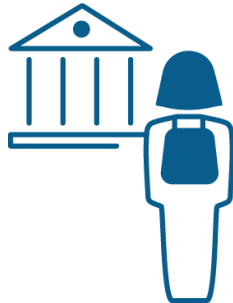


UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE



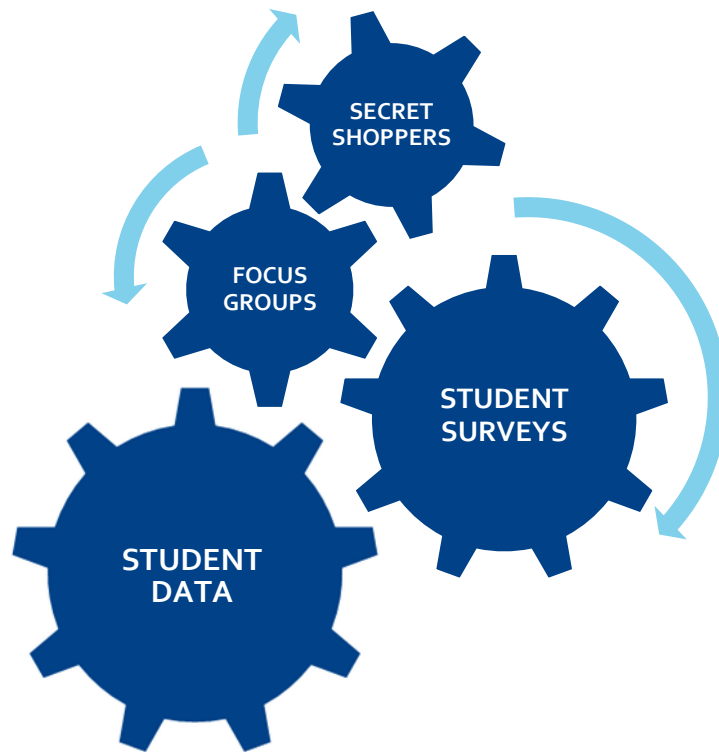
LEADING FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXCELLENCE: CURRICULAR RESOURCES

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

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OVERVIEW



MANY COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTING AND ANALYZING DATA TO IDENTIFY STUDENT ACCESS AND SUCCESS GAPS, MEASURE PROGRESS IN CLOSING THOSE GAPS, AND ULTIMATELY DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT A STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE HAS “WORKED.” THIS WAS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE. ANECDOTAL STORIES ABOUT THE REMARKABLE SUCCESS OF ONE STUDENT, A FEW STUDENTS, OR A FEW HUNDRED STUDENTS OFTEN OBSCURED THE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES EXPERIENCED BY THOUSANDS OF OTHER STUDENTS. AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES, WHERE AN AVERAGE OF 60 TO 70 PERCENT OF STUDENTS FAIL TO GRADUATE AND PERNICIOUS EQUITY GAPS PERSIST, DATA HAVE BEEN USED BY LEADERS TO SHED LIGHT ON THE URGENT NEED FOR REFORM.

But as important as analyzing data to assess student outcomes is, so too is engaging in rigorous analysis of the student experience. Data are essential to understanding which students struggle, but the student voice is needed to understand why and to bring the data to life.

Quite often, what students experience at community college is different from what faculty and administrators assume it is. Processes for course registration, tutoring, advising, financial aid, and other critical student services are often designed to be “user-friendly,” but students may not experience them as such. Processes are also designed with certain assumptions in mind about what students are struggling most with—what stands in the way of their success—but if these assumptions are incorrect, the processes will be flawed. For these reasons, leaders must regularly take steps to understand the student experience. In this module, participants will explore three strategies for gathering information about how students experience the college: student surveys, focus groups, and “secret shoppers.”

LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

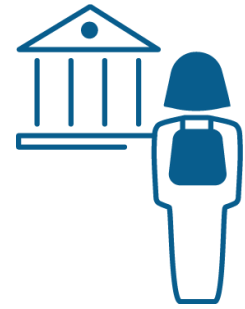
After completing this module, participants will be able to:

- Understand the need to intentionally and regularly gather information about how students experience the college.
- Understand how to decide which method of understanding the student experience (focus groups, secret shoppers, or student surveys) may be best given a particular situation.
- Plan for the implementation of focus groups, secret shoppers, and student surveys at their college.

PRE-READING

- Rassen, E., Chaplot, P., Jenkins, D., & Johnstone, R. *Understanding the student experience through the loss/momentum framework: Clearing the path to completion*. Completion by Design, The RP Group, & Community College Research Center. Retrieved from <http://inquiry2improvement.com/attachments/article/12/CbD-Understanding.pdf>
- WestEd & Public Agenda. (2012, January). *Student focus group resource guide*. Completion by Design. Retrieved from http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Student-Focus-Group-Resource-Guide-FINAL_o.pdf

KICK-OFF ACTIVITY



KICK-OFF ACTIVITY.....25 MINUTES

If the resources are available, it would be powerful to use videos of students from participants' colleges.

1. **Show the following two series of videos (courtesy of the Center for Community College Student Engagement) of students talking about their experiences first enrolling in community college: [Financial vulnerability](#) and [Orientation](#).**
2. **Participants should consider the following questions while watching the videos, recording their thoughts on Handout 1. Participants should assume that all of these students attend the same college and that participants are that college's president.**
 - What evidence would you draw from their stories about what your college is doing well or should be doing better?
 - Hearing their experiences, what questions come to mind that you'd want to ask your senior staff and faculty? Specify whom and what you'd ask.
 - When listening to the students, what surprised you? What else would you want to know about students' experiences?
3. **After watching the videos, participants can discuss their observations in table groups. Consider:**
 - How do student voices—in the format of interviews and focus groups, rather than as quantitative data points—currently inform change at your institution?
 - Where do you see specific opportunities for listening to student voices to impact change?
 - What do you see as the benefit of putting systems in place to understand the student experience?
4. **Additional videos are available at <http://www.ccsse.org/center/resources/video.cfm>.**

CAPTURING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE THROUGH STUDENT SURVEYS



KEY LEARNING

Student surveys offering a mix of question types are one of the most commonly used tools for capturing students' experiences. They have many advantages:

- **Surveys can reach students regardless of geographic proximity to the institution.** This makes surveys particularly useful when investigating the experiences of graduates, former students, or prospective students, who may be located far from the college campus.
- **Surveys can efficiently reach large numbers of students.** Once a strong survey is created, it can be sent to large groups of students. As long as the college has updated student contact information and a good strategy for receiving responses, surveys can be a strong tool for obtaining information from a large number of students.
- **Surveys can provide anonymity.** While a student might be uneasy speaking honestly in front of a college representative, anonymous surveys allow students to candidly express their thoughts and feelings about their experiences.
- **Surveys allow for flexibility with students' time.** Student surveys can be completed on students' own schedules, and thus avoid conflict with their school, work, and family commitments.

However, student surveys also present some substantial limitations:

- **Limit ability to follow up on specific questions.** While focus groups allow the ability to dive deeper into certain questions or topics as they arise, student surveys are more limited.
- **Often result in low completion rates.** Without the in-person contact of a focus group, students may not be motivated to complete student surveys. Colleges can consider tying survey completion to incentives in order to boost participation.
- **Skew toward positive feedback.** Students who have not had successful experiences with the institution may be less likely to reply to surveys, skewing responses in ways that may obscure important challenges non-respondents experienced.

Given these advantages and limitations, student surveys are most often used by community colleges in three ways:

1. Student entry surveys. These student inventories—often given to all incoming students—help colleges understand challenges that students may face once they register at the college. Understanding these risk factors and potential challenges in advance allows the college to align the type and amount of intervention and support with specific student challenges. Questions asked on student entry surveys may include:

- What amount of time do you expect to spend studying outside of class per week?
- What is the distance between this college and your place of residence?
- Before you decided to enroll, where did you get the most information about this college (e.g., family or friends, brochures, college website, campus tour)?

Surveys also may contain questions designed to elicit students' attitudes towards college and previous school experiences, asking them to agree or disagree with statements such as "Most of my high school teachers have been caring and dedicated," or "I resent the amount of control that my high school teachers have had over me."

2. Student engagement surveys. These surveys focus on how students are currently experiencing the college and may be given to all enrolled students every few years. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)¹ is a commonly administered engagement survey. These surveys often provide information useful to crafting student retention and graduation strategies. Surveys might include questions like:

- How many hours a week do you spend working? Preparing for class? Traveling to and from class? Participating in college activities?
- How frequently do you use certain college services (e.g., child care, career counseling, tutoring, transfer advising, library services)? How satisfied are you with each service?
- How many classes are you currently taking? In what formats? At what point in the semester were you fully registered for classes?

3. Student exit surveys. These surveys aim to determine what students are doing after graduation or, in some cases, why students did not graduate. The value of these surveys is often limited, due to low response rates. Surveys may include questions like:

- Did you accomplish the workforce goals you had while you attended this college? Did you accomplish the transfer goals you had while you attended this college?
- What barriers to completing college did you face? Which were you able to overcome?
- What factors contributed to your success at the college? How did the college help?

GROUP APPLICATION ACTIVITY: PLANNING FOR STUDENT SURVEYS25 MINUTES

1. In small groups, participants should work through the following protocol to generate ideas for how they could best use student surveys to understand the student experience at their colleges. Provide each group with two pieces of chart paper.

- On the first piece of chart paper, brainstorm as a group all of the new initiatives that are being implemented at your college currently or have been implemented during the past year (e.g., using MyMathLab, introducing a new early alert system, creating a new or expanded career advising center).

¹ A sample CCSSE survey can be found here: http://ccsse.org/refresh/CCSSE_Refresh_Sample.pdf

- On the second piece of chart paper, list some examples of student success goals that your colleges are working toward (e.g., x% of students who transfer will graduate with a bachelor's degree in three years).
- Go through each initiative and success goal and, using the following questions, determine whether a student survey might be a helpful tool for understanding the student experience in this scenario:
 - How many students would you hope to survey?
 - Where are these students generally located (e.g., still enrolled in the college? graduates outside of the service area?)
 - How complicated are the questions you'd like to ask? Would you like flexibility to follow up on specific answers?
 - How sensitive is the topic being explored? Would students be likely to speak about this topic honestly if asked about it in person?
- Using the knowledge gained from the Key Learning section and the questions above, decide whether or not each initiative or goal would be well-suited to the use of a student survey. Circle those for which you might use a student survey; cross out those for which another tool might be better.
- Discuss with your group: How could you adapt this exercise to use at your college?

CAPTURING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE THROUGH FOCUS GROUPS



KEY LEARNING

Focus groups can be a powerful research tool to help college faculty, administrators, and staff explore student experiences in much greater depth than can be done through surveys or analysis of quantitative data. In addition to being used to collect data, focus groups can be used to engage students in the reform process.

Some guidelines that have emerged from the field for conducting successful focus groups follow.

- Be clear about your goals for the focus group, and develop questions accordingly.
- Understand that students often blame themselves or their peers for failure, even if the challenge they face could have been resolved by actors within or outside the community college. If a student names failure of personal responsibility as the sole reason for a challenge, acknowledge student responsibility and then redirect the conversation by asking what the institution, an advisor, or a faculty member might have done differently.
- Recruit a diverse group of participants. Make sure to include as many students who have struggled or failed as who have succeeded. Don't rely on "easy access" students (e.g., student government leaders), and hold focus groups at times when many different students can attend.
- Choose a facilitator who is neutral, credible, and unfamiliar to the students.
- Provide context that helps students feel comfortable being candid. Be clear about anonymity but also keep opening instructions fairly short and neutral, to avoid creating bias in students.
- Use a digital recorder rather than (or in addition to) a scribe to ensure that there's no bias in the information captured.
- Let the conversation flow, and allow students to ask questions.
- Encourage students to provide specific details and examples to support their answers.²

² Adapted from the WestEd & Public Agenda. (2012, January). *Student focus group resource guide*. Completion by Design.

Retrieved from http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Student-Focus-Group-Resource-Guide-FINAL_o.pdf

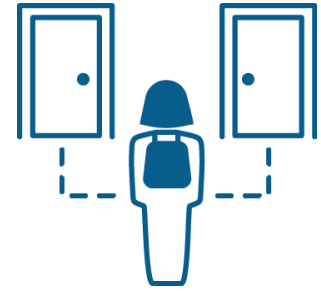
Focus groups may be particularly valuable:

- **When conducted with prospective or new students.** Focus groups of prospective students can give the college a unique insight into what students experience before they even register for classes. How do these students understand and respond to communication from the college before classes begin? New students who have just started at the college may be another good group to target for focus groups. Consider: How do these students experience the on-boarding structures as someone unfamiliar with the college?
- **To understand how students experience new initiatives.** When the college introduces something new—a new advising model or a new online portal, for example—focus groups can be valuable tools for soliciting feedback on the changes. Students will have a deep understanding of how the experience of a new process compares to the old one.

GROUP APPLICATION ACTIVITY: PLAN A FOCUS GROUP..... 35 MINUTES

1. In small groups, participants will take 35 minutes to plan for a focus group to learn more about how students experience the enrollment process at their colleges. Invite participants to discuss in table groups five of the most important experiences students have (or should have) in their first semester of enrollment—for example, meeting with an advisor to create an educational plan and choose a specific pathway, or meeting with financial aid counselors to create a plan for paying for college. Groups can record their ideas on Handout 2.
2. Groups will then choose one of these experiences to “drill down on” in a student focus group. As groups choose, invite them to consider which experience would best lend itself to a focus group as opposed to a survey or secret shopper exercise.
3. Next, participants will plan a focus group to explore how students experience the particular piece of the enrollment process that they have selected.
 - What are the goals of the focus group?
 - How will you recruit participants?
 - Who will facilitate? Why would this person make a good facilitator?
 - What context would you provide for students before beginning the focus group?
 - What would you ask students? Remember to script questions that support the goals of the focus group.
4. Bring the group back together for a quick debrief. What was the most challenging aspect of planning a focus group like this one? What might prevent you from meeting your focus group goals? Who at your college would likely take the lead on planning focus groups? How do you plan on sharing what you’ve learned with that individual?

CAPTURING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE THROUGH SECRET SHOPPERS



KEY LEARNING

Do students really experience what we hope and assume they experience based on the policies and practices we have in place? How do we know? Corporations often use a “secret shopper” or “mystery shopper” program to evaluate how consumers actually experience the purchasing process and quality of their products. Secret shoppers go through all the steps of a certain customer service routine—for example, returning an unwanted purchase—and document their experience during each step of the process to reveal any glitches, inefficiencies, or problems. At a community college, the secret shopper would go through all the steps of a particular process—perhaps registering for classes or applying for financial aid—exactly as a typical community college student would.

Secret shoppers should be instructed to interact with the college not as someone who already understands higher education policy and practices or feels empowered to “find the answers,” but as someone who acts as a real community college student would. Secret shoppers may find it helpful to consider some of the following “roles” as they move through the exercise:

- A student who is the first in his or her family to attend college
- A student who had a negative experience in high school or has been out of school for many years
- A student who needs financial aid and cannot afford to pay any bills or upfront costs before financial aid is disbursed
- A student who works full-time during the day and has other family responsibilities
- A student who may feel uncomfortable about asking for help or questioning further when given inadequate or contradictory information
- A student who feels insecure about his or her academic ability or unsure about whether he or she belongs in college
- A student who has no clear idea what to study or do for a career, having come to college because he or she thinks it is “something I should do.”

The goal is not for the secret shopper to act clueless. Secret shoppers should engage from a neutral standpoint that allows them to encounter the systems and policies in a way that most closely resembles (and allows for inquiry into) the experiences of the majority of students (or some specific subset that is not succeeding). Clearly, all students will experience these systems differently based on their personalities and existing knowledge; the objective of this exercise should be to assess the systems students encounter in the most neutral way possible.

Secret shopper activities may be useful in the following situations:

- **When the experience being explored is a multi-step process.** Often, each step of a process is reasonably well-designed but what students experience is a series of steps that, taken together, can be burdensome or unclear. For example, the on-boarding process (navigating the campus, registering at the college, taking placement tests, meeting with an advisor, meeting with financial aid, attending orientation) lends itself well to the use of a secret shopper, since it has many complex steps and the experience could not be captured with just a few questions.
- **When the experience being explored involves “customer service.”** Deciphering some components of the student experience can be done with simple survey or focus group questions, such as “How long did you have to wait before you saw an advisor?” However, because students often have few points of comparison, students may not be able to easily assess customer service or express their views about such things as “How easy was it for you to apply for financial aid? How easy was it to learn about and choose among the several program options available?”

INDIVIDUAL APPLICATION ACTIVITY: PLAN A SECRET SHOPPER EXERCISE25 MINUTES

1. **Invite participants to take 25 minutes to independently plan a secret shopper activity, following the protocol below and reflected on Handout 3. This activity can also be completed as homework.**
 - List all of the experiences and processes that a new student would go through on your campus, from filling out the application to attending the first day of classes.
 - Choose your secret shopper. Who will he or she be? What “role” might he or she play?
 - Create a list of questions for the secret shopper to explore while going through the on-boarding process at your college. The appendix to this module contains some questions to help get you started.

APPENDIX: STUDENT EXPERIENCE QUESTION EXAMPLES

The following questions may serve as a good starting point when designing focus groups, student surveys, or secret shopper activities. Given time constraints typically faced by participants, focus groups may be limited to a few questions, or even a single open-ended question with follow-up prompts to get clarity (e.g., “Tell us about your experience with the application process”). Participants should add questions to this list that are specific to their reform efforts or contexts.

Questions about the application:

- Was the online application clear?
- Was it easy to complete?
- How long did it take?
- Did the application make it seem as though the college wanted you to enroll?
- Were there technical glitches or problems?
- Did the application encourage you to think about choosing a field of study? How so? In what context?
- Did the application require you to select a program of study?
- Did the application process provide you any information or guidance about how to choose a program of study (e.g., labor market information related to fields of study in the region)?
- Did the application process provide clear instructions and deadlines for registering for classes or taking placement exams?
- Did the application process provide clear deadlines for financial aid application and instructions on how to apply for financial aid (e.g., how and why to complete the FAFSA, implications of full-time vs. part-time study)?

Questions about financial aid:

Before beginning, log on to the college’s website and consider the following:

- Does the website make it possible for students to estimate their expenses and aid options?
- Does the website provide any financial literacy guidelines (e.g., guidance on taking out loans, how to select lenders)?
- Does the website give any indication of when financial aid will be disbursed?
- Does the website provide any tools to help students budget for expenses throughout the year?

- Is there information about whom to contact for help with financial aid?
- How many clicks does it take to answer each of these questions?

In focus groups, then ask:

- Through what means did you find out about financial aid availability?
- Did you check the college's website for information about financial aid? If so, was it helpful?
- Did you receive clear instructions for how to apply for financial aid? From where did you get that information? Was anyone *unable* to give you helpful advice?

Secret shoppers can't actually complete financial aid applications, so more extensive feedback in this area can be gained from focus groups with additional questions:

- When did you complete your financial aid application?
- When did you receive a financial aid disbursement (relative to the first day of class)?
- Did you receive the amount you expected to receive? If not, how different was it?
- Outside of financial aid, was the amount you had to pay for college what you expected?
- Did you contact the financial aid office? If so, about what? What information did they provide?
- Did you have to purchase textbooks or pay other costs before you received your financial aid disbursement?
- What would have made the financial aid process easier for you? What could have been better?

For more guidance on self-assessment of financial aid policies and practices, see the resources developed by the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement for [Lumina Foundation - Beyond Financial Aid](#).

Questions about placement:

- Did the application provide clear instructions on if/when/how to take the placement exam?
- Were those instructions communicated in a way that felt encouraging or intimidating?
- Were you able to proceed directly to scheduling a placement exam (if required)?
- Did the placement testing center offer hours that were convenient for you?
- Were you able to find the placement testing center when you arrived on campus? Did anyone help you find it?
- Were you advised on whether/how to prepare for the placement exam? Were you given the option to study and return to take the exam at a later date?
- Were the purpose and consequences of the placement exam explained clearly?
- After completing the placement exam, were you given clear guidance on how your scores would impact registration or course selection?
- Was it clear how the placement exam and score related to your program of study (e.g., how your score would impact your ability to register for courses in your program of study, how enrolling in developmental courses might delay your time to completion)?

Questions about registration:

- Were you given clear guidance on when and how to register for classes?
- Were you given guidance on when and how to see an advisor prior to registration?
- If you saw an advisor, for how long did you meet with him or her? What was discussed during the advising session?
- Did your advisor talk with you about your career goals? What was that conversation like?
- What was the process of selecting classes like? Was it clear which classes were available that were required for your selected program of study?
- Were you given guidance on attending full-time versus part-time?
- Were you provided information about the courses you'd need to take and any sequencing/prerequisite courses needed in order to complete your program of study?
- Were you given any information about transfer to a four-year institution?
- Were the classes you needed available? Were they available at times that were convenient for someone working full-time weekday hours?
- Did the registration process make you feel like the college was happy to have you enrolled?