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Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Crafton Hills College Student Focus Groups Findings

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Marc Beam

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Executive Summary

Project Background and Purpose

In fall 2019, Crafton Hills College (CHC) engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of six focus groups designed to learn more about what factors contribute to students' enrollment at CHC. The goal of this project is to provide the college's Strategic Enrollment Management team with insights into the experiences of currently enrolled CHC students from the target populations and prospective students to support its strategic enrollment planning efforts. In particular, these focus groups were intended to assist the college in improving student retention rates by identifying challenges students face that could lead to them to drop out or otherwise be unable to achieve their educational goals.

The college identified student populations with historically low course success rates and stratified them by units completed in order to understand the experiences of students at different stages of their educational journeys. The college also identified prospective students who applied and began the registration process but did not enroll in any courses. Ultimately, six focus groups were conducted with 32 total participants.

Researchers from the RP Group, in collaboration with a committee of CHC faculty members and research staff, designed a set of questions to guide the student focus groups. The researchers sought to understand the student experience from the perspectives of currently enrolled CHC students by asking the following primary questions during the focus groups:

1. Tell me what it is like to be you at this college.
2. How are we at the college making it easier for you to succeed?
3. How are we at the college making it harder for you to succeed?
4. Do you have anything else you would like to share?

The RP Group also conducted one focus group with prospective students. The college sought to understand aspects of the experience of those who had not enrolled at CHC by asking the following questions during the focus groups:

1. We see you completed the assessment/placement process and also likely completed the college's orientation process. However, you did not subsequently enroll in any classes. Please tell us about that experience.
2. What can we do to increase the likelihood of you enrolling in classes at CHC?

Key Findings and Common Themes

Students who participated in the focus group sessions offered relatively similar feedback about key issues such as the registration process, educational planning tools, instructional and counseling faculty, financial aid, and support services. Given the similar experiences described by each group, themes from the sessions are grouped by topic rather than student types, with differences between student types mentioned in the respective theme.

Summarized below are the findings that emerged from the focus groups:

- Perceptions of the campus environment
 - The college features a welcoming campus environment that feels inclusive but lacks diversity.
 - There is a need for improved lighting during evening hours.
 - Students identified issues with parking including lack of availability, excessive fines, poor and confusing signage, and antiquated meters/machines.
- Experiences with instructional faculty, resources, and supports inside the classroom
 - Students' relationships and interactions with instructional faculty had a powerful impact on their educational experiences. Many students were highly enthusiastic about CHC faculty, though some had encountered difficulties with their instructors.
 - There is a general satisfaction with course availability and options.
 - Students expressed satisfaction with academic support services and tools.
 - Challenges exist with the cost of textbooks and supplemental materials, as well as encountering difficulty using the technology on personal devices
- Experiences with counseling/staff, resources, and supports outside of the classroom
 - Students described positive experiences with counseling services, when they are able to access.
 - Financial assistance and resources were identified as critical to students' ability to continue their education.
 - Students had mixed experiences with Web-Advisor.
- Process for entering a path at the CHC
 - Students described a lack of clarity and ease of use with the online registration process.
 - There is a desire for more upfront academic and career guidance.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

These focus groups marked an important beginning for making student perspectives more visible at the college. Looking at the college through the lens of students' experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—could dramatically help evolve the campus community's understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. The college has an opportunity to build upon this initial step of eliciting student views by developing a systematic process to regularly engage student voices in the planning, design, assessment, and refinement of college practices.

Based on the focus group findings, the RP Group offers the following eight recommendations for the college to consider in order to improve the experience and outcomes of both currently enrolled and prospective students:

Recommendation 1: Create networking opportunities for students based on shared cultural experiences and interests in order to increase a greater sense of inclusion and diversity.

Recommendation 2: Examine the financial implications of practices and processes inside and outside of the classroom to identify possible cost barriers for students.

Recommendation 3: Align services and resources with course schedules in order to provide students with access to these services when needed.

Recommendation 4: Examine ways to upgrade/modernize payment machines to improve access and usage at the college.

Recommendation 5: Explore additional professional development opportunities for faculty to increase engagement and proactive supports for students, including specific training in Canvas to increase faculty's adoption and full utilization.

Recommendation 6: Examine the lighting situation across the campus to ensure adequate lighting is in place during the evening hours in order to increase a sense of safety and security for students.

Recommendation 7: Simplify the registration process such that students can more easily access and complete the CHC application.

Recommendation 8: Provide prospective students with some general career and educational guidance upfront to help them make more informed decisions about how CHC can meet their academic goals.

Introduction

Project Background and Purpose

In fall 2019, Crafton Hills College (CHC) engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of student focus groups. The purpose of this endeavor was to identify opportunities to improve student retention rates by increasing the college's understanding of the experiences and perceptions of CHC students and prospective students. In particular, these focus groups were intended to identify challenges students face that could lead to them to drop out or otherwise be unable to achieve their educational goals. The college plans to use the qualitative information gathered from student comments in the focus groups to inform retention strategies for incoming students and currently enrolled students at Crafton Hills College.

The college identified students with historically low course success rates and stratified them by units completed. The college also identified prospective students who applied and began the registration process but ultimately did not enroll in any courses. There were six focus groups conducted with 32 total participants. This report identifies and shares key findings from five focus groups of currently enrolled students and one focus group held with individuals who applied to CHC but did not ultimately enroll.

In This Report

The first section of this report begins by outlining the focus groups' areas of inquiry, identifying key research questions, summarizing recruitment processes, and identifying the characteristics of participants, primarily as observed by focus group facilitators. Next, the report explores the key themes that emerged across the six focus groups, with participants' perspectives on these themes shared in their own words. Please note that for the sake of clarity and in order to focus on the most critical issues identified by participants, the order in which topics are presented in the report does not reflect the precise order in which they were discussed during the focus groups.

Lastly, the report offers college leaders a set of recommendations, discusses potential implications for enrollment management planning, and then provides some concluding remarks.

Focus Group Design and Implementation

Research Questions

Focus Groups with Enrolled Students

Researchers from the RP Group, in collaboration with a committee of CHC faculty members and research staff, designed a set of questions to guide the student focus groups. The researchers sought to understand the student experience from the perspectives of currently enrolled CHC students by asking the following primary questions during the focus groups (see Appendix A for supplemental/probing questions that were also used):

1. Tell me what it is like to be you at this college.
2. How are we at the college making it easier for you to succeed?
3. How are we at the college making it harder for you to succeed?
4. Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Focus Group with Prospective Students Who Applied But Did Not Enroll at CHC

The RP Group also conducted one focus group with students who had engaged with the college enrollment process by applying to Crafton and completing the assessment/placement process but did not enroll. The college sought to understand aspects of the “not-enrolled” experience by asking the following questions during the focus groups:

1. We see you completed the assessment/placement process and also likely completed the college’s orientation process. However, you did not subsequently enroll in any classes. Please tell us about that experience.
2. What can we do to increase the likelihood of you enrolling in classes at CHC?

Participant Recruitment Process

After identifying the target group of students representing populations with historically low success rates, college staff recruited students to participate in the focus groups on the selected dates. Crafton Hills College’s institutional researcher first queried the college’s student information system and used random stratified sampling to generate a list of all students who met the criteria of being enrolled in the current fall term, having a particular number of earned college units, and having the demographic characteristics of student populations that have struggled to succeed at the college. Additionally, the researcher queried the college’s student information system and used random sampling to generate a list of prospective student who completed the assessment/placement process but ultimately did not enroll at Crafton.

Next, researchers undertook a labor-intensive outreach process, relying on emails, text messages, and follow-up phone calls to recruit potential focus group participants. Recruitment was focused on groups of students with historically low course success rates at CHC, which include African-American and Hispanic students.

In the weeks leading up to the focus groups, more than 1,000 students were contacted via emails prompting interest to participate in the focus groups. Students were asked to register for the focus groups via an online form. Potential participants were informed that their participation in the focus groups was voluntary and that their responses would be confidential. Students were also informed that they would be provided with refreshments and a \$25 Amazon gift card as a thank you for their participation. In a final attempt to meet the target number of participants, research staff recruited an additional seven students on campus the day of the session for entry-level students.

Focus Group Implementation

On October 2019, six focus groups were conducted with 32 participants. The groups primarily comprised currently enrolled students who had various amounts of units completed. Students who had earned fewer than 15 units were identified as “new” or “entry-level.” Students who had completed between 15 and 45 units were placed into “progress” focus groups, and those who had more than 45 units earned were identified as “completion” students. There was one focus group for the “entry-level” and “completion” groups and two focus groups for the “progress” group. A fifth group included students with at least nine units in career/technical education (CTE). Another four individuals participated in a sixth focus group session for those who had applied to CHC but did not enroll. All six focus groups were held at the main campus in Yucaipa, in the Learning and Resource Center (LRC) near the library. Sessions were scheduled in the daytime (10:30am), afternoon (2:00pm and 3:30pm), and evening (5:30pm) over the course of two days (Tuesday and Wednesday).

Each session had a minimum of four and a maximum of eight students. As noted earlier, ultimately 32 individuals participated in the six focus groups. While this participation rate may seem low in comparison to the number of students on the initial target list, the RP Group’s extensive experience in arranging and running student focus groups indicates that engagement of 28 students can be considered a moderate level of participation. Additionally, the successful recruitment of four non-students is noteworthy as this population is often the most difficult to reach. They received \$75 in gift cards for their participation.

Participant Characteristics

The RP Group did not officially collect extensive demographic data with respect to focus group participants. However, observations from the facilitator suggest that the participants comprised a reasonably diverse representation of the CHC student population. Student comments later mention how participants seem to over-represent persons of color, which confirms that the original sample looked specifically at African-American and Hispanic students.

Although some participants were traditional-age students (18-24 years old), a few were older students returning to community college after attending a four-year university or working. Additionally, some participants indicated during the discussions that they were first-generation college students. The focus group facilitator further noted participation from both male and female students, as well as students who represented a range of ethnic backgrounds.

Moreover, participants varied further in terms of enrollment status (full- or part-time). Many students reported working at least part-time, and a number of them shared that they received scholarships and/or financial aid. Special populations were also included, with one or more participants who indicated they were non-binary (transgender), disabled, or participant in Extended Opportunities Programs & Services (EOPS).

Finally, participants varied in terms of geographical origin. The majority indicated that they had grown up in the area surrounding Crafton Hills College and had attended local high schools. However, a few participants shared that they were originally from another part of California or another country (F-1 Visa students), and a few identified themselves as English Language Learners.

Key Findings and Common Themes

This section explores the key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. While some issues that arose during focus group discussions were unique to individual students, the analysis of the qualitative data revealed a number of common topics and themes. As noted earlier, although these findings reflect responses to the four research questions that framed each focus group, the presentation of key themes emerging from these conversations does not necessarily follow the chronological order in which each of the four main topics was discussed. The section concludes with a summary of prospective student experiences that may inform future enrollment processes. Each of the themes is explored in detail. Where appropriate, quotes from students are offered to provide additional insights; they have been edited for clarity and length.

Before delving into these findings, however, it is important to note the surprising level of consensus and agreement on critical issues across the focus groups. As described earlier, the design of the focus groups was set up to hone in on the specific experiences of students at varying stages of their educational journeys: entry, progress, and completion. Built into this design was the assumption that these students would have distinct feedback to offer that was unique to the amount of time they had spent at CHC as well as their level of academic progress and achievement.

While there were some distinctions among the groups on topics such as parking and use of the transfer center, students from all groups largely offered similar feedback about key issues such as the registration process, educational planning tools, instructional and counseling faculty, financial aid, and support services.

Due to this strong level of consensus across the populations that participated in the focus group, the feedback described in this section are grouped by topic/theme rather than

separated out by particular student group. Summarized below are the following common themes that emerged from the focus groups:

1. Perceptions of the campus environment
2. Experiences with instructional faculty, resources, and supports inside the classroom
3. Experiences with counseling/staff, resources, and supports outside of the classroom
4. Process for entering a path at the CHC

Perceptions of the Campus Environment

A Welcoming Environment

All students were asked what it was like to be themselves at Crafton Hills College. Currently enrolled students were quick to say how comfortable they feel on campus. Four students commented:

This campus is beautiful. I love like the plants and the trees. It's gorgeous. I seriously love it. I love walking on this campus.

I found myself getting along well with everybody. I've had nothing but good experiences.

[I] think [that CHC] makes a really big point to be as inclusive as possible. I think that they have a lot of ... systems in place to make sure that any students who wouldn't naturally be inclined to succeed ... do so—that everybody has a level playing field. ... I think they've done a really good job to be inclusive and mindful of where everybody's at.

I really do like this college compared to just high school in general. I know there's like a big difference between the two, but I just don't feel like there's as much judgment as there is at other schools like high school. ... Like, I've never been turned away or made to feel ... stupid for having questions.

An Inclusive Campus yet Limited Diversity

The topics of diversity and inclusion emerged as key themes across the focus groups, with students pointing out both the drawbacks of having few people of color on campus and the overall sense of inclusion at CHC that they still mostly experienced. In fact, regardless of demographic background or characteristics, nearly every student expressed a feeling of inclusion and/or appreciation of their diversity. Three students explained:

I am the first person in my family to attend college, so I didn't really know what to expect at first. But so far, Crafton has made it pretty easy to adapt to a new environment. I'm also transgender, and I noticed that as compared to high school, a lot of the professors here are very kind and welcoming and they're [accepting of] the pronouns that I use and everything like that.

I'm Hispanic. I live in a trailer park that I also work at on weekends. And I am a substitute custodian for the company up the street. Coming here, I do feel very

comfortable, although when I do walk into the classroom [and] people [first] notice me, I do look more thuggish. I wear baggy shorts and all that. But when people genuinely get to know me, they see that [I'm a] good person and usually I find ... friends very easily.

I don't think I've ever [been] called too negatively because of my skin tone ... or because of my weight. ... I've never been degraded in any way.

Students of color further observed that often there were only a small number of students from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds in their classes, and this situation sometimes created challenges for them. Nonetheless, three participants shared that while they wished there was more racial and ethnic diversity at CHC, they retained an overall sense of fitting in:

When I came here, I loved the campus. [But] the first thing I noticed is that there's not a lot ... of people who are like my skin tone.

It would be nice to see more people of my skin tones. I like the fact that I'm around very motivated, very determined people. So it's a ... good fit for me. I'm really happy that I decided to come to the school.

Definitely [CHC] is a fit. At first, it was a lot of being the only Black person in one room. I'm going to class [and] I still see that a lot ..., so that's definitely a demographic thing. [In classes where we talk about race], it can kind of feel like you're like the one person that has to speak up for that demographic, but it doesn't ever hinder anything, ... so it's not a negative thing.

At the same time, some students emphasized that the isolation they experienced being one of a very few students of color in each class was a significant issue. Two students described:

I mean demographically ... it is really hard. I think this [focus group has] the most colored people I've seen in the school [at] one time. ... If you were in a class setting, there would probably be me and one other Hispanic [student] in that ... whole class. ... I've found it's not negative, but there are some hindrances with certain things ... in some courses I've been in. I am a sociology major, so some of [the] teachers not having the same racial backgrounds [as people of color] don't fully grasp some of the things that they're talking about. And sometimes [there are] things that make me feel uncomfortable, but that also goes with being in a college and being in a class setting and just learning other people's views that are aside from yours.

[In] a lot of classes [I take], I am the only [person of color] in the class. [And] it seemed like when it comes time for group [work] or something like that ... I'm left by myself.

Campus Safety

Students expressed feeling safe on campus; however, several said there were dark places, especially in the parking lots. Students expressed different opinions regarding campus security; some said security officers are available if needed, while others said they have not seen security officers around. Five students' comments reflect the range of feedback on campus safety:

I've actually never felt unsafe. As a woman, I carry around pepper spray with me anyway just in case. But like I've never felt the need to pull it out when I'm here. I feel really safe and that's ... another really great thing about this campus. I don't know if it's in the culture of Crafton, but I feel really good around most of the other students here and the faculty as well.

I'm [taking] three night classes and [in] every single faculty have said, "If you need somebody to walk to your class ... [you can call] security ... and they will do it."

This is dark here. It's really dark, really scary.

I'm a male, but I still felt it's a little bit too dark here to be up here, like alone.

I didn't really see like any security.

Parking Issues

Students from each of the focus groups described negative perceptions about campus parking. Most agreed there is not enough student parking available and it takes them too long to find a parking spot, which sometimes makes them late for class. Others say the machines could be updated to accept credit cards, parking fines are excessive, and the signs are confusing. Four students describe their frustrations with parking.

Sometimes all the lots are full—you just have to park, [on the] side of the street, or down the Hill and ... it can get really bad. ... I got here on time, but now [I'm going to be] be late because all this walk[ing] I have to do.

No matter how early I get here, sometimes it's just a pain finding parking.

I have to get here probably 45 minutes before my class begins in order to find parking. And ... I would suggest the campus to upgrade ... where you pay for parking. I'm not one to carry cash with me at all times. It's rare when I carry cash, I've already gotten my first parking ticket for not having cash on me and not being able to buy [a pass]. I would like for them to actually upgrade their machines and get one that takes actually like a card so I can just swipe it.

Parking still sucks! You get your early parking spots, and then you've got the little meter maids out there just ready to write you tickets. And we're college students. We can't afford a \$30 ticket and some signs aren't totally clear.

Experiences with Faculty, Resources, and Supports Inside the Classroom

Mixed Experiences with Instructional Faculty

Instructional faculty can make a huge difference in students' lives and often create the environment within their classrooms that students attribute to the entire college. Many focus group participants had positive experiences with CHC's instructional faculty, describing teachers

who helped them access support and encouraged them to push themselves toward success. However, some students encountered difficulties with instructors who they felt lacked empathy, needed stronger pedagogical skills, and/or behaved unprofessionally.

While participant feedback included a range of opinions, comments from all of the students made clear that their experiences with CHC faculty had a powerful impact on them and left a strong and lasting impression.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY

Focus group participants gave many compliments to CHC faculty, stating how much faculty care about student success and noting their inclusiveness. Furthermore, students described that faculty showed an awareness of the struggles they might be encountering outside of the classroom, offering them both direct assistance and referrals to campus services. Three students commented:

I think that [faculty here] actually care, and they want to make sure that you're accommodate[d] well with your classes.

I feel like the teachers do a good job by not being biased to any certain type of person or political or religion.

[One instructor of mine] always had fruit accessible for us, like in a little basket, [and] she had granola bars as well. She would always tell us about the food pantry that the college has to offer to go in there in case ... we're at risk of being homeless. My history professor, she brought [to class] the mental health awareness and she brought the ... health center, [and she advised us to] take advantage of those benefits that we get as being college students. And I didn't know about [those services], and now that I know ... I think I'll put it to use.

Several students commented about how faculty worked with them to advance their educational goals. Two students shared:

At first, I was [thinking that] ... I'm going to stay in the [entry-level Spanish] class. Like I can easily pass it. But [my instructor] pushed me. It made me feel good because they kind of care for you and ... they want to see you succeed. Now I don't have to take another Spanish course because I was placed into a higher Spanish [level]. It kind of made it easier for me to just be done with my foreign language [requirement].

One of my teachers had mentioned [that] some schools like to keep you here and want you to keep taking classes so they make more money. But at Crafton, they kind of give you that gentle push, like, "Come on, what's next? Let's go. You can transfer."

DIFFICULTIES WITH INSTRUCTIONAL FACULTY

At the same time, several students identified challenges or ways that faculty made it harder for them to succeed. These students cited a variety of issues, ranging from professionalism and

teaching style to a lack of empathy or inability to see the student as a whole person facing difficulties outside the classroom.

Several students felt some of their instructors were unprofessional, difficult to approach, or slow to respond to students' requests for help. Three students described:

I've noticed that a lot of the professors aren't very professional. I had a sociology professor that didn't show up on the first day.

I have an English professor right now who I emailed, and she got back to me a week later. ... I was like, "Hey, I have this problem." And she said, "Okay, I'll check it out." And then she still didn't respond [for] a whole month, and then we finally got the issue solved.

[I had three professors who] were definitely harder to approach. Or when you did approach them, they were very—I wouldn't say aggressive, but ... they didn't seem like they were concerned or cared truly about what you were saying. They knew I was working and ... they told me I should just stop working completely. But I'm like ... "I have bills and everything." Certain things they said, I wasn't really comfortable with. ... I felt like [they were] saying you should have your parents help you. And I'm like, "Well you don't know my situation."

Other students had faced challenges with their instructors inside the classroom itself. Students perceived that some faculty seemed to be "burned out" and disinterested in teaching, while others were knowledgeable about the subject matter, but seemed to be lacking the necessary pedagogical skills. Five students explained:

As far as professors have gone, I have a problem with professor burnout—when they start to do the same curriculum over and over and over again, and ... you can see that there's no passion behind what they're teaching you.

I was in the ____ program and you saw that professor burnout a lot. It's the same thing they teach every semester over and over. ... And you just see that there's no passion.

I believe that some teachers are not meant to teach. They know so much about that [subject, but sometimes an instructor] doesn't know how to teach it. I can tell that he ... doesn't know how to teach us how to the complete problems. He's just writing things on the board.

[Sometimes] when you go up and ask, "Hey, I don't understand this," the professor will say, "Well, we have other people in here. They're getting it. Why aren't you getting it?" Well, everybody learns different[ly]. I'm different.

I think at times there are certain professors that ... aren't very good at teaching. One professor ... she cannot teach at all. I was trying my hardest to figure out ... what was going on. And I think only one person had an A, and everybody else's like, "Hello?!?"

Furthermore, some students made a direct connection between retention rates in certain courses and the quality of instruction. Two students articulated:

I think that it's equally on the teacher to ensure that they're reaching their students. [In one class, at the] beginning [of the semester], every seat was full. By the end of it, there was only eight of us left. And so I'm like, "How are you teaching? That should reflect on ... your ability to keep your students engaged."

when it comes to teachers failing huge amounts of students, students dropping out in large numbers having trouble connecting with a professor, I'm like, "Why is that not getting addressed?" That has to do with people's academic wellbeing, which I feel like should be ... a priority— you want your students to pass.

Lastly, a couple focus group participants had encountered faculty who seemed to lack interest in and empathy for their students. Two students described:

I just wasted this whole semester ... dealing with this [instructor] who really doesn't care, doesn't make himself available to help out, [and] really [is] so incredibly boring. [Now] I'm taking [the course] again and ... I'm passing with an almost perfect score now.

I also had another professor who ... just really didn't care about the students. ... If you ask questions, [she made me feel like] it's because you're dumb and you don't get it.

General Satisfaction with Course Availability and Options

Students were complimentary about the availability of classes. Several stated they could always get at least one course they needed. Three students commented:

Compared to other community colleges, it's easier to get your classes here.

There's always at least one class that you need that you'll be able to get into.

There's a lot of online classes too, so I can take them from home. So that's what I've been doing a lot this semester—I have all online classes.

Although students were mostly able to get courses they needed, some felt limited to a single choice—which often was not their best choice. Two students explained:

This semester on my [educational plan] I was supposed to take Intro to Computer Science, and when I went to look for the class, there weren't any in-class options, they were all hybrid. ... I've never taken an online class before ... and then computer science, that's my first class into that major and then I have to take it online? ... I'm very auditory [as a learner], so ... that's making it harder for me.

I check Rate My Professor before I register for any of my classes because ... I don't have time to be dropping in the middle of the semester. But unfortunately, [I had to enroll in one course because it] was the only one that fit with my schedule at the time. Even though I checked [the website] and I saw people saying pretty heavy stuff about this

[professor]. [And] when I ended up taking [his class], it was just like, "Wow ... I should have just not even wasted my time."

Overall Satisfaction with Academic Services and Tools

Students were quick to say how much they appreciate the tutoring services at CHC. Students commented mostly on two tutoring choices: general tutoring and STEM tutoring. Five students highlighted how useful tutoring was:

The tutoring center helps so much.

Tutoring, that helps me as well.

I think [it's really helpful] having the tutoring center available so that you can get help [in] different places where you struggle, like essays or math or, or anything. Chemistry. That is a big one.

I always go to the tutoring center if I have any questions on English and math.

The STEM [tutoring is where] I feel like I'm learning more ... than I am in lectures. So workshops and tutoring, those things, I'm so happy that I've got so I can succeed.

Students also mentioned the library online databases and study rooms as helpful. As two students shared:

There are online databases. When I'm taking like English classes that really helps with research and stuff. Yeah. Reliable. So you can do that ... in the library and from home.

What's also really good is the study rooms in the library ..., because you can have like [a] minimum of two people and have a study group in there with a white dry erase board. That helped me get through anatomy [because] we could talk as a group and study that way. And having that resource versus having to ... find a classroom that's not used or try to go off-campus someplace else where it's all noisy and everything [was very useful]. Having that made a big difference for us.

Several students mentioned the course management system, Canvas, and how important it was to their success. Students liked the communication it enables with faculty and peers, and they especially highlighted the benefits of being able to track assignments and grades in each class. Three students commented:

I always like the communication [through Canvas]. It's pretty solid. I get notifications through Canvas. [And it's] awesome to have an app on my phone to stay on top of my classes. That's a really, really great [tool]. I have direct communication with my professors. ... I know it's helped me out a lot being able to message them directly, and then if I do need to get in touch with the counselor, that's pretty seamless.

For a lot of classes, it's kind of mandatory to have Canvas because it makes things go so much easier. So that's usually where my professor will post lecture outlines you know, updates on when things are due, and I get all of that to my phone, answer my email. So

that's really great. And ... I can go on there and I can actually even see the other students that are in class. So if there's someone who's in my class who was like my lab partner for example, like I can message her and see like, "Did you study for this? Or can we get together?" Reaching out to other students [and] reaching out to my professors [is] really, really easy.

I find Canvas very helpful with a professor [who] actually uses it because I can, because I can see my grade and if I need to check it, I can. If they put their assignments, I can see what homework is due... which is very helpful.

Students would prefer that *all* faculty use Canvas, which is not currently the case, and they shared some insights into why some faculty may not use it effectively. Three students observed:

One thing that I feel really should be required is teachers should have to be on Canvas, because I'm in ... eight courses right now and only five of them are [on Canvas].

I've met some professors that are more tech savvy than others.... If you have a good professor, they can basically throw up the entire course online so you have all your resources, and it's a really great learning tool. But I had one professor who was [doing] the bare minimum. She put the syllabus up, and I think that was it. ... She didn't use computers unless she had to.

I know prior to having Canvas, [the college] had Blackboard. And I know a lot of instructors they preferred Blackboard, but when they switched over, they didn't want to learn how to use a new program. So I think that kind of is one of the downfalls of us being able to use Canvas. I think it runs better and everything, but the fact that the instructors won't go out of their way to learn a new program for our benefit also is a downside.

Challenges with Textbooks and Supplemental Materials

Students noted challenges with the cost of and ability to learn smoothly with required textbook types and having to pay for software and/or getting the application to work. Two students described:

A lot of the teachers are recommending a digital version of the textbook, which is good and bad. But for me, I've had kind of a bad experience with it. I prefer a regular textbook. The digital ones a little bit cheaper, which is good, but you can run into issues with technology and the password not working. With the book, there's no issue. So that's kind of getting in the way of some classes.

We have to use something called My Math Lab and you have to pay for a code just to people to do your homework, which that really annoys me... I just feel like to be able to do homework, I shouldn't have to pay \$100, \$115 to be able to have access to that. So, that sucks.

Experiences with Counseling/Staff, Resources, and Supports Outside of the Classroom

Positive Experiences with Counseling Services

When asked about how CHC helped them succeed, focus group participants were quick to mention counseling and several other types of support services. Counselors advise students on course selection and developing educational plans, as well as help students find career pathways and plan to transfer. Some are dedicated counselors for students in specific programs.

Many students described positive experiences with counselors who had helped them figure out which classes to take, as well as offered an overall sense of support and availability. Four students described how helpful their counselors have been:

I just went to my counselor six months ago, and we were going through all the classes that [need to be] taken, and you kind of set out a plan. And so ... the class I'm taking now ... is the last class I need to reach my graduation requirements. So ... it was laid out ... [My counselor] went through the schedule with me and [reviewed] the classes offered, and [let me know] this is exactly what you need to do.

There's a lot of ... Hispanic counselors that I've met in this college that I've spoken to. ... That keeps me motivated.

I have a counselor, [an] international student counselor, and she's always there and helpful.

The counselors [in] the transfer center up there, they are always accessible to me, and I've made good use of their workshops.

In addition, several focus group participants offered examples of counselors making exceptions to support their needs. Three students commented:

I had placed lower in my math [placement test the second time I took it] ..., so [my counselor] said, "We'll just wipe this off. We'll use your previous [score] and you can do your statistics right off the bat," which was perfect because I don't have to take the beginning math.... I've had a lot of great experiences here with all my resources and with how understanding the staff here is.

I had some classes from [another college] that technically aren't on the schedule for here, but my counselor went out of the way to email his boss and the boss's boss to figure out if they [could] ... transfer those [courses] into my credits. And it took ... like a month or so, but they managed to find a work-around so ... I didn't have to retake all those classes.

Students also shared how the college's mental health counselors made a difference for them. Two students explained:

Mental health. Cause my first semester here I had a complete breakdown, like a, an anxiety attack. ... I couldn't breathe and they took care of me down there and... they just surrounded me with love. [They told me], "Everything's going to be okay. Everything's going to be all right."

I kind of wish they would kind of put more emphasis on the workshops that they have. The anxiety and depression groups, they are really helpful.

Difficulties with Counseling Availability

The one challenge focus group participants cited about counselors was long wait times for counseling appointments. Students had different ways of trying to work around this challenge, as two students describe:

When I need to talk to my counselors, usually I go earlier in the morning, and I feel like less people are there early in the morning [because] everyone's busy with classes, so no one's really taking the time to go talk to the counselors. It's later in the day when people have more free time, that's when they get filled up, and that's when a lot of them will leave.

Yeah, it's a little difficult to get in [to counseling] at times when you need to. Sometimes at the last minute, I find out I need to go talk to a counselor. ... In which case, you go up there and they're like, "Yeah, sorry we don't have anyone else"—until you give a little bit of a shove. Then like, "Oh wait, we have someone."

Importance of Financial Assistance

Most students mentioned how important financial assistance was to them, whether it was in the form of scholarships, grants, loans, or resources such as the food pantry or bus passes. Students described being unable to afford attending college, even when living at home with parents or working a job. Three students specifically mentioned being homeless and needing additional support to stay in school.

In addition to official financial aid packages, focus group participants described several other critical resources that made a big difference in their ability to stay enrolled at CHC and succeed in their courses. For example, a few students mentioned a food pantry that provides free snacks and hygiene supplies, clothing, and diapers for students that need this type of support. Five focus group participants described how critical this assistance was to them:

I definitely appreciate the amount of resources [with] regards to financial aid because I certainly would not be able to pay for college on my own.

I was homeless at some point in time, and I was living in my car. I let the school know about it and they gave me parking spots ...and the food [pantry], numerous other resources. I was able to speak with a counselor, completely free of charge. I'm not the only homeless student here.

We became homeless. [We used the] food pantry here ... and you can always go there [and] get a food voucher. ... My grades start dropping during summer and [CHC staff] were talking to me. They also kept reassure[ing] me, email[ing] me, "Hey, how are you doing?" So they do check up on you. They let me know, [there's] a counselor for me and she helped me a lot.

But even if you can't afford to pay for textbooks, they have options for people who can't buy those things. And ... I just definitely appreciate ... how many options there are in comparison to other colleges.

Well, it's great that we have the coaches' cupboard because I go there almost daily to get a snack to hold me over.... So I have a class at 10:00 AM, and then my next class is at 5:00. So I usually don't leave campus. I'm usually here all day. So usually right after I get out my first class, I get a snack.

Several students also commented on the value of being able to ride the bus at no charge. Three students described:

Me and my husband we're sharing our car because ... one of our cars, we didn't have the money to fix it. And the bus ride for me was free because you have your ID here. [That] was just a really big deal for me—a really big thing for me for the first semester.

When I first started going here, I didn't have a car. So the bus passes, they helped a lot.

I appreciate that the student ID ... lets you ride the bus for free because I don't drive. I couldn't afford a car or gas because I don't have a job. ... I've been riding the bus for years, but now I get to do it for free since I'm a student now. So that's very helpful for me.

Even with all the resources available, some students still struggle to pay for items they cannot afford. Moreover, receipt of financial aid is not always timely nor easily accessible. In addition, new programs that ease the burden of incoming students leave some of those already enrolled in a frustrating position. Two students commented:

I think money is definitely a big thing. My parents are in that perfect bracket where I don't qualify for financial aid, but they don't have any extra [money] to help me out. So I do have to pay for everything out of pocket, full price. Now I'm hearing that the new high school seniors that are coming in, they're part of some program [where] their classes are free, and they're getting Chromebooks and stuff. And I was like, "I'm happy for you, but I'm also really insulted."

In the _____ program, they don't take ... financial aid—[you] can't get financial aid for the program. So a lot of that you have to either be able to use the BOG waiver or come up with your own funds, and that's hard. I mean it's a lot of money you got to put in to even get into the program to get the materials you need. So that makes it hard.

Mixed Experiences with Web-Advisor

Focus group participants offered positive feedback regarding many of the online tools available to them at CHC, particularly Web Advisor. Students appreciated the usefulness of this educational planning tool; however, Web Advisor also garnered criticism related to the pop-up surveys it produces. Four students commented:

I would say it's definitely very helpful that they have everything online. I haven't actually been to see a counselor yet. I've been here for a year and half a semester. I have very bad anxiety, so sometimes it's almost impossible for me to leave my house and go see a counselor. So to have that online resource [is very helpful]. Web Advisor tells you the whole list of required classes. They have different things for if you just want to take general ed, if you want to transfer to CSU or UC, they have different layouts for you based on your major. It tells you what exact classes you can take based on the list, and it tells you what classes you've already taken, and it just removes them so you don't have to worry about them anymore. It's very easy to maneuver.

So online I go and dig into ... [Web Advisor], and it shows you the classes right away before they even start the next semester. So that helps me to pick up classes even faster before they're on the website.

I've got one problem with... [Web Advisor]— ... the questionnaire. It just keeps popping up. It's because you have to do it. Yeah, don't do it. It keeps coming up. I did it once and then ... it came up again afterwards and I was like, "Okay, I'm never doing this again."

So on Web Advisor they ask a survey question... And it's kind of annoying because [it keeps] popping up until you do it. You can say no, and then you go to ... get your classes, and then it'll pop up again, and it's very slow to exit out.

Process for Entering a Path at the CHC

As noted earlier, a separate focus group was conducted with students who completed the application process at CHC, but ultimately did not enroll. Four prospective students participated in this sixth focus group.

All four participants had prior college experience and chose Crafton Hills College for a specific reason. The positive reputation of the college, its location, and its program offerings were attractive to all four prospective students, although each had challenges using the online registration process. Each person expressed a desire to have better guidance from CHC on which class(es) or program would best suit them at their current stage of career exploration and development.

Difficulties with the Online Registration System

One of the themes that emerged from this focus group was that all four participants found the CHC online registration difficult to use. For example, all of them described feeling confused about whether a class was offered on-campus or online. Others needed more help navigating the site. Three focus group participants described their experiences:

I found the [registration] website difficult to navigate.

[The online registration] was a little hard to navigate for me. I tried it with the mobile app, and then I tried with the laptop computer...I'm not sure, but it's almost like [the instructions were] missing a step. ... And I believe there are separate passwords for your email, and you needed your email. You were frozen in water without it. And so I would always think, "Oh no, I've got to access my email in order to get to the register." And I found [the process] not to be intuitive—it was not user-friendly.

Everything was just so weird. ... I had asked two of my friends who went [to CHC] before what to do, and they helped me out because ... I spent like two hours [trying to figure it out]. And I kept doing it for two days.

Desire for More Upfront Academic and Career Guidance

While all four participants expressed a desire to take courses at CHC, they seemed to have struggled with identifying educational and career goals. The participants agreed that more intensive counseling with respect to determining a career pathway would be valuable. Additionally, several expressed uncertainty regarding long-term goals and needed support in exploring careers before committing to coursework. The participants explained:

I would say I have been thinking about going back because I changed my major and I'm so comfortable with it now because this is what I'm supposed to be doing, and it's not nursing. When I spoke with ... the counselor, she was really good, and she guided me to where I was telling her that I wanted to go.

I feel like maybe [the college] could help me or other people more by guiding you through what your ... personality is like and what you would be good at...

General Suggestions to Improve the CHC Experience

Students offered several suggestions related to food services and expanding services to offer evening hours.

Students consider the food services limited in choices and a bit expensive, compared to options off campus. Someone suggested a food truck would bring variety to campus meals. Three students shared:

It would be nice if they had a food truck. I went to the little cafeteria to use. [It is] okay. But it'll be nice if they had different foods.

I'm here from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock [at night], so I haven't [eaten] anything and I have no money on me this day. I'm tired of eating sandwiches.

Going to the cafe, it's expensive. I have to end up going off campus with losing my parking spot, going to 7/11 where I can get that so much cheaper.

Students suggested extending support services into evening hours, at least a couple of times per week to support students that work during the day. Two students commented:

I was going to school at night and I feel they should at least have some resources that they normally have during the day available at night, whether it's one or two counselors available. Whether it's one person available that you can just speak with at the transfer center. At five, very much everything's closed. It used to be for people who work during the day, but all your resources are closed at night. So it's hard to get up here during the day.

As far as some of the office hours, maybe once or twice a week, extend them to the evening ... just extending to maybe not even super late, like 7:00 or 8:00 would probably work for most people.

Discussion of Findings and Recommendations

These focus groups marked an important beginning for making student perspectives more visible at the college. Looking at the college through the lens of students' experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—could dramatically help to evolve the campus community's understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. The college has an opportunity to build upon this initial step of eliciting student views by developing a systematic process to regularly engage student voices in the planning, design, assessment, and refinement of college practices.

Based on the focus group findings, the RP Group offers the following eight recommendations to improve the experience of both currently enrolled and prospective students for the college to consider:

Recommendation 1: Create networking opportunities for students based on shared cultural experiences and interests in order to increase a greater sense of inclusion and diversity.

Currently enrolled students noted the welcoming and inclusive campus environment they felt at CHC. However, at the same time they described a lack of diversity and people (students and faculty) who looked like them. Help build connections for students across the institution by proactively creating networking opportunities for students who share similar cultural backgrounds and interests as a way to build potential social support networks for students at the college.

Recommendation 2: Examine the financial implications of practices and processes inside and outside of the classroom in order to identify possible cost barriers for students.

Students from the focus groups noted the critical role that finances played in helping students persist at the college, as well as the ancillary resources and services (e.g., food pantry). Given the essential role of finances, the college may want to review its practices, offerings, and timelines to identify areas that may be creating cost barriers for students. For example, students noted that although digital textbooks were cheaper than paper textbooks, the

additional cost of supplemental software in terms of money and time, made it feel costlier for students. In addition, students noted high the cost of food on campus relative to off-campus options and the inconveniences they brought for students to have to leave campus for more affordable food options and then to come back to try to find parking in limited spaces.

Recommendation 3: Align services and resources with course schedules to provide students with access to these services when they need it.

Student reflections pointed to the need for more student-friendly hours for services beyond the standard 9-to-5 schedule. For example, students reported positive experiences with counseling services, but noted that it was only effective when students were able to access a counselor when they needed one. Moreover, student suggestions noted the need for resources and services during evening hours to accommodate students who were taking evening classes.

Recommendation 4: Examine ways to upgrade/modernize payment machines to improve access and usage at the college.

Students from across all the focus group sessions expressed frustrations with the parking situation at the college. The need for modernized machines to pay with a credit card was identified, as well as the need to upgrade signage with more obvious notices. In addition, students' suggestions also indicated a need to upgrade payment systems in other areas of the campus, such as the health center. Given the increased use of electronic payment methods, the college may want to consider auditing its payment systems and examining ways to provide students with multiple modes for payment.

Recommendation 5: Explore additional professional development opportunities for faculty to increase engagement and proactive supports for students, including specific training in Canvas to increase faculty's adoption and full utilization.

Students from the focus groups made clear how important the instructional faculty was in shaping the students' experience in the classrooms. Not surprisingly, students had positive experiences when the instructional faculty showed interest in their success, whether it be connecting them to resources outside of the classroom or taking the time to listen and explain things for students. Given the important role faculty play in shaping students' experiences in the classroom and possibly for the institution as a whole, additional professional development offerings to support faculty in creating a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive learning environment could improve the students' learning experience at CHC.

More specifically, students frequently mentioned the value of Canvas as an effective method for institutional communication and engagement with instructional faculty and peers. Students expressed an expectation that all faculty use Canvas, which suggests a need for professional development to increase the number of faculty using Canvas in their classes, as well as ensure faculty are using the full range of tools within the Canvas environment.

Recommendation 6: Examine the lighting situation across the campus to ensure adequate lighting is in place during the evening hours to increase a sense of safety and security for students.

A number of students in the focus groups mentioned the “dark spaces” on campus that left them feeling scared during the evening hours. To increase a sense of security and safety for students who are taking evening classes, an audit of the lighting in common areas, pathways, and parking lots should be done to ensure there is sufficient and adequate lighting throughout the campus.

Recommendation 7: Simplify the registration process so that students can more easily access and complete the application.

Prospective students noted the difficulties they had with navigating the online registration system. Students who are determined will try to work through those challenges to complete the application; others, however, could be deterred by this challenge from completing the application and subsequently enrolling at CHC.

Recommendation 8: Provide prospective students with some general career and educational guidance upfront so that they can make an informed decision about how CHC can meet their academic goals.

Prospective students noted the need for more career and educational goal guidance before they register at the college. For those who had attempted to register, they found the registration process difficult to navigate. To help inform prospective students’ decision to enroll at CHC, consider providing these students with information to help inform their educational goals and plans, and strengthen the connection for these students around how CHC can help them achieve their goals.

Concluding Remarks

These focus groups provide Crafton Hills College with direct feedback from students regarding their academic and personal experiences at the college. Listening to the voices of students is essential to developing a true understanding of how to be responsive to student needs and best promote success for all students by meeting them where they are.

At the same time, it is critical not to inflate these focus group findings into a conclusive generalization about any particular group of students or the student population as a whole. Six focus groups were conducted, with 28 enrolled students and four prospective students participating. This sample size is clearly small in comparison to the total number of students at CHC. In addition, students who are invited to participate in or self-select to join a focus group are often those who are most motivated, interested, and/or driven to provide feedback about their experiences. While their perspective is both important and valuable, one cannot ignore the fact that the perspectives of those students who chose *not* to participate remains absent from the findings and analysis.

Additionally, the nature of focus groups as a research tool limits the degree to which findings can be generalized across an entire population. While each focus group was structured around a consistent protocol with the same set of questions, discussions went in different directions based on the students who participated. As a result, certain issues were raised or more deeply explored in some focus groups, while in others these subjects were touched on lightly or did not surface at all. Furthermore, group dynamics and group composition can also influence what the participants say, or do not say, during discussions.

As such, it is important to take the findings in this report seriously, while simultaneously keeping in mind that they represent only a window into student perspectives at Crafton Hills College. The more student feedback that is regularly solicited through focus groups or other similar forums, the more complete the picture that emerges will be, empowering the college to develop strategies and make decisions that best enable each and every student to thrive.

Appendix A: Supplemental Questions

Supplemental items were also developed for the focus group facilitator to use as prompts. After students responded to an open-ended question, the facilitator could ask participants about the more specific components of their educational experiences. Supplemental items for the **currently enrolled students** included:

- How would you describe the culture at Crafton Hills College to someone who is unfamiliar with the college?
- What are the biggest barriers to you enrolling in college in general? At CHC?
- How did you decide which courses to take in each semester?
 - Are you following your educational plan? If so, how closely? If not, why not?
 - Are the courses you need available when you need them?
- What resources and services at the college have been helpful for you to complete your education? This can include people, offices, services, or something else.
 - How did you learn about these resources and services?
 - What would be the best way to share information about course offerings, resources, and/or services—email, text messages, flyers, or something else?
 - What resources and services at the college can be improved to help you complete your education?
 - What resources and services *outside* of the college are you using to support your education? For example, are you taking classes at other colleges to complete your program in a more timely manner or using tutoring services outside of the college?
- What challenges do you face as a student in <name target group> to completing your education at the college?
- What have you personally done to overcome these challenges?
- What is the college currently doing to help you succeed with continuing your education?
 - In what ways, if any, is the college *not* supporting you with your education?
- What advice, if any, do you have for CHC to better support students like you in completing their education at CHC?
- Do you have any last comments or pieces of advice for CHC to help motivate or encourage prospective students?

As with the focus groups for enrolled students, additional prompts were also developed to help gather more specific information from participants. Supplemental items for prospective students **who applied but did not enroll** included the following:

- What experience have you had with Crafton Hills College, if any? Whether you've had any experiences with CHC or not, what is your impression of the college?
- How would you describe the college to someone who is unfamiliar with it?
- What criteria do you use to determine which college to attend, such as course offerings, location, or course schedule? What specifically about those factors matter to you?
- What type of information about the college would be helpful to inform your decision to enroll at CHC or not?
 - What would be the best way to share this information with prospective students like you—email, text messages, flyers, or something else?
 - When would be the best time to share this information—before, during, or after you apply?
- We see you completed the assessment/placement process. Did you also complete the orientation?
 - If yes, please describe your experience – was it helpful? Unhelpful?
 - If no, why did you not attend the orientation?
- What could CHC do to motivate you to enroll at the college?
- What advice, if any, do you have for CHC to motivate or encourage prospective students like you to become CHC students?
- Do you have any last comments or pieces of advice for CHC to help motivate or encourage prospective students?

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for *all* students.

Project Team

Marc Beam, Project Director

Elisa Rassen

www.rpgroup.org