

STUDENTS SPEAK FOCUS GROUP INITIATIVE

PROGRESS NOTES: PHASE 1

About Progress Notes

Progress Notes: Phase 1 is an overview of progress-to-date for *Students Speak*, CSM's student focus group initiative. This update includes background about the initiative, a description of its goals, an overview of the research methodology, and a brief summary of findings, recommendations, and action steps undertaken.

Background

Students Speak developed in Spring 2007 as a means to identify and analyze practices at CSM which—from the perspective of students—may inadvertently contribute to the college's persistent enrollment decline. It is CSM's first college-wide initiative to use focus group methodology to capture students' perceptions of the college, including why students attend CSM, enroll in classes, and use support services.

Students Speak's goals have been to:

- assess how easy or difficult it is for students to “navigate” through CSM;
- make recommendations to improve services or processes that may affect students' enrollment choices; and
- build an internal capacity to engage in qualitative institutional research that measures organizational effectiveness.

Phases 1 and 2

Conducted in May 2007 (Spring 2007), *Students Speaks, Phase 1*, included 28 sessions with 57 day and evening students, the results are summarized here.

For the complete *Report of Findings*, log on to *CSM Internal's* Research link:
<http://collegeofsanmateo.edu/csminternal/?url=research/currentedition>

Conducted in November-December 2007 (Fall 2007), *Students Speak, Phase 2*, specifically targeted evening students and 40 students were interviewed in 10 sessions. Findings for Phase 2 will be available in late March through *CSM Internal*.

Research Methodology

Focus of Interviews:

The primary research focus was on the “front end” of the student experience: factors that influence students' initial decisions to enroll; how and what they first learn about CSM; how they maneuver through application and enrollment processes; what services they use; and how they finally select courses. Simply asked, what do students think about the ease of navigation through CSM?

Research Team:

An internal team trained in focus group research methodology was assembled to execute the project. They included a CSM faculty member and dean, two classified staff members, and a researcher from University of California, San Francisco: Milla McConnell-Tuite (Office of Research & Planning), John Sewart, (Office of Research & Planning), Bev Madden (Public Relations & Marketing), Sheldon Carroll (Articulation), and Dennis Keane (UCSF).

Activities:

The team developed interview questions in consultation with a number of faculty, counselors, staff, and administrators. Focus-group questions were subsequently pilot tested in interviews with individual students while a variety of demographic information was gathered from participants.

To recruit participants, the team members made presentations in 38 day and evening classes spanning 15 disciplines. Eighty students initially indicated an interest in participating. Final participants included 57 students in a total of 28 sessions: 15 one-on-one interviews and 13 focus groups. Interviews also included sessions dedicated solely to evaluating the functionality of CSM's website; 2 students from other institutions (San Francisco State University and University of California) were included in this latter group.

Phase 1 Participants:

Fifty-seven students ranged in age from 17 to 60 years old. Their ethnic identifications roughly mirrored that of the college as a whole; 53% were bilingual; as a group they spoke as many as 15 different languages; and 20 or more students were enrolled or had been enrolled in ESL classes.

Findings and Recommendations

The findings reported here constitute a brief synthesis of more than 100 pages of session transcripts. Recommendations are intended as suggestions and as starting points for further discussion and analysis in the respective program areas and among pertinent staff and subject-matter specialists.

Themes:

Every interaction matters; each member of the campus community has a role in attracting and retaining students.

Students have dozens of interactions at CSM with a large number of staff members and programs before entering a classroom. Many CSM students highly value and admire the outstanding faculty, counselors, and staff who assist them. These students view CSM as a respectable institution with opportunities for all. Those interactions include their experiences not only with individual college staff, but navigating the website, using the class schedule, or simply calling an office at CSM to seek information.

Each member of the campus community needs to be aware of the effect of his or her interactions with students. Each interaction is an “opportunity” for students to choose to attend and eventually enroll in classes. Alternatively, if the interaction is negative, students may choose to reject CSM as a confusing and inhospitable place, seek another institution, or give up on higher education entirely.

Students generally view CSM as an “academic” institution with a long history of high academic standards.

Students value CSM's numerous opportunities for academic preparation, career training, and transfer to baccalaureate institutions. Many are familiar with CSM's high rate of transfer and numerous articulation agreements with highly-desirable universities.

They also value earning good grades from instructors who simultaneously uphold standards, challenge them academically, treat students fairly, and are warm and welcoming, both friendly and serious about their work. Students also seek information about faculty prior to enrolling from a variety of sources including counseling staff, classmates, and online faculty rating forums like ratemyprofessors.com

Students respect high achievement. The successes of all members of the campus community—students, faculty, and staff—should be widely communicated and integrated into its marketing efforts. Outreach should reflect CSM's innate “brand” as an academic institution with high standards with diverse opportunities for many.

Incivility is counter to enrollment development and retention strategies.

Incivility reinforces a paradoxical view of CSM held by some students: CSM as a reputable institution on one hand and “high school on the hill” on the other, a place where students behave immaturely or inappropriately. Students object to incivility in all its manifestations, from graffiti on bathroom stalls to abruptness by front-line program staff to rudeness by peers. They also object to poor classroom management on the part of some faculty who tolerate offensive or distracting behavior in class (i.e. students who arrive late, sleep in class, play with their cell phones, use their computers for work or play not related to the class, etc.).

CSM's processes are too frequently convoluted, cumbersome, sometimes illogical, and ultimately off-putting for many students.

In a well-intended effort to provide students with “all” the information students need in using CSM's programs or services, CSM frequently drowns them with dense text that is, for many, indecipherable. Overly complex “steps” and overly detailed text appear in a variety of media, both hard-copy and web-based. As CSM identifies critical enrollment management strategies, it needs to streamline key application, enrollment, matriculation, and course-selection processes; eliminate unnecessary steps in those processes; and simplify print- and web-based communications about those processes.

CSM needs to focus strategically its outreach, marketing, and recruitment efforts.

Findings identify multiple sub-populations of students. In identifying these subpopulations, CSM has several genuine opportunities to expand enrollment in purposeful, coherent, targeted ways, rather than through reactive, scatter-shot efforts that culminate with no measurable outcomes.

Progress-to-Date

Dissemination:

Since its initial distribution in Fall 2007, *Students Speaks: Report of Findings* has been used for study sessions with SMCCCD's Board of Trustees, CSM's President's Cabinet, Management Council, Student Services Administrators, Student Services Leads, Instructional Administrators, Office of Public Relations & Marketing, and a variety of other programs.

Scores of improvements have been or are underway to those services or processes that affect the "front end" of the student experience. They include such areas as enhancing articulation by feeder high schools and adult schools, developing new marketing and outreach materials, increasing CSM's visibility on the web, improving WebSMART and CSM's website, creating new internal communication tools (e.g. *President's e-news*), developing a new strategic marketing plan, and many other efforts to streamline processes and improve "customer service."