

This Month's Topic: Bringing Student Voices to College Decision-Making

As guided pathways discussions grow across the state and at Crafton Hills College (CHC) specifically, a common question arises, "But what do our students think?" Knowing what students think would help them be more successful in college can strengthen the decisions we make. A focus group is one research method that frequently helps to provide the basis for assessing what students are thinking, and some colleges are using focus groups to help inform decisions as they develop their institution's local framework for redesigning their college around the student experience. In August 2017, Career Ladders Project (CLP) published "[Bringing Student Voices to Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design](#)" which outlines the major themes from a series of student focus groups at different colleges. This month's *Did You Know?* explores the findings of this report to begin discussions and inform implications of how CHC can better highlight its students' voices in college decision-making.

Students Crave More Structured Guidance

I. Many students find choosing a major to be challenging.

Students report that they are underprepared to select a major as they enter college, yet they are compelled to select from a long list of programs during the application process. Students are interested in knowing about their career options, the salary and number of jobs available when they graduate, how their strengths and interests align with different options, and whether they would enjoy and be successful in those careers. While some students enjoyed course exploration as a means to select their major, many students felt this form of exploration to be a wasteful use of time and money.

II. Choosing courses and getting into the right ones is often challenging

Students noticed key courses they needed to continue in their program were often full, not offered during the right semester, weren't prioritized for students in that major, or were offered on a limited availability often conflicting with work schedules. Students were confused about which courses might help them complete their programs within 60 units mistakenly enrolling in courses that didn't fulfill the correct requirements. Notably, students in CTE programs did not feel course selection was particularly difficult.

Students Want More Connections to the College and Each Other

III. Students value support services when they can access them, but many are unaware of the wide range of supports available.

While students overwhelmingly enjoyed the support services made available to them, they often didn't know about the various programs and support services until it was too late. Students felt that colleges could do better at identifying and referring students to specific programs and support services. Sometimes students were unaware of special support programs until they were discussed in their specific focus group.

IV. Students would prefer to see the same counselor every time and would like to see counselors who specialize in their area of interest or major.

Students felt counseling appointments are already too short, and seeing different counselors meant they had to waste precious time reorienting themselves for each appointment or repeating prior experiences. Students also felt some counselors were exploring programs for the first time with them, which left the students feeling uneasy about the advice and direction they were given.

V. Students yearn for a sense of community and peer connection at their colleges. They also seek culturally relevant curricula and diversity in their educational experience.

Students discussed the importance of feeling they belong and seeing issues that matter to them in the curriculum and throughout the school. Students desired the ability to network with other students in the same program or with similar career interests, and they felt peer-to-peer mentoring would help them succeed.

Methodology: Between March and April 2017, CLP staff facilitated 16 focus groups with a total of 137 students from two mid-size urban California Community Colleges. The focus groups included a diverse cross section of students from different backgrounds, experiences and programs, including those who were full- and part-time; day and evening; seeking transfer, an associate degree and/or a certificate. No college representatives were in the room during facilitation.