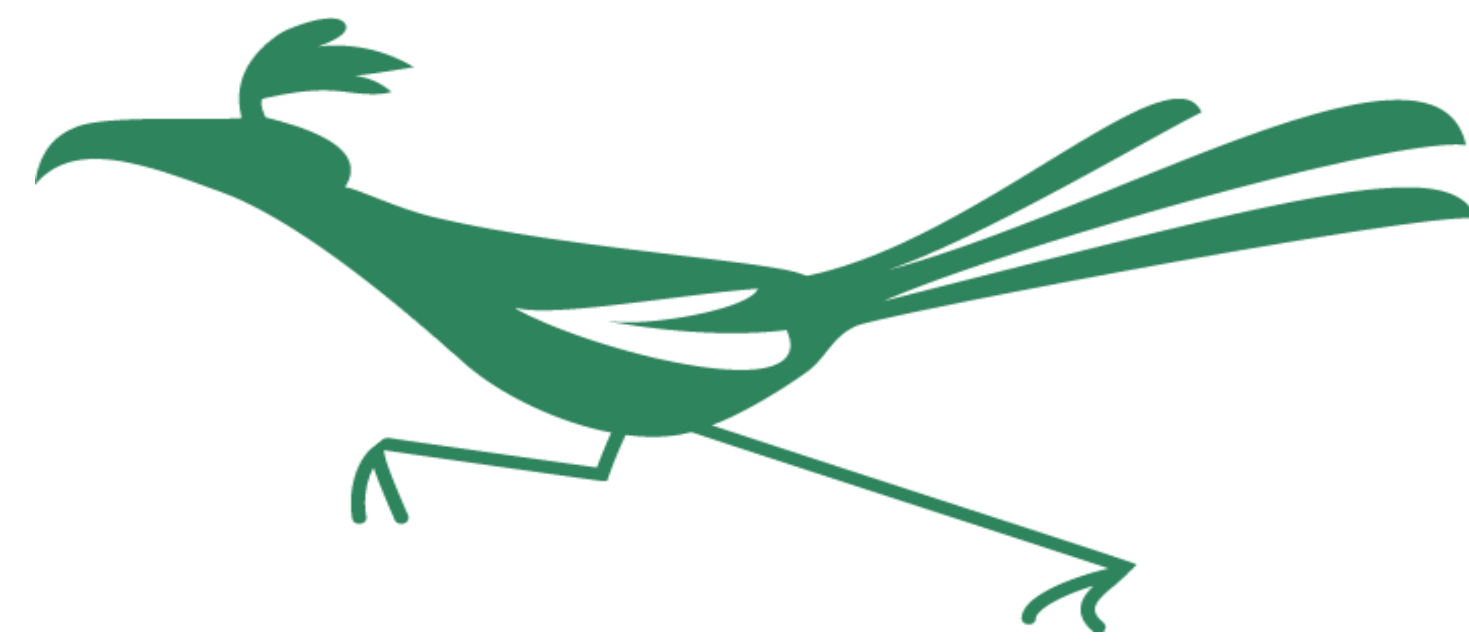




Elevating Student Voices to Advance Institutional Progress

Darian Poma & Jared Shaw

Crafton Hills College



Introduction

Crafton Hills College (CHC) aims to better understand how the institution can support students in identifying and committing to a major. Research shows that when student voices are actively sought and integrated into institutional decision-making, students are more likely to feel empowered, heard, and supported (Booth et al., 2013). To explore this further, a classroom-based qualitative study was conducted (i.e., focus group), focusing on students who identified as undecided in their major selection. Two open-ended prompts were used to guide responses

1. *Describe your journey as an undecided student. Is there something holding you back? If so, what?*
2. *How can the college better support you in selecting a major?*

The goal of this study was to gather insight into the challenges undecided students face and to identify actionable strategies CHC can adopt to better support these students.

Method

Overview of Project P Approach

This participatory qualitative study used open-ended, student-centered methods to capture the experiences of undecided students. Students shared their perspectives through visual and verbal activities, allowing them to express support needs, barriers, and personal challenges in their own terms. This approach empowered students as active collaborators, revealing insights into institutional structures and unmet needs.

Recruitment Procedures & Inclusion Criteria

Researchers conducted this study with a total of 11 CHC students who were enrolled at the time in Counseling 110: Introduction to Career, Education and Life Planning, a course for first-time college students that focuses on career development, academic goal setting, and personal self-exploration. The group represented diverse genders, racial/ethnic backgrounds, academic levels, and program pathways. No incentives were offered for participation.

Focus Group Design

Researchers conducted a focus group to explore why CHC students are undecided in choosing a major. The session used a structured poster creation activity to engage students and gather insights into their experiences.

1. Preparation and Setup: Researchers developed a PowerPoint presentation with the session agenda, instructions, and study purpose. Consent information was provided in advance, and all materials (poster paper, markers, instruction handouts, coloring pages, and stamp markers) were prepared beforehand.

2. Introduction and Instructions: The session began with introductions and a brief 10-minute presentation explaining the study’s purpose, consent, and poster activity. Students were given printed instructions and were informed that their responses would remain anonymous. Students were guided to create posters with three sections:

- **Their Journey:** Participants described their experiences as undecided students along with anything that might have held them back.
- **College Support:** They listed ways CHC helped them.
- **Improvement Suggestions:** They suggested how the college could better support them.

3. Poster Creation Activity: Participants had 25 minutes to create their posters, using any design they preferred. Relaxing music played in the background, and coloring pages were provided for those who finished early.

4. Gallery Walk and Theme Identification: Completed posters were displayed, and participants engaged in a gallery walk lasting 15 minutes, using stamp markers to highlight statements they related to or agreed with. This helped identify common themes and subthemes.

5. Group Debrief: Researchers facilitated a 15-minute discussion, where participants shared their thoughts on the posters. Both researchers actively engaged, took notes, and encouraged open dialogue.

6. Data Collection and Analysis: All posters were photographed, and their content was transcribed into an Excel file for analysis.

Analysis Approach

The researchers employed Inductive Thematic Analysis (Alhojailan, 2012) to examine focus group data, allowing themes to emerge directly from students' responses without being constrained by predefined categories. In qualitative research, coding is the process of labeling segments of data with descriptive keywords or short phrases to facilitate analysis and interpretation. These labels, or “codes,” were then grouped into broader themes based on patterns across participant input. To capture group consensus, participants also used “stamps” to indicate agreement with what was written on student's posters during the sessions. Each student could place one stamp per idea or section but was allowed to stamp multiple different responses. These stamp patterns added an additional layer of insight, helping researchers identify which themes and suggestions resonated most strongly with the group. Students offered a total of 132 stamps.

The analysis process was as follows:

Data Organization: All participant posters were photographed and transcribed word-for-word into a detailed Excel file. Each response was labeled with an anonymous identifier to maintain participant privacy. The researchers numbered each poster.

Initial Coding: Each participant’s responses were carefully read, and key ideas were highlighted. The researchers paid close attention to repeated phrases, opinions, and suggestions, which served as preliminary codes.

Theme Identification: The researchers reviewed the initial codes and grouped them into broader themes based on recurring ideas. The stamps from the gallery walk helped identify which themes were most frequently acknowledged by students, providing a visual indicator of consensus.

Theme Refinement: The researchers re-examined the identified themes, ensuring that each one accurately represented the students' perspectives. Subthemes were created when distinct but related ideas were identified within a larger theme.

Final Theme Organization: The final themes were organized to guide presentation of findings, highlighting key insights about the experiences of undecided students at CHC. This inductive approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the actual experiences and feedback of the participants, providing an authentic and accurate representation of their perspectives.

Results

Two primary themes emerged from participant responses:

Theme 1: Event and Workshop Awareness

Many participants reported being unaware of campus events and workshops designed to support major exploration, with **55%** (n=6 participants) indicating a lack of awareness. There were **64%** (n=7 participants) of participants that identified the need for clearer, more accessible communication about campus events, supported by **60 stamps** (45% of stamps). One participant suggested the use of visual aids to highlight career paths, with **9 stamps** in support, while another recommended that professors actively promote events and distribute handouts in class, receiving **11 stamps**. A participant requested workshops on time management and social skills (**10 stamps** agreeing), revealing a gap in awareness, as such workshops are already available on campus.

Participant Suggestions for Improvement:

Responses indicated a need for more structured exposure to career pathways to reduce uncertainty and fear of long-term misalignment with chosen fields.

- Distribute event flyers through faculty
- Increase marketing of career resources
- Share more detailed career path info
- Host personality-based career workshops
- Promote and evaluate the career counseling course

Theme 2: Counseling Outreach

Participants expressed uncertainty about the major selection process and reported difficulty accessing academic counseling. A total of **45%** (n=5 participants) of participants addressed the need for improved counseling outreach, with **30 stamps** (23% of stamps) supporting these responses. One participant recommended that counselors take a more proactive role in preventing students from “falling through the cracks”, which received **4 stamps** of support. Another emphasized the importance of counselors helping them “stay on track”, receiving **10 stamps** in agreement. This recommendation highlights a perceived gap in support and emphasizes the value of early, consistent guidance.

Participant Suggestions for Improvement:

Findings suggest that students may require greater institutional support to build confidence and a sense of security in navigating college-related decisions.

- Assign counselors to students for ongoing support
- Provide regular check-ins and guidance on resources
- Offer more flexible appointment scheduling

Discussion (Next Steps)

Overview of findings

The focus group findings highlighted two critical areas for improvement: event/workshop awareness and counseling outreach. Students reported difficulties in accessing academic counseling and emphasized the need for proactive outreach to prevent them from "falling through the cracks." This indicates a need for more consistent, personalized communication between counselors and students.

Additionally, many participants were unaware of existing campus events and workshops designed to support major exploration. Enhancing the visibility of these opportunities through targeted communication strategies could increase student engagement with available support.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following actions:

- Implement proactive counseling check-ins to maintain consistent support.
- Increase the promotion of events and workshops across multiple platforms.
- Redesigning on-campus bulletin boards for better engagement.
- Explore student-preferred methods for receiving information to improve outreach effectiveness.

Preliminary findings from recent research conducted with CHC students revealed a recurring theme: students expressed a strong desire for more organized marketing of campus events and workshops, along with enhanced outreach from counselors.

Research by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) demonstrated the effectiveness of proactive academic advising at Mohawk College (Finnie et al., 2017). First-year students who received repeated emails encouraging participation in advising services—particularly group advising sessions—were less likely to drop out. Specifically, proactive group advising improved retention over one term by 2.5%, with an even greater impact observed among male students. These findings highlight the value of proactive outreach in enhancing student engagement and retention.

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