



Hartnell College

Student Focus Groups:

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Introduction

Project Overview

In fall 2017, Hartnell College engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a set of six focus groups to increase the college's understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Hartnell students with the goal of identifying any implications for enrollment management planning. The qualitative information gathered from students will be utilized by the college's Enrollment Management Committee to inform the development of an enrollment management plan for Hartnell College.

Such a plan would support future course scheduling to meet the needs of students and the community in terms of the types of courses offered, when and how to offer them, and what supports are needed for students to be successful. These student focus groups are intended to identify challenges students face that could become insurmountable and lead to stopping their education. The challenges students face will be addressed by the college's enrollment management team to inform strategies to improve retention.

In August 2017, five focus groups¹ were conducted with students identified as continuing (persisters) and students that had stopped/dropped out (non persisters). A total of 38 students participated in this endeavor. Two focus groups were held at Hartnell's main campus and one at the college's most recently built Alisal campus; both are located in Salinas, California. The remaining two focus groups were held at the college's King City Education Center in King City, California, which is about one hour from Hartnell's main campus.

In This Report

The first three sections of this report describe the overall methodology utilized to conduct these focus groups. Section 1 outlines the focus groups' areas of inquiry, identifying key research questions used to learn about students' experiences, and briefly discusses how college administrators, faculty, and staff can meaningfully interpret the findings from the focus groups. Section 2 presents an overview of the outreach and recruitment process implemented by Hartnell's Institutional Planning and Effectiveness Office to engage students in the focus groups. Section 3 describes the characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups, while Section 4 explores the key themes that emerged across the five focus groups, with students' perspectives on these themes shared in their own words. Section 5 offers college leaders a set of recommendations and potential implications for enrollment management planning. Finally, Section 6 provides some concluding remarks.

¹ Three focus groups were planned for each of the identified student groups (continuing and students that had stopped/dropped out); however, despite Hartnell's outreach efforts to engage the participation from both groups, only two focus groups were conducted with the students that had stopped/dropped out.

participated. As a result, certain issues were raised or more deeply explored in some focus groups, while in others these subjects did not surface, despite the fact that these topics may have been equally relevant for members of different groups. Furthermore, group dynamics and group composition can also influence what the participants say, or do not say, during discussions.

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Furthermore, the choice of incentive may not have been attractive to former students, which may also help explain the low response rate from non persisters.

Section 3: Participant Characteristics

As previously noted, focus group participants comprised 38 current and former Hartnell students. These students represented various age groups, including traditional age students (18-25 years), first generation to attend college, older students who were returning to school after an extended absence from education, and students who were coming back to community college after attending a four year university. Students were also diverse in terms of gender and ethnic backgrounds. Participants further varied in terms of enrollment status (full/part time) and length of time at the college. Special populations were included with one or more participants who were disabled, a foster parent/child, and/or a veteran. Several students identified themselves as English Language Learners.

Furthermore, students cited a broad range of career interests and were pursuing majors such as forensic science, business administration, nursing, computer science, English, teaching, agriculture/food safety, environmental engineering, music, political science, biology, and administration of justice. Many students reported working at least part time, and a number of them were parents (both single and part of a couple). The majority of students grew up in Salinas, King City, and the surrounding cities of Soledad, Gonzales, and Greenfield. A handful shared they were originally from another part of California or out of state.

Section 4: Key Findings—Common Themes Across Focus Groups

Though some issues that arose during focus group discussions were unique to individual students, analysis of the qualitative data revealed common topics and themes between persisters and non persisters, which included the following:

- Hartnell's changing reputation

Hartnell's Changing Reputation

A general theme that surfaced among older returning students, across focus groups, was the palpable change in the college's reputation over the last 10 to 15 years. At that time, Hartnell was often referred to as the "Radio Shack of education."

A student that attended Hartnell over a decade ago described:

Ten years ago, a lot of people would say, "Oh, you're going to Hartnell?" And they would

everyone agreed that affordability and location were top reasons to attend this particular institution. A student shared:

I tell everyone that [the college] works with your schedule because they offer on campus as well as online classes. The teachers have really great office hours and they're real easy to talk to whenever you need to talk to them.

Another participant added:

I tell people that it's a good school to start with. People here at Hartnell [are] more approachable when it comes to resources or having to get information or help. They're willing to help.

Hartnell College Opens Doors

As noted above, focus group participants had many positive things to say about the college, many of which contributed to their decision to attend Hartnell. Students spoke about the various opportunities that the college provides such as giving older students who have stopped out a chance to continue their education, offering a path to a career that provides family sustaining wages, and enabling students to pursue job advancement opportunities. For example, a student who had reached the "ceiling" in his job described:

I re applied to Hartnell College because I'm already at the top of my game at my current employer. I'm the Administrative Assistant [in the] Accounting Department. I'm not able to move forward and advance to [an] analyst or a managerial position because I don't have a degree. Not [being] able to advance is my motivation to complete my AS degree here and then move forward and complete my bachelor's degree.

Drilling down a bit deeper, focus group participants described specific ways in which the college provides the opportunities described above, which included the fact that the college is quite affordable when compared to the costs of four year universities. Overall, it provides convenient class schedules (morning, afternoon, evening, and online courses). It offers high quality courses and programs of study. Hartnell has smaller class sizes that allow students to develop connections with faculty, and it makes available a wide array of student academic and support programs. These services include tutoring, supplemental instruction, a number of different categorical programs, a food pantry, emergency funding, and a crisis center, to name a few. A student shared about the opportunities Hartnell provides:

I didn't qualify for financial aid, but I was still able to pay [for college]. I was able to balance my [work and school] schedules because Hartnell College has different class times available. I was able to [make my job and going to school] work well together.

Another student added:

Coming out of high school, I w

She articulated:

I grew up with a huge family in a town like Salinas where everybody's lower middle class, even sometimes lower than the middle class. So then whenever I see Monterey people.. all these kids that don't need to work, their parents are paying for college, and they all have really nice things and none of them have kids. I just didn't feel like I would fit in there because I have a kid. I had my kid at 22, I have a part time job, and I need financial help with school. I just felt more accepted here. I feel like it's more diverse here than it would be in Monterey.

Overall Connection to the College

Research on student success, including studies conducted by the RP Group, has shown the importance of students feeling connected to and engaged with their college as one of the critical factors that contribute to student success.

As illustrated above, generally students feel welcome at Hartnell however, when delving deeper into students' level of , e A E * 1 A ei evi stv

Two students shared:

The good thing is that they do have security within the campus,

In the words of one ELL student:

I just feel like the teachers are very bad. They treat me like trash, and when you can't catch up with your work or you have issue with a lot of things, [teachers are not helpful].

Even though, these experiences were shared by a small number of students in the focus groups and generalizations to the entire population of older returning students and English Language Learners cannot be made, RP Group researchers felt the issues raised by these students warrant further exploration by the college.

Sources of Motivation to Attend College

When asked about what motivated them to attend college, persisters readily shared their perspectives, discussing what drove them, both internally and externally, to enroll and stay in college despite the challenges that many encountered at Hartnell and in their personal lives. Students described personal characteristics, such as perseverance, self motivation, and a sense of individual responsibility, as keys to driving their pursuit of educational achievement. Persisters also stated that improving their economic stability and being a role model to others were strong incentives to staying enrolled. Moreover, many identified the importance of the support from the people in their lives, including Hartnell personnel, family, and friends.

One persister described these kinds of internal motivations:

My driving force for me to come back is I just want an education. I want to learn. I want to improve myself. I know that getting an education and getting a degree is definitely a key to getting a better job. That's one of my reasons for coming sev on n B

I came here from Pennsylvania [and] Hartnell was disheartening at first... [When I finished] high school, I had applied [to] the Art Institute of

and information about additional supports and resources, such as crisis counseling and the Monterey Salinas Transit program.³

While students mentioned that there were some teachers and counselors who provided referrals to these services and programs, more often than not, students learned about a particular service by chance, such as from a friend or simply stumbling upon it. Focus group participants indicated that the college could do more to communicate the availability of these resources to students. As one participant said,

There's so many programs that this college has, but sometimes you don't know about them—[they are] like a hidden treasure.

Mixed Experiences with Counseling Services

In every focus group, students expressed at times feeling discouraged, frustrated, and stressed out. The persisters seemed to have resilience and adequate support, while non-persisters felt they did not get the support they needed from the college. Despite students' awareness of and

So far I've only gone to two counselors, one from [King City] and one from Salinas, and both of them are really straightforward and helpful. [The counselors told me,] "This is what you're going to need in order to graduate with your associate of science." And [the counselor in Salinas] gave me an outline of what classes I need[ed] to take so I could meet the requirements to graduate. Then [in King City] as well, they help you a lot. And, if you want to go to university, they look up schools for you and see what pretty much fits your needs, whether you want to [go to an] online university or a regular university.

Participants who had not had a positive counseling experience cited both receiving little guidance and being provided unhelpful or even inaccurate academic advice, such as being told to take more classes than they needed. Others shared that they simply felt their interaction with the counselor was impersonal, and the counselor lacked empathy or failed to pick up on the emotional needs and potential crises that students were facing. Three students explained:

My first couple [of] visits with the counselors, they forgot or they neglected to tell me what classes [on my education plan] I needed [in order] to transfer. [I felt] they were trying to keep me around for a long time. Then, I think, on my fifth visit with the counselor, and this was a different counselor, he was like, "Dude, you could have been out of here a long time ago." I don't know why people didn't tell me that.

[The counselor] told me that I didn't need that class. I'm like, "Really? But why is it on my ed plan?" I'm not sure. So I'm kind of confused right now. I have to go again [to counseling] because I don't want to be taking classes I don't need.

I talked to my counselor about my situation, about my daughter's dad, but I never mentioned the domestic violence or depression. I feel like they should have asked [me about it, though,] because [the counselor] knew that [my daughter's dad] did not want me to come to school. When it's something [like getting abused], you're [not] just going to tell everybody, "I'm getting abused" and stuff like that. I just feel [that the counselor] should have reached out a little bit better.

One student added that she needed to be knowledgeable and a strong advocate for herself to avoid taking unnecessary classes. She elaborated:

I'd like to voice my concerns. Counselors always [tell you], "Don't take more than one science class because you'll fail," but I did what I wanted and registered for multiple science classes to get done quicker. I also learned that you can find your exact paper [education plan] that counselors give you online. Then [counselors] can't tell you to take additional classes unless you need them. The whole LVN and RN program and prerequisites are online, and that's how it is for most majors, too. Then [the counselors] were telling me that I should take a sociology and an anthropology [class], and I was like, "No, it says right here that I only need one or the other." I think you need to be an advocate for yourself.

On the other side of the coin, the counseling experiences of students who were in special/categorical programs greatly differed from the experien

Several students remarked:

I feel like the teachers should be more informative to the students. I know that the teachers are aware that the majority of the students have financial struggles, so they should offer information of [where] you could get your books cheaper, [places that are]

Two students described:

I went [to] Financial Aid like last week because I'm an AB540 student. I ask[ed] somebody to help me [with] the application. They said, "Sorry, I cannot help you." Who should I go with? ...I called the number on the page, and they hung [up] on me. They never answer[ed] me. So I don't have my financial aid right now.

[The financial aid staff] are helping you, but you [can] totally tell they don't want to help you. You're waiting in line for so long and they're like, "Next in line, please," with that sarcastic voice. And then you walk up and it's "ID. What do you need?" And I [asked], "How do I do this?" "Go online," [she said]. [But] I need[ed] details, like how? ...They don't give you [any] details

In addition to "unhelpful" staff, students also noted that delays in receiving their financial aid disbursements were problematic. Participants articulated that the college's financial aid disbursement schedule significantly hinders their ability to successfully start their classes at the beginning of each semester. Many students noted often falling behind in their class assignments or even failing tests because of not having the financial means to purchase their textbooks either before or during the first few weeks of the semester. One student described:

The [financial aid staff] told me, "You're not getting your financial aid until mid

One student who lives in King City (a one hour drive from Salinas without traffic) commented that by bus, the commute actually takes two hours each way. He described:

It takes me four hours a day to go between King City and Salinas by bus because it stops in every city that is between King City and Salinas: King City to Soledad... Soledad to Greenfield... Greenfield to Gonzales... Gonzales to Chualar, and then you get to Salinas

This same student also shared that not only does he have to give himself over two hours for the trip from King City to Salinas, but he must also factor in time to get to the only bus stop in King City where he can catch the bus that will take him to Hartnell College. He added:

Hartnell has one assigned pick up spot over there [in King City], which is right across the street [from the King City campus]. It's literally like a mile [for me] just to walk [to the bus stop from my house].

When asked if the college provided assistance to cover the cost of transportation, a few students mentioned they had heard of a transportation assistance program offered by the college. However, students shared that they would most likely not qualify for the program because of income requirements, and thus they had not applied for it. Other students simply had not heard about the program. Circling back to the vast geographic region served by Hartnell College, one student pointed out that the transportation program was really focused on students who live in Salinas, not other parts of the county. One student noted:

I mean [the transportation assistance program] benefits people who live in Salinas. I used to live in Greenfield, [and] it's considered like three zones, which is triple the fare [of what a] Salinas resident [would pay].

Participants noted that aside from the commute time and financial cost associated with taking the bus, transportation issues also limit their ability to fully participate in group projects. Students wanted to work with their peers, but when they added up the time and cost of commuting, some students could not make being part of a group project work. One participant described:

[Having to take the bus] makes it hard for group projects. I was in a group project for communications. I live in Soledad and another girl lives in Greenfield, and then you have to try to meet up to get stuff done. I felt like me and her weren't involved enough because... we didn't have enough time to meet up with the other people in our group and then get back.

A second student added:

A third student added:

I'm impressed with the faculty. I think the faculty does a really good job explaining things, but then also taking personal time to come and help the students. There's been a couple times, in my math classes, where they've had a Saturday session in the morning or in the afternoon where [faculty will] come in. They'll help you prep for an exam or whatever. They really go above and beyond what they are obligated to do.

On the flip side, both persisting and non persisting students expressed the sense that some faculty members did not value the

appeal their assessments get placed in the appropriate level for math and English. The quotes below highlight students' feeling the need to be proactive and assertive with counselors to get better placement results. Two students noted:

When I took the assessment test, [staff] placed me in Math 121, the lowest level of algebra, [which] I had already taken in high school. I went up to statistics in high school. I told [the staff in the assessment office], "I already took statistics in high school." And they were like, "Well, in that case, you can move up straight to statistics." I was like, "Okay, so I had to actually tell you I already did this. I don't need this assessment in order to move me up?"

I didn't take a placement test. I just showed [staff in the assessment office] my transcripts ... [Assessment office staff] said, "Okay, you don't have to take these courses now." But, I feel that if I had just [gone] into [the assessment center] and didn't know that some of those courses could be avoided [because] I had taken [them previously], I could have been stuck in [lower level courses].

Class Availability

Students' final academic concern was the limited availability of classes they needed for their program of study simply because the course was impacted and/or not being taught during a particular semester. The lack of course availability was particularly problematic for courses required in order to transfer. Furthermore, many students noted that they worked, and classes were not always scheduled with the needs of working students in mind. For example, having a class meet once a week is better for working adults, compared to a class meeting two or three times a week. Three students described:

I really wanted to graduate with my associate's [degree] in political science, [because] it looks so much better if I get the AA. But I couldn't get [my AA] because they're not offering one of the classes next semester. I would have to [wait] until next fall to take it, and it's too late for me add [the class this semester] because [the teacher is] probably like way ahead in his class

With the scheduling, it's hard because there's so many students that [are enrolled] here. Everything gets filled so quickly. If you [don't have] priority registration for any reason you're screwed. Almost [any course] you need is full.

I work in the morning, and I don't get off work until the afternoon. A lot of the classes

The real reason I stopped [taking classes] was because work got in the way. We had just taken over the farm from our partner and our only employee went with our partner. So it was just my husband and myself doing all the farm work. And I just couldn't do classes at the same time.

My last baby got real anemic, and so I had to go to the hospital twice a week to get this medicine, [the one] they give you in your arm. So [I] just [couldn't] keep up with my classes.

Challenges with Navigating the College System

Students across the focus groups, especially first generation college goers, expressed their lack of knowledge about many of the processes, policies, and expectations that college staff, faculty, and administrators typically presume are common knowledge. The rules of navigating college include filling out a financial aid form, making sense of transfer requirements for different universities, and bringing your own Scantrons to class. The lack of "navigational skills" and the experience of constantly stumbling upon rules and ways of doing things that students "should have known about" can be very disheartening for students and can be a contributing factor to dropping out. Two students currently attending Hartnell explained:

I have felt dumb. [The financial aid staff] made me feel dumb because I asked them, "[Do] I have to bring this?" They said, "Yes", and I said, "But what is this?" "It's what it says it is." I'm just like, "I know, but I don't understand it." ...And so, I walked out of [the financial aid office]. I don't really want to come back.

Oh, the Scantrons was one of my struggles in the beginning. We had Scantrons in high school, but we didn't have to supply them. My first semester here, I was taking an evening class. And [the instructor said], "Every test will be on Scantrons." Then the test day comes, and [the instructor said], "Everybody get out your Scantrons." I'm like, "What the F are you taking about? I thought you gave those to us?" [The instructor] literally laughed at me saying, "Ha ha, silly student." She thought I was kidding, but I was like, "No, seriously, I don't know what this is or where to get it." [I don't know] if that's common knowledge, but I had no idea my first semester.

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Three students described:

There was one professor I felt that his teaching style did not match with the subject at

2 Explore changes to policies and practices in general counseling that would enhance student/counselor relationships and increase the delivery of accurate information and helpful services

Students across the focus groups frequently described general counseling as both important to their academic success and a source of numerous obstacles. Many reported that they had difficulty getting appointments, and even when they did see a counselor, they felt they were not always given accurate or consistent information. In contrast, students participating in programs with dedicated counselors, such as EOPS and MESA, told a starkly different story. These students described the critical benefits of having a personal relationship with a counselor who both knew them well and was able to convey useful information that helped them stay focused and on track toward their goals.

While it is clear that budgetary concerns and a potentially unw

bus service between key location

appeared to be their ability to balance the competing demands of family, work, and school. Furthermore, this difficult balancing act seemed exacerbated for non-persisters who had significant health issues or negative experiences with faculty and staff.

By sharing their challenges and recommendations, focus group participants have provided Hartnell with insight into some issues that can be addressed through strategic enrollment management and others issues that must be addressed to create a college culture that promotes equitable student success.

These focus groups marked an important beginning for making student perspectives more visible at Hartnell 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.

