

Published by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement

Beyond Numbers: Using Focus Group Work to Dig Deeper into the Student Experience

As colleges examine data about their students, they are able to assess *what* is happening on their campuses, but assessing *why* can sometimes be a challenge. In their efforts to answer the “why” question, some colleges are using focus groups to dig deeper into the student experience.

Featured Texas Small Colleges Consortium (TSCC) Member: College of the Mainland

As a member of Achieving the Dream, which focuses on the use of data to improve student outcomes, College of the Mainland recognizes the need to collect qualitative data in addition to the quantitative data typically collected by the college. In doing this, college leaders believe they are better able to identify gaps in student success, as well as identify *why* these gaps exist.

The college views focus groups as one way of collecting data to help identify the reasons behind *what* is revealed in quantitative data. Although focus groups typically examine a single issue or question, institutions often want answers to multiple questions. Thus, a mixed methodology was developed by the college to address more than one question, while simultaneously allowing for in-depth discussion.

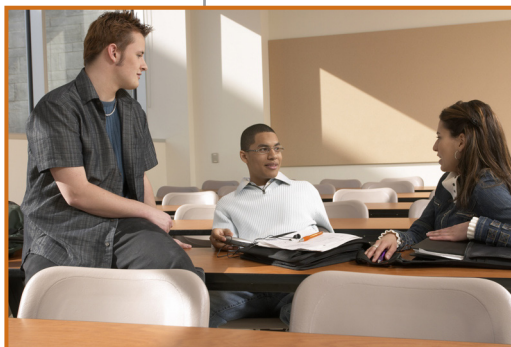
In preparation for focus group sessions, College of the Mainland’s institutional research staff met with faculty to identify key questions for discussion. Focus groups were then conducted using the following mixed methodology approach. As part of the group session, students were first given an opportunity to respond individually, in writing, to a set of questions. They then spent time discussing their written responses with the group. The students were then asked to discuss additional questions posed aloud to the group. Finally, to conclude the focus group session,

students had the opportunity to provide additional written comments and feedback.

For College of the Mainland, several positive outcomes of this approach became evident. For example, receiving written feedback that may not have been voiced by students while among their peers provided greater insight into the student experience and allowed time for students to think about their responses before listening to others’ opinions.

Student Voices: Focus Group Work with Entering Students in the Houston/Gulf Coast Area

The Center for Community College Student Engagement’s (CCCSE) *Initiative on Student Success* Starting Right project focuses on the challenges facing entering



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community college students and the steps colleges can take to increase the potential for more students to succeed. Starting in August, CCCSE staff began conducting focus groups at three community colleges in the Houston/Gulf Coast area: Lone Star College-North Harris, San Jacinto College-Central Campus, and TSCC member Brazosport College.

Focus Group Time Line

Students involved in this project have been asked to participate in four focus group or interview sessions, each one hour to 90 minutes in length, over the course of their first academic year. The first focus group session took place during registration, just prior to the start of the 2009 fall term. The second focus group was conducted during the fourth week of the fall term. The third will take place close to the end of the fall term, and the fourth during the following spring term.

For More Information

If you are interested in more information about this project, please contact Arleen Arnsparger, Project Manager, *Initiative on Student Success*, at arnsparger@cccse.org. For guidance on how colleges can use focus groups to listen to students, please visit the Focus Group Toolkit (highlighted on page two) on the CCSSE website at <http://www.ccsse.org/resources/focusgroups.cfm>.

Registration for CCSSE 2010 is open!
To register online visit
<http://www.ccsse.org/join/join.cfm>
Registration Deadline: November 1, 2009

Students Speak

In comparison to the 2009 CCSSE Cohort, 2009 TSCC respondents are more likely to indicate their family is extremely supportive of the student attending the college (71% vs. 67%).

As part of the Center's focus group work, students have been asked if there were people supporting and encouraging them to attend college. In response, focus group participants said:



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- ★ "Yeah, my counselors and teachers, people that thought I actually had potential, especially my family."
- ★ "My mom always pushed me to go to college. And, I have an older cousin who just graduated from college. They're constantly pushing me."

SAVE THE DATE!

CCSSE staff look forward to seeing you at the **2010 TAIR Conference in Waco, TX.** The proposed Special-Interest Group session for the Texas Small Colleges Consortium is "Building a Culture of Evidence."

More upcoming conferences in 2010

- ★ **League for Innovations Conference**
March 28-31, Baltimore, MD
- ★ **American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Convention**
April 17-20, Seattle, WA
- ★ **Association for Institutional Research (AIR) National Forum**
May 29-June 2, Chicago, IL

For more information about the CCSSE Texas Small Colleges Consortium contact April Juarez, CCSSE College Liaison, at juarez@ccsse.org or (512) 232-3744.

Focus Group Toolkit

<http://www.ccsse.org/resources/focusgroups.cfm>

Visit the CCSSE website for a comprehensive toolkit for planning and conducting focus groups on your campus. The CCSSE Focus Group Toolkit provides colleges with sample materials to use as a guide for organizing, conducting, and reporting findings from focus group work. Such resources include the following:

- **Planning Focus Groups**
Coordinator checklists, room set-up guide, videotaping guidelines, consent form templates, etc.
- **Recruiting Focus Group Participants**
Guide for selecting focus group participants, participant invitation templates, etc.
- **Focus Group Discussion Guidelines**
Moderator guide, student profile sheet templates, response sheet templates, etc.
- **Analyzing and Reporting on the Focus Group Discussion**
Summary report sample



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For additional information on focus group tools specific to the entering student population, please visit the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) Focus Group Toolkit website at <http://www.ccsse.org/sense/resources/focusgroups.cfm>.

To learn more about how to plan and conduct focus groups, please contact Arleen Arnsparger, Project Manager, *Initiative on Student Success* at arnsparger@ccsse.org.