



theRPgroup

Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Through the Gate Focus Groups:

San Joaquin Delta College Student
Perspectives

March 2018

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Introduction

Project Overview

The RP Group's Through the Gate transfer study, is a multi-phase research project aiming to identify strategies for increasing transfer among "high-leverage learners" in California Community Colleges — individuals who have completed all or most of their transfer requirements, but who do not make it "through the gate" to a four-year institution.

Phase I of the Through the Gate transfer study comprised a quantitative analysis to profile the non-transfer students and identify where our state is suffering the greatest transfer leaks. The quantitative analysis revealed that between 2010-2015, 292,556 students met or became close to meeting the transfer requirements, but did not transfer to a four-year college. Furthermore, when examining their enrollment status as of spring 2016, a significant proportion of these non-transfer students who were at or near the transfer gate had exited the system without earning a college credential. Differences among this non-transfer population also emerged across race/ethnicity and region. Results revealed that once achieving the requirements for transfer, Latino and Native American students are less likely to make it through-the-gate while African-American students overwhelmingly step through the gate to continue their journey toward baccalaureate completion.

Phase II will draw from Phase I to ask non-transfer students why they are not transferring and what is needed to get them through the transfer gate. To prepare for Phase II research activities, one college from each target region (Inland Empire and Central Valley) was invited to participate in Phase II planning activities that included focus groups with current students who were at- or near-the-transfer gate.

This report provides a summary of the findings from two focus groups conducted in fall of 2017 at San Joaquin Delta College (SJDC), a college in the Central Valley region with the goal of gaining additional insights into the targeted student's transfer journey to help inform the project's Phase II research activities.

In This Report

The following section provides a description of the methodology used by the researchers from the RP Group, including the process of engaging students in the focus groups, participant characteristics, the key questions pursued, and themes that arose in the students' feedback.. This section is followed by a brief discussion of how focus group data can be most meaningfully interpreted by college administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as an overview of focus group findings.

Methodology

Student Recruitment Process

To prepare for the student recruitment process, the Institutional Research (IR) Director at SJDC created a randomized list of students enrolled during fall 2017 and had not transferred to a university, who fit the following student profiles:

1. **Transfer-prepared students (Near the gate):** Completed 60 or more transferable units, 2.0+ GPA, and had not completed transfer-level math and/or English.
2. **Transfer-ready students (At the gate):**
 - a. Completed 60 or more transferable units, 2.0+ GPA, and completed transfer-level math and English.; and/or
 - b. Earned an Associate Degree of Transfer (AD-T).

The IR Director then emailed students an electronic invitation and sent text messages with dates and times for the focus groups. The recruitment period was open for approximately one month. Three focus groups were planned for fall 2017, but only two focus groups (transfer-prepared and transfer-ready (Group 2b) were conducted due to the low number of students who had earned an AD-T but were still enrolled at San Joaquin Delta (12 students total).

Participant Characteristics

In November 2017, the RP Group conducted two focus groups with SJDC students, focusing in particular on students' transfer journey, barriers they encountered along the way, what they found helpful as they worked toward their transfer goal, and what advice they had for college administrators, faculty, staff, and other students to help students transfer.

A total of 20 students attended these focus groups, with the majority being first-generation (60%), female (70%), of Hispanic background (55%), and on average 30 years old (see Table 1).¹ For the transfer-prepared group, the majority of students were planning to transfer to a California State University (CSU), while a larger percentage students from the transfer-ready group indicated plans to transfer to a University of California (UC) institution (40% vs. 30% who indicated CSU). The characteristics of these students are fairly representative of the general student population at SJDC based on fall 2016 headcount data.²

¹ Student characteristics were collected via a Demographics Information Sheet students completed when they arrived at the focus group session.

² Data from California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart for SJDC in the fall 2016 reported 56% female, 46% Hispanic.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics by Target Student Population

Characteristic	Transfer-Prepared		Transfer-Ready		All Participants	
	Total	%	Total	%%	Total	%
Gender						
Female	5	50%	8	80%	13	65%
Male	5	50%	2	20%	7	35%
Other	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Ethnicity						
African American/Black	0	0%	1	10%	1	5%
Asian	0	0%	3	30%	3	15%
Filipino	1	10%	0	0%	1	5%
Hispanic	6	60%	5	50%	11	55%
Other	1	10%	1	10%	2	10%
White	2	20%	0	0%	2	10%
Two or More Races						
First Generation	6	60%	6	60%	12	60%
Four-Year Institution – Primary Choice						
UC	1	10%	4	40%	5	25%
CSU	9	90%	3	30%	12	60%
Private	0	0%	1	10%	1	5%
Out-of-State	0	0%	1	10%	1	5%
Blank	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Overall Total	10	-	10	-	20	-

Note. Student characteristics collected via demographic sheets collected during focus group sessions.

Key Findings: Common Themes across Focus Groups

The two focus groups were scheduled in a room in the Science and Mathematics building at SJDC. To gain insight into students' experiences of their transfer journey, the focus group facilitator asked specific questions in the following topic areas: students' transfer journey, the barriers they experienced, the resources that supported them, and advice they had for the college and other students to improve transfer success. Each focus group conversation was audio recorded with students' consent and then transcribed for analysis.

Several key themes emerged from the two focus groups.

Reflections on Transfer Journey

Perceived Viability of Transfer and Degree Options

All students, from both the transfer-ready and transfer-prepared groups, were aware of the Associate Degree of Transfer (AD-T) option at the college and all were planning to transfer with an associate's degree. One difference noted between the two groups, was the slightly higher percentage of transfer-ready students than transfer-prepared students reported planning to complete an AD-T prior to transferring (70% vs. 50%, respectively).

When asked why students wanted to earn a degree before transfer, a majority cited the desire for financial stability and a back-up plan for the future as their primary reason. As one transfer-ready student shared:

Finance reasons. The fact that you don't know the future. What I mean by that is just in case anything happens or I can't continue to attend school at least [I] have some degree to fall back on.

Many students from both groups also expressed perceptions of earning a degree at SJDC as a more cost-effective strategy to build their credentials and boost their resumes. One student from each group commented:

Because it's cheaper to get [a degree] here than to go somewhere else and get it.

I see it as a way to kind of pad your resume down the line. Oh, I have an associate's degree in multiple fields.

Goal Changes Perceived as a Strategy to Success

One subset of questions focused on students' original and current transfer pathway, and not surprisingly, many of the students shared having current academic goals that were different from when they first started. However, surprisingly, almost all the students who changed their majors, perceived the change positively and framed the experience in a way that suggested they perceived the change as a strategy for succeeding. Below are comments from two students highlighting how the flexibility to change their majors allowed them to find a better personal fit for their respective situations:

I know that for me when I took a certain class, I started realizing this class wasn't for me. Therefore, this major wasn't what I was really looking into, so when I started to kind of look on Assist.org, I started finding other majors that better fit what I felt more comfortable with.

I originally started going [to school] for nursing and I ended up taking a break and... I got married and I had a kid and I changed my major to liberal studies, so I could become a teacher because that fits better with my likes and my family. And it seems like it's a better fit for me, so I changed it to be happier, I guess.

However, one student did note the delays in completing and the additional costs of changing majors, but followed up the remark with a perceived benefit despite costs to time and money:

Yeah, I've actually changed my major twice. It's extended how long I've had to be here, which means more classes and more money. But at the same time, I also have more units and I'm actually getting five degrees now instead of just the one just because I've taken so many classes all over the place.

Concerns about Transfer

Another question about students' transfer journey asked them to imagine their first day at the transfer institution and what that experience would be like. Students expressed excitement coupled with anxieties around "relearning the ropes" at the institution and increased costs. As one student reflected:

I'd be happy because I'm like I finally did [it] and I'm here and I'm the first [in my family] to be at a college, [and] to transfer into a four-year university, but I'd be scared [and worried] because it's new. I have to get used to the classes again. It's pricier. I'm probably going to get lost, but that's just my main concern.

Resources that Support Transfer

Students were asked to share information about the resources they found helpful in supporting their transfer goals.

Use of Web-Based Tools and Information

Web-based tools and information were cited by students in both focus groups as primary resources that supported their transfer goals. Students identified Assist.org, an online repository of articulated courses in California's public post-secondary institutions³ helping them with their transfer planning and identified the UC's Transfer Admissions Planner (TAP), an online education planner for prospective students to plan and track coursework required for transfer into a UC.⁴ Information from the SJDC's website, as well as the transfer institutions' websites were also cited as resources students used to gather information to further support their transfer planning.

Special Programs and Individuals Within and Outside the College

Students from both groups cited the specific programs on campus, college faculty (both instructional and counseling), and peers as valuable resources supporting their transfer journey. Programs such as Math, Engineering, and Science Achievement (MESA)⁵ and Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS)⁶ provide students with high-touch support services

³ <http://www.assist.org/web-assist/welcome.html>

⁴ <https://uctap.universityofcalifornia.edu/students/>

⁵ <https://www.deltacollege.edu/dept/mesa/>

⁶ <https://www.deltacollege.edu/dept/eops/>

that students value. One student reflected on their EOPS experience and how it helped her get on track with her goals:

I was in this program here called EOPS and that really help me get on my path because I'm first generation here. None of my family ever went to college. Starting out, I was really lost. I didn't really know what path to take and it was very confusing and when I signed up with EOPS three years ago, they helped me get on track. They helped me build a plan, figure out what I wanted to do because before that I was just taking classes because I didn't really know what needed to be done or how.

In addition, counselors were also viewed as a valuable asset on campus, one student expressed the importance of seeing a counselor:

Use the resources, like now that you know that they're there actually use them. Don't just, you know, know that there's counselors like I did. And I didn't ever talk to a counselor until recently and if I would have done that way sooner, it would have been so much better, so actually use what's available.

Barriers to Transfer

During the focus groups, students were provided a verbal list of common reasons that prevent students from transferring. Reasons included but were not limited to: balancing personal and work life, financial barriers, not applying, limited course availability, first choice was not available, and being place bound. Over 70% of all students from the focus groups, identified missing courses, completion of transfer-level math, and financial concerns as factors preventing them from transferring.

Limited Course Availability

Students in both focus groups identified limited course availability as one factor preventing them from transfer. They cited the need for more sections, more flexible scheduling options, and consistency in offerings. One student shared the challenges with completing required coursework in a timely manner when courses are not offered consistently each semester:

They offer [courses] here and they weren't [always available]. They will skip a semester and you have to wait another semester.

Students recognized factors affecting course availability, such as the number of faculty teaching disciplines. As one student shared:

There's only like a few teachers that teach the course, so that's another thing too.

Completion of Transfer-Level Math

Students from both focus groups cited math as a barrier to transfer. Eight out of the ten transfer-prepared students were placed in remedial math courses and so identified the challenge of moving through the math sequence to get to the required transferable math course. Many of these students lamented on not taking math courses sooner in their academic careers:

I think for me too what I [would've] done differently knowing now was probably... when I first started I didn't start taking math classes. I started after two years because I was afraid like I said, I'm really bad at it. So I was afraid of that and I didn't want to start off bad already. That's why I started later. But I feel like if I would have just did it and, you know, dealt with it, then I wouldn't be struggling now with it.

Recommendations Based on Students' Voices

Students from both focus groups were asked to reflect on their transfer journey and offer advice for college administrators, faculty, staff, and others students on how to support students' transfer success. Most of the advice reflected the need for the college to be more student-centered.

Improve Marketing of Resources on Campus

Many of the students expressed the importance of marketing the resources available at the college to students early and often to ensure they are aware of the resources.

One student reflected:

I think just to kind of emphasize on [the] importance of looking at your resources. For instance, I personally came to Delta College at 18 and I felt like a little fish in a big pond, so I left. I left for about two to three years. I was gone and then I came back. When I came back I was introduced to a club on campus called the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA)⁷. From LMSA, the president actually told me about MESA, which introduced me to MESA and being a part of MESA...being around so many people that are first generation that have a goal in mind to transfer that helped me to continue to view that goal.

Another student shared a similar sentiment:

Advertise all the help that's available because I'm just starting to learn. I mean I've been here a while. I'm just starting to see how much that Delta really offers as far as help goes. Whereas when I first started I felt like I was doing it all by myself, so I think if they kind of connected you more with counselors and things like that, the tutoring centers. I think it would help a lot more people succeed early on.

Additional ideas offered to the college included offering more transfer-related events and workshops. One student, referencing "Transfer Night" spoke to how because of the limited availability she had to choose between attending classes or the event:

Yeah, it's a one-time thing because I have to choose whether I want to go there or go to my class. And what if I miss important information and the teacher said something and I don't have contacts in that class and I just missed it? So I feel like they should do more of that, but different days and different times.

⁷ <http://lmsasjdc.wixsite.com/home>

Offer More Sections of Courses and More Faculty (Instructional and Counseling)

In both groups, students identified limited availability of course offerings and services as a result of the lack of sufficient numbers of faculty to teach sections and advise students in the counseling department. As mentioned, students identified the need for more consistent and flexible course offerings to ensure they can complete in a timely manner. In addition, they identified the need for more dedicated faculty (instructional and counseling) to ensure that all students were getting the courses and advice/counseling they need to meet their goals. Two students shared how all the “good” counselors were so busy, that it was difficult to meet with them:

This one counselor...she's really good and then sometimes kind of hard to get to her.

Sometimes I would go to the website and made an appointment, but they would always be like... no one's available.

Re-Examine College Practices Inside and Outside of the Classroom

Although not consistently cited across students in both groups, a few students did identify college practices that appeared to be impending transfer success. Inside the classroom, students shared experiences where there were textbook requirements for classes they ended up not even using them:

[T]here's been some professors that add a book after that wasn't originally on the list. That's a big one. I've had several classes where there's one book we don't even really use.

Outside the classroom, students expressed concerns about the college's priority registration process, that appeared to penalize students who met a maximum unit threshold, even when the students only needed one or two additional courses to successfully complete their goal. As one student shared:

I used to be like a priority, so I'd get really early dates, but now because I'm over the units where it's like, well, now I need to transfer, my date was really late, so I'm like on the waiting list for two classes, even though, those are required to transfer.

Even though only a couple of students identified these practices, re-examining the process for these practices with a focus on the impacts these practices and similar practices have on students may help uncover strategies that will help make them more student-centered.

Implications for Phase II

The focus groups conducted at San Joaquin Delta College will be used to inform the planning of Phase II activities that include the development of questions for an online student survey and student interviews to help us better understand why students who appear to have met or nearly met all the transfer requirements are not transferring. Listening to the voices of students from each of the groups targeted will be essential to helping us develop a better understanding of the barriers to transfer students are experiencing and what can be done to facilitate this transition for significantly more students.

Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group 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.

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