiple group members expressed this and the desire to participate further, as needed.

Participants were also quite complimentary of the college, and especially of faculty. The students we interviewed were a diverse group, in demographics and in experiences, but it was clear that for many, Porterville College is a part of, or even the center of, their community. As one stated: "I started my life all over again. It's a new start and I built it around this place."

Participants were effusive in their comments, particularly about faculty, describing them as "caring." One stated, "They will take the initiative, put in the time with you."

Another agreed, "Teachers do a good job setting me up for success."

There were occasions throughout the discussions when students complained, usually about a specific issue. These are noted above only when there was a pattern or consensus of participants. But it is worth keeping in mind that each interaction has the potential to set a tone for our students' experiences at the college.

When asked about the transition from high school (or their other previous educational experiences), students were aware of clear distinctions, both academically and culturally in these experiences and they largely appreciated these differences. They appreciate the college experience and compared it positively with the comparatively more prescriptive high school one.

This distinction translated into the next question as students were largely unaware, despite the college's efforts, of the changes in the placement process. They had, by and large, only accepted what they were told by counselors, advisors, and others with whom they interacted, and had generally not questioned, at least not until directly asked, their placement in English and math classes. If there is anything to come out of this discussion, it would likely be that the college's efforts would be better spent, not on communicating the changes, but on making sure the process is as accurate as possible and is communicated well to each student. There seems to be little need to focus on what happened in previous years as each new group of students is likely to accept the current process as it is presented to them.

On the other hand, the college is to be commended for its communication efforts with regard to student support services. Students interviewed were very well aware of their various options, and furthermore, spoke quite highly of most of them. If anything is to be done in this area, it is to continue this effort to provide these options, to expand some of them (such as the Lending Library) and to continue to work to make students more comfortable attending office hours.

The focus groups show how complex the textbook situation is, for both students and faculty. The number of options available, how they differ by subject area, the varying and increased costs, and the different ways in which technology has changed, and will continue to change these choices for both students and faculty. If there is a clear recommendation to be made here, it is that the college should have an ongoing, faculty-led, dialogue on textbooks and other course materials. That dialogue should include, at a minimum, the impact of changing technology options, both proprietary and open source,

the ways in which pedagogical strategies impact the value textbooks bring to the student experience, and the rising and various costs, with an understanding that all of these are in constant flux.

In the closing question, there were complaints brought up about specific occurrences, but these are discussed here only when there was a pattern in the discussion. One such pattern was that multiple students wanted faculty to use Canvas, which they find useful, even if their class does not have an online component. Students specifically mentioned that Canvas made it easier to track their grades and progress. Just weeks after the focus groups, the college switched to remote learning for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester due to the COVID-19 epidemic and Canvas came into wider use for that reason.

In brief, while the Office of Institutional Research conducts multiple student and other surveys to track opinion, engagement, and behavior, focus groups can be an additional valuable tool to provide qualitative information on the student experience. We will consider future focus groups on these and other topics, as suggested by college needs.