



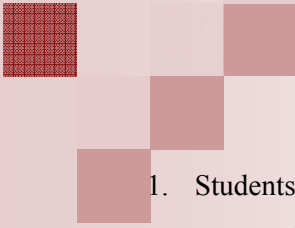
**Fresh Look Focus Group Study
Executive Summary
Fall 2005**

**Prepared by:
Skyline College
Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness**



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Highlight of the Findings

1. Students who participated in the focus group study value the interactions and differing perspectives of a diverse learning community.
2. Student participants expect to gain knowledge, skills and abilities that will prepare them for life and help them to make informed decisions.
3. Student participants expect their college experience to facilitate the attainment of their personal, educational and career goals.
4. Student participants respond well to a high touch environment and approach to learning including: friendliness of staff, helpfulness of instructors and a wide range of support services.
5. Student participants want more communications about events and activities on campus, as well as more information on the various services available.
6. Student participants appreciate the support they receive through services and the interest and concern in their success they receive from faculty and staff. These expressions of support motivate them.
7. Student participants believe that college provides the opportunity for self-discovery and self-actualization. Consequently, they expect to have access to a variety of classes, programs and services that will facilitate this process.
8. Student participants expect their college experience to provide: 1) Quality of Instructional Component, 2) Availability of Resources, and 3) Environment Conducive to Learning.
9. When asked why they picked Skyline, most said that it was close to home and that they had heard Skyline College was small and not as crowded as other campuses in the area. Very few students had any strong impressions of Skyline prior to coming to the college.



10. When asked why they were attending college, the overwhelming response was to improve their opportunities for a good job. The other two primary reasons were to gain confidence, and because education was a family value.

11. Most of the focus group participants had heard about or experienced City College of San Francisco, College of San Mateo, Cañada College, Foothill College and De Anza College, and had definite opinions and perceptions about each college.

12. Students responded most positively to college schedules that were comparatively thick and to those schedules with images that depicted variety and options.

13. Students who participated in the focus group study responded well to images that showed a wide range of possibilities which translated into their desire for self-actualization and self-discovery.

14. Images that showed students interacting with staff and faculty in modern facilities (i.e., up-to-date labs and equipment) were appealing to most student participants because of their strong desire and expectation to receive this type of support and individualized attention in a serious and well-equipped academic setting.

15. Student participants responded positively to images of diverse students, but indicated that they did not like those images of people posing because it looked too contrived. Additionally, they preferred the images of diversity that reflected diversity of ethnicity



OVERVIEW

The purpose of this focus group study is to provide information for the development of the marketing plan for the Fresh Look Project. This focus group study was used to assess the value propositions and perceptions of students at Skyline College. The information from the focus group study will be used to inform marketing and communications efforts as well as to inform program and services decisions.

Students were recruited on campus during peak class hours and asked to complete an application if they were interested in participating in the focus group study. In order to achieve some randomization, over 200 applications were collected. Participants were selected according to certain demographic characteristics (i.e., day and evening class takers, education goal, age and ethnicity) so that they would reflect the characteristics of the college as a whole. However, because the sample was largely a convenience sample and not a true random sample with statistically significant levels of confidence, the opinions and perceptions may or may not be representative of the opinions of the entire primary and secondary market segment.

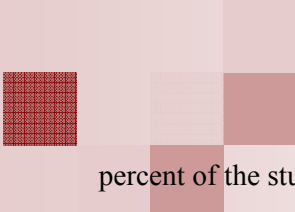
Nevertheless, the focus group study has helped to determine patterns which can be validated through previous as well as follow up research (i.e., Faces of the Future Survey 2003).

Participants were divided into seven focus group sessions, and each participant received a co-payment of \$50 plus a meal or snack. The focus group sessions ran on October 4th and 5th from 4-6 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. and on October 11th at 12-2 p.m. and 4-6 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. at the Ecker and Associates research facility in South San Francisco. The Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness compiled the results and shared them with college constituencies at the end of October, then with the marketing consultants (Mission Minded) to inform their marketing planning efforts.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Who are the focus group student participants?

The focus groups consisted of sixty-two students from across the college recruited during peak hours for morning, afternoon and evening classes, in the quad, in front of the Learning Center and at the coffee bar in front of the theater. Over two-hundred applications of interest were collected and, of those, eighty-four students were selected to fill the seven focus group sessions. The student participants varied in age, ethnicity, education goal, enrollment status and interests. Half of the students were part-time, and about one-third of them were day-time only students while 34% were both day and evening, and 35% were evening only students. Seventy-six




percent of the student participants were between the ages of 17-28, while 7% were 29-39, and the remaining 7% were forty or older. Approximately 15% of the student participants have been at Skyline for less than one year, while 63% have been at Skyline for two to four semesters, and the remaining 22% for five semesters or more. The majority of the student participants were award- seeking with or without transfer (79%), while the other student participants were taking classes to upgrade their current job skills, for personal enjoyment or were undecided. The student participants are pursuing a wide variety of majors and areas of interest including: engineering, nursing, bio tech, business, anthropology, criminal justice, physical education, biology, psychology, computer science, communications and art . While the majority of student participants have attended only Skyline College, about 44% of the student participants have attended or are concurrently attending another college or university including:

- City College of San Francisco
- College of San Mateo
- Foothill College
- Cañada College
- Santa Monica College
- Contra Costa College
- Chabot College
- Laney College
- Sacramento City College
- University of the Philippines
- Cal State University Northridge
- Sonoma State University
- UC Berkeley
- San Francisco State University

Why did they decide to go to college?

When asked why they decided to go to college, students revealed a number of common themes.

Pathway to Success. The overwhelming response to this question was to improve their opportunities for a good job. The student participants believed that education is a path to success in life. They believed it is the means to a better job and a brighter future. Student participants agreed that a college degree would help them achieve their goal of a more comfortable lifestyle. A number of student participants shared that they had been working



in a variety of industries (i.e., airline, technology and civil engineering) for a number of years and had gotten laid off one or more times as a result of the downturn in the technology industry and the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They returned to college because they believed that going back to school for retraining and/or to find a new career path was their best strategy for staying employed in their field of interest.

Esteem. Student participants commented on the confidence and esteem they have gained from their college experience. Several student participants who were reentry students told about their uncertainty of returning to college after raising a family or being out of school for a number years. They claimed that their motivation for returning to college was largely due to their decision to improve their self-esteem and be a role-model for their family.

Family Values. Many of the student participants also said that education is a family value and that their families encouraged and even expected them to go to college. A number of student participants indicated they were first generation college students. These student participants expressed a strong sense of family obligation but noted that their commitment to getting a good education was as much a commitment to family as it was to personally fulfilling a dream of theirs.

Student Participant Quotes:

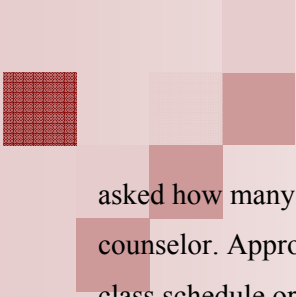
“My family is very educated and professional from the Philippines. When we migrated here it was difficult to see my mom struggle with two jobs. I decided that I needed to go back to school to get a good job and reach my potential. My boss was very encouraging. I joined a club and started really loving Skyline.”

“I thought for a long time it was too late for me to go to college. For me it’s like fulfilling a dream.”

ACCESS

How do you usually learn about courses, programs and services at Skyline?

When asked to recall how they usually heard or learned about course and program offerings and services at Skyline, the answers were mixed. There was no consistency to their responses which may indicate a lack of awareness of the array of programs and services available. About one-third of the student participants said they received information from their counselors. However, when




asked how many sought out counselors, only about half responded that they had met with a counselor. Approximately one-quarter of the students said they got their information from the class schedule or the student handbook. A number of students mentioned reading about information on posted fliers but that it was difficult to find current and relevant information on these postings. While students commented on the benefit and usefulness of Websmart, they did not make much mention of other aspects of the Skyline website. Other students agreed that word of mouth (e.g. family, friends and other students/classmates) was their best source of information. Most of the student participants agreed that they would like to see more communications on events and activities on campus, as well as information on the various services available.

What are some of the support services you have used or know about on campus and describe your experience in using these services.

Student participants were asked to talk about the student support services that they have used and knew about at Skyline College. The majority of student participants mentioned TLC-The Learning Center. They all agreed that their experience in the tutoring center had been very positive because it was easy to use, the tutors were knowledgeable, they had access to tutors on a variety of subjects, and computers were readily available. Many of the student participants also talked about their knowledge of and experience with the MESA program. Most agreed that the program was very useful and that the staff and tutors were very helpful. About half of the student participants talked about the counseling services and their mixed positive and negative experiences with counselors. Some agreed that the counselors were very helpful and knowledgeable, while others said they were not.

Other services and program-type services mentioned, although inconsistently, were as follows:

- Library
- Health Center
- Career Center
- Transfer Center
- Financial Aid
- EOPS
- Women In Transition Program
- Honors Transfer Program
- Puente



Some comments were made about the lack of advertising for these services. There was agreement in one session that the offices where these services were housed were not clearly marked and therefore difficult to find. Students in each group were interested in hearing about the various services on campus and particularly about those they had not accessed. Overall, student participants expressed great appreciation for these services and were pleased with the variety of resources and the level of support and friendliness they received from the staff.

Student Participant Quotes:

“The EOPS program helps students in financial need. The counselors are a great help. The services helped me as a re-entry student.”

“The librarian is a lifesaver. They find the book and help you research the information.”

“I didn’t know how to use the free money I got from financial aid. They explained how to fill out the application and withdraw funds.”

What do you usually do with your class schedule once you have decided on classes?

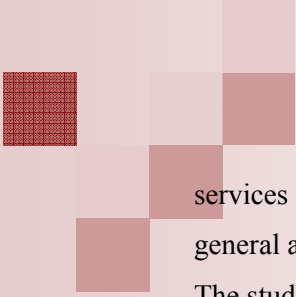
Student participants were asked about their use of the class schedule. The majority of student participants said that they kept their schedule throughout the semester as a reference or source of information. A few students said that they kept their schedules beyond the coordinating semester so that they could continue to track their education plan, while others said that they discarded their schedules altogether and knew that they could pick up another schedule on campus if they needed another one.

URBAN MYTHS

What do they think of the competition?

Student participants were asked about colleges in the area they have heard about and how they perceived these colleges. Most student participants had heard about or experienced City College of San Francisco, College of San Mateo, Cañada College, Foothill College and De Anza College. Their perceptions of these colleges are as follows:

City College of San Francisco: Crowded campus with a lot of rowdy students who are largely young, immature and don’t take their academic studies seriously. The campus is not safe and has a high crime rate. Parking is extremely difficult and inaccessible. The



services are unreliable and the lines for registration are very long. The instructors in general are “harder” than Skyline instructors, but not nearly as helpful nor accessible. The student-teacher ratio is very high which makes it hard to find teachers who care about the students. There is a wide selection of classes, and their football, science, film and culinary arts programs are excellent. They also have a wonderful library.

College of San Mateo: Less diverse than Skyline with a lot of young students who like to smoke. This is a hang out for “slackers.” The weather is nice and the campus is large and pretty. It is a livelier campus than Skyline with more social activities and events. Parking is inconvenient because you have to walk a long distance to get from the parking lot to class. The student-teacher ratio is very high. There is a broader range of classes and programs and their astronomy, music, communications and nursing programs are excellent.


Cañada College: Small, quiet campus on a hill with modern facilities. Summers are hot with no air conditioned buildings. Good programs in team sports and engineering.

Foothill College: A good school that serves a high socio-economic group of students. They have a high transfer rate and students receive a lot of assistance with all of their education goals. Students are serious and academically oriented and possibly better prepared when they go to college. Instructors are good and well qualified. The school is built on hills, which makes it very difficult to navigate and the parking is very inconvenient.

De Anza College: A lot of transfer students because they have a very good transfer program. They are on the quarter system with shorter-length classes.

Why did they choose Skyline?

About half of the student participants said that Skyline College was their first choice when deciding on a college. The other half said that Skyline was an alternate choice after considering their options of going to a CSU or UC first, or after attending another college or university. When asked why they picked Skyline, most said that it was close to home and that they had heard Skyline was small and not as crowded as other campuses in the area. Very few students had any strong impressions of Skyline prior to coming to the college except that many thought it might have a similar atmosphere to high school (e.g. immature students and instructors who are not passionate about teaching or care about the students). In addition, they knew that college was a



cheap option for higher education and that it offered a stepping stone to transfer or to a new career path.

Student Participant Quotes:

“I thought it would be a good place to spend time figuring out what to study.”

“I thought I wouldn’t find serious mature students at Skyline but I have.”

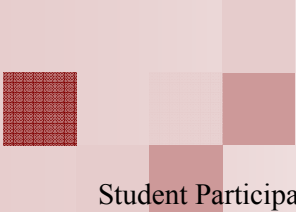
VALUES & EXPECTATIONS

What is most important in their educational experience?

The student participants were asked to talk about the most important aspects of their educational experience at Skyline College. A number of student participants commented on the importance of a college education as a way in which to excel in life and to achieve their long and short-term goals (i.e., educational and job-related goals). For many, the college experience was a means to an end. Subsequently, they expected their college experience at Skyline to facilitate their achievement and sense of accomplishment but not without challenges.

A second important aspect of their educational experience at Skyline was the knowledge they gained. They believed that “knowledge is power” and through their educational experience they expect to gain a great depth and breadth of knowledge that would help them make informed decisions in life. Moreover, they expected that their educational experience would prepare them for the world and expected that what they learn would be applicable to real life situations. They believed that with the increased knowledge they expected to gain from their educational experience, they would gain more respect from their peers and society at large.

A third important aspect of their educational experience had to do with becoming well-rounded individuals. Many student participants commented on the importance of having access to a variety of subjects outside of their majors and areas of interest and the freedom to choose their course or program of study. They believed that it was important and highly desirable to be exposed to new topics, concepts and activities that they may never have considered before attending college. They also believed that it was important to experience interactions with a diverse college community (i.e., other students, faculty and staff).



Student Participant Quotes:

“I want to be involved in personally enriching experiences and be a better person overall. Learn things that I can take with me.”

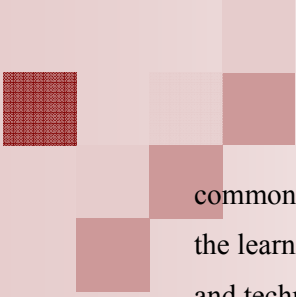
“I don’t just want to study things for my major. I want to be there and take anything that interests me and will help me grow and learn.”

“School allows you to be on top of your game. I see friends who aren’t going to college are not getting anywhere and have no goals. College allows you to make conscious decisions about your own life.”

What qualities do they look for in a college?

Students were asked to describe their expectations of a college or school. They described a number of qualities that were based on their experiences at Skyline and at other colleges and universities. Their top three expectations fell into three categories: 1) Quality of Instructional Component, 2) Availability of Resources, and 3) Environment Conducive to Learning.

1. **Quality of Instructional Component.** The student participants consistently commented on the importance of working with their instructors and counselors to achieve their goals. They stated that they have learned to appreciate the importance of a supportive relationship with their instructors and realized the significance of working together. Student participants also commented that they expected to experience instructors who were passionate about what they taught, who were approachable, available to help them when needed and who cared about the students learning. They also expected a wide variety of course offerings that would help to expand their horizons, promote their self discovery and facilitate their career and other life choices. They also expected to be challenged intellectually and expected their instructors to take their academic success as seriously as they did.
2. **Availability of Resources.** The student participants commented on their expectation of resources in a number of areas. They expected and valued the use and availability of support services such as a comprehensive library, a tutoring center and computer labs. They expected and valued the use and availability of financial aid. They expected to find support services that were specific to their needs such as the MESA Program, the Honors Transfer Program and Puente. They expected that these services would help to establish a



common bond with other students and thereby facilitate friendships and connectedness to the learning community. The student participants valued the use of up-to-date equipment and technology and expected the college to provide these in preparation for other life experiences.

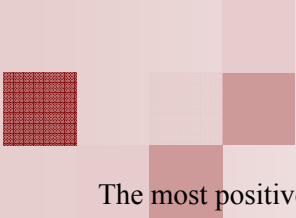
3. **Environment Conducive to Learning.** Student participants agreed that an atmosphere with few (social) distractions was most conducive to academic success. They preferred a small campus to a large campus and expected low student teacher ratios. They expected a campus that had sufficient and convenient parking and was easily accessible. They expected a safe environment and one that was casual with a laid back atmosphere. Student participants commented frequently on the lack of social events and activities at Skyline and although they preferred an atmosphere with few distractions and one with mature serious-minded students, most agreed that having the full college experience meant having access to a variety of cultural and social events and activities on campus. The single most common thread in all of the comments around environment pertained to diversity. The student participants valued a college that has students, faculty and staff who are ethnically and socially diverse. They appreciated the differences and believed that it made their college experience an infinitely richer experience. Finally, they expected to receive the help they need from a friendly and welcoming staff.

Student Participant Quotes:

“Skyline offers the opportunity to develop familial type relationships.”

What expectations would they have of these different colleges based on the cover images of their schedules?

The student participants were provided with a variety of schedules of California community colleges and asked to describe their impressions of each college based on the cover images. They were then asked whether or not those images appealed to them and why. The images on the cover of the schedules ranged from very academic with portrayals of technology, science and math and students studying in labs, to very non-academic with images of girls' volleyball teams, theater arts and groups of students having fun posing in front of a school building. Other images included abstract paintings and photographs of natural settings such as a beach and a forest. Overall, student participants did not respond well to single images such as the girls' sports team or the beach. Nor did they respond well to images that were non-academic or abstract.



The most positive responses were elicited by the thicker schedules and to those schedules with images that depicted variety and options.

Consistent with their values and expectations, student participants responded well to college images that showed a wide range of possibilities which translated into their desire for self-actualization and self-discovery. Images of a mix of academic and vocational programs, as well as support services and campus activities drew strong positive responses. In addition, images that showed students interacting with staff and faculty in modern facilities (i.e., up-to-date labs and equipment) were appealing to most student participants because of their strong desire and expectation to receive this type of support and individualized attention in a serious and well-equipped academic setting. Student participants also responded positively to images of diverse students, but indicated that they did not like those images of people posing because it looked too contrived. Additionally, they preferred the images of diversity that reflected diversity of ethnicity as well as diversity of age, lifestyle and interests. They also liked covers that included information about campus diversity and cultural events. Although students liked the images of students enjoying campus activities and socializing, for the most part they agreed that colleges that portrayed images of fun with little or no emphasis on academics were not appealing. This was consistent with their serious drive and commitment to education as a stepping stone to a better way of life. It also explained their strong positive reaction to images of students with graduation regalia signifying accomplishment and a means to an end.

Finally, student participants had mixed reaction to one image of trees. Although they agreed that it portrayed a campus that is quiet, tranquil and conducive to studying, they did not like the abstractness of the image. They could not get a sense from the image as to whether it was a college where serious-minded students might attend.

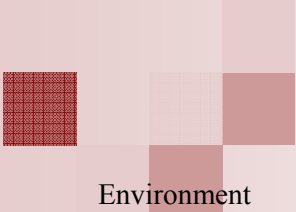
PERSPECTIVES

Which words do they think of when they think of Skyline College?

To further explore the student participants' image of Skyline College, they were asked to consider their impressions and experiences at Skyline College. They were then given several minutes to record words or phrases that came to mind as they thought about Skyline College. Afterwards, they were asked to share their impressions. Their comments fell into five logical categories:

1) Environment, 2) Faculty, 3) Staff and Services, 4) Students, and 5) Programs.

The first category, Environment, received the greatest number of comments and impressions. The top six words and phrases that student participants used related to this category were as follows:



Environment

1. Quiet, serious and easy to stay focused
2. Small, intimate and cozy
3. Foggy and cold
4. Friendly, warm and welcoming
5. Beautiful natural surroundings with great vistas and fresh air
6. Caring, supportive and pro-students

The next category, Faculty, received the second greatest number of comments and impressions.

The top five words and phrases that student participants used related to this category were as follows:

Faculty

1. Motivating and encouraging
2. Helpful and available
3. Interested in students' success
4. Knowledgeable, well-qualified and professional
5. Approachable and personable

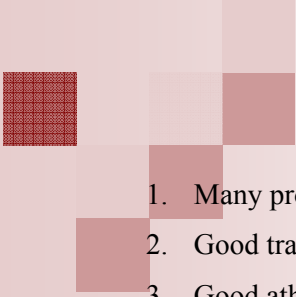
The third category, Staff and Services, received a relatively large number of comments and impressions. The top five words and phrases that student participants used related to this category were as follows:

1. A lot of great learning resources
2. Opportunities to join clubs
3. Special assistance for re-entry students
4. User-friendly services
5. Helpful, friendly, supportive staff

The fourth category, Students, received a moderate number of comments and impressions. The top five words and phrases that student participants used related to this category were as follows:

1. Diverse
2. Serious and mature
3. Successful
4. Willing to help, not competitive
5. Friendly

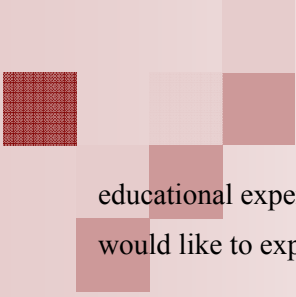
The fifth category, Programs, received the fewest number of comments and impressions. The top five words and phrases that student participants used related to this category were as follows:

- 
1. Many programs and courses to choose from
 2. Good transfer program
 3. Good athletics program
 4. Challenging and fun
 5. Trademark programs: Auto Tech, Bio Tech and Cosmetology

MEETING NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

Based on the images that student participants shared, they had an impression of Skyline that was consistent with many of their values and expectations. Student participants were serious about their academic endeavors and preferred an environment that is conducive to learning: One that offered few distractions so that they could stay focused, and one in which faculty, staff and services supported their learning so that they would have a good chance at being successful. Consequently, they believed that the weather, the landscape, the caring and supportive faculty and staff and the mature, serious-minded students met their needs and their expectations. They were delighted with the qualifications of the faculty and believed that Skyline offered a high quality of learning with several reputable programs. They were also pleased that the faculty were readily available and that communication with faculty was relatively easy. They had the impression that Skyline offered a wide variety of classes which helped them in determining a career/life path and achieving their educational goals. Student participants were also impressed by the variety of learning support services available (i.e., tutoring centers) and grateful for the attention they received for their particular needs (i.e., re-entry programs and financial aid services). Student participants viewed the college as a wonderfully diverse community of learners. They appreciated the varying perspectives of their peers and resonated with the cultural differences. They valued relationships and relationship building and because of this they were positively impressed by the friendly, non-competitive nature of their peers.

While the majority of images and impressions were favorable, there were a number of comments about the inconvenience of the construction. About one-quarter of the student participants knew about the various construction projects and that a new student center was being built. The majority of students did not know what was being built. Their impression was merely of the discomfort it was creating. In addition, many student participants commented on the lack of student activities and opportunities to socialize. Many of these students have had the opportunity to attend or visit another college where student activities in the quad were a regular part of the



educational experience. While they agreed that they preferred a quiet, studious environment, they would like to experience a more socially active campus environment.

Participant Quotes

“I’ve had great teachers who instill a sense of responsibility so you really can’t slack off. That’s helped me a lot.”

“Students are mature and a good support system. I’ve made friends with people not my own age. It’s been a good experience for me.”

“I was ready to experience average and I’ve been pleasantly surprised. The teachers are great. A few burn out teachers but mostly good.”

“Skyline is a place to restart your education. You get a feel for college life and independence.”

“Skyline has exposed me to the real world. I learned how to prioritize. It’s a very welcoming environment.”


“Skyline has a lot of diversity. You get a chance to connect with different people from different cultures.”

“I transferred to State and now I’m back. Skyline has more intimacy. You have the opportunity to bond with faculty and other students. It gives you a strong base to continue on and the confidence you need to progress.”

CONCLUSIONS

Student participants expressed a number of values and expectations related to their post-secondary educational experience at Skyline and other institutions including:

1. Diversity Appreciation. Student participants value the interactions and differing perspectives of a diverse learning community.
2. Knowledge Gain. Student participants expect to gain knowledge, skills and abilities that will prepare them for life and help them to make informed decisions.

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3. Goal Attainment. Student participants expect their college experience to facilitate the attainment of their personal, educational and career goals.
 4. High Touch. Student participants respond well to a high touch environment and approach to learning including: friendliness of staff, helpfulness of instructors and a wide range of support services.
 5. Connectedness. Student participants want more communications about events and activities on campus, as well as more information on the various services available.
 6. Support. Student participants appreciate the support they receive through services and the interest and concern in their success they receive from faculty and staff. These expressions of support motivate them.
 7. Access. Student participants believe that college provides the opportunity for self-discovery and self-actualization. Consequently, they expect to have access to a variety of classes, programs and services that will facilitate this process.

IMPLICATIONS AND THOUGHT POINTS

The college can increase its overall effectiveness by offering programs, courses, support services, communications and marketing that are closely aligned to students' values and expectations.

Branding

What image do we want to portray in the community?

Which programs, services and type of environment do we want to be known for?

What makes us unique and sets us apart from other colleges in the area?

Learning Environment

What approach to learning do we want to take (e.g. modes of delivery, learning communities and accelerated programs)?

Which cultural and social activities do we want to provide?

Which programs and courses do we want to offer?

Which support services do we want to promote?

What type of facilities do we want to provide (e.g. equipment, technology and learning centers)

Communications

How can we best communicate with our students about the various programs, services and activities?

How can we best communicate with the community?