Madera College Student Focus Groups

Spring 2022

Executive Summary

Career Ladders Project held focus groups with students enrolled at Madera College with a concentration on the following groups: first-generation and/or Pell-eligible students, re-entry students and adult learners, men of color, and men of all backgrounds. The goal of the focus groups was to learn more about what helps historically marginalized students to feel engaged, welcome, and supported at Madera College. Students were asked about their experience when starting and transitioning to college, the support that students accessed, the challenges and barriers they face in staying in college, and how Madera College might better support students to feel welcome and engaged. This project is part of the college's larger effort to better understand and meet students' needs.

Introduction

The focus groups were conducted to better understand the barriers and challenges students in specific demographic groups are facing at Madera College. Leaders at the college are striving to be more intentional in making equity populations feel supported, welcome, and seen. They recognized that they needed to hear from students about what was working and where there is a need for more intervention or redesign of practices, services, or processes. At the request of Madera College, Career Ladders Project worked in partnership with the college research offices, the guided pathways leaders, and the equity committee to plan and design these focus groups. Because this effort is tied both to equity and guided pathways, the disproportionately-impacted groups were identified by the college and used to determine the demographics of each focus group. Guided pathways serves as a framework for understanding where students are on their college pathway and as a useful reference to understand students' needs in order to increase their success. Using the guided pathways framework as a foundation, the focus groups were designed to gather information from students on how to create a welcoming environment for historically marginalized students, learn what helps students persist, learn why many men of color drop out, and learn what may be hindering success and how the college can support student success and completion.

Participant Demographics

Focus groups included each of the following populations: men of color; men of all backgrounds; first-generation and/or Pell-eligible students; adult learners and those re-entering college; and a general/non-specific focus group open to all students.

There were 30 students who participated in the focus groups:

Men of color	Men of all backgrounds	First-generation and/or Pell-eligible students	Adult learners/ Re-entry students	General/ non-specific
3	9	7	3	8

Overall Student Perspectives

Key Findings by Population

Men of color | 3 participants

Students in this group discussed seeing college as a path to a career; however, found it difficult transitioning to college from high school. Once they were familiar with the college and learned about resources such as the tutoring center, EOP&S, and the STEM center, they felt secure in knowing where to go for help or to get questions answered. However, they noted that communication with faculty was often difficult and they often didn't know how to access office hours. The students all noted pressure to work and make money. They felt like this is likely a factor in the number of men attending college. They also noted a fear of failing. A couple of students noted the impact of letter grades on their motivation; they felt that letter grades shouldn't be so important when they are coming to the college for job training.

Men of all backgrounds | 9 participants

Similar to the participants in the men of color focus group, this group of students shared that they see college as a path to a career. Many participants also mentioned that their family put pressure on them to attend and succeed in college, but that there was also tension there with the competing need to make money and to not overburden the family with school expenses. Like the men of color group, these students struggled with the transition to college from high school, but found support from the counseling faculty, especially when they were in the transition period as a new college student. They

noted that as the semester got going, counselors were unresponsive or busy, so they found support from their instructors. Participants in this group also felt like the college likely sees fewer men than women enrolling because men often feel more pressure to work and make money, but many also noted that they see college as more of a female domain and some believed that they feel the system is designed for the way women learn.

First-generation and/or Pell-eligible college students | 7 participants

The students in this group shared that they decided to attend college because they either needed to learn English and/or wanted a career with benefits. Like other groups, students in this group appreciated the support they received from counselors, specifically noting the referrals to other programs, navigation support, and help with financial aid materials. Like the men of color group, this group noted that once the semester was underway, they sought out support at the Learning Center and from professors, going to the counselors primarily when they needed to add or drop a class. They also reported finding communication with professors challenging at times and said that professors' lack of flexibility made success challenging if problems arose at home or with family. Students in this group reported wanting more motivational and cultural events at the college to help build community. Many also shared that the college has a lot of great resources like the food pantry, mental health services, and tutoring, but the college doesn't promote these services in enough places so many students don't know about these resources.

Adult learners/Re-entry students | 3 participants

This group of students noted markedly different insights than the other groups. As older adults, they appreciated coming back to college and feeling like women were welcome in non-traditional female career paths such as STEM. They also appreciated all of the resources instructors provided, but noted that professors could be a little bit more flexible with their office hours availability and due dates. This is the only group to mention that the Latinx students are the largest racial/ethnic group at the college, noting that there weren't many Asian and Black/African American students at the college even though those groups are represented in the community. Like other groups, they noted that the college could do more for student engagement by promoting, supporting, and advertising clubs and holding events on campus that bring the community together.

General population | 8 participants

Students in this group largely agreed that they returned to college to either find a career pathway that was meaningful to them and/or find a higher-wage career. They did not mention the struggle with transitioning to college as other groups did; however, they did mention that the lack of flexibility from instructional faculty presented barriers for them. They cited examples including professors not being open to office hours outside their pre-scheduled hours, not responding to emails in a timely manner or at all, and not allowing extenuating circumstances to permit extensions. One student noted a professor in STEM who was extremely responsive by email and flexible with office hours. She felt this increased

her ability to be successful. A few people in this group noted the benefit of online classes to accommodate competing pressures on their time. They felt that it was important to provide online options for students in the future.

Key Findings by Theme

Onboarding Support

Many of the students in the focus group mentioned ways that they felt supported in onboarding to Madera College. They specifically mentioned the support that they received from counselors in this stage as meaningful. "My first experience was all the staff from counseling and even the educators, they all kind of took the side of encouragement." That encouragement and tailored guidance goes a long way for students. One student noted that she wouldn't have gone back to college without the college outreach: "I didn't expect to come back to college, but I received a phone call from your counselor and told me that I was very close to finishing."

Several students noted that there were aspects of the website, financial aid, and registration that were confusing, but that the counselors supported them through all of that once they got to them: "Once I got to college the counselor started helping me out with everything else." Some students felt that they learned about a lot of college resources from counselors, while others mentioned that they often didn't learn about resources until later and thought that might be something the college could address with some sort of welcome day event. "I think an orientation where student services present their services and teach them how to get help with college would be helpful for new or returning students." Mental health services and the food pantry were two key resources that students noted they didn't learn about until later. Students felt like these resources should be easier to find. Some noted only seeing flyers for them in the restroom. They mentioned that signs around campus could help make students aware of the resources.

Staying on the Path

Many students noted that it was more difficult to get the support they needed once they were in the middle of the semester. Students noted that counselors and instructional faculty were often unresponsive to emails mid-semester, some noting long waits to get a response if they got one at all. When students did eventually find helpful academic resources such as tutoring, they reported feeling like they had what they needed. "Once I found the resources, like you know things like the STEM Center and the Reading and Writing Center,…things started to become a little bit easier."

Many students mentioned faculty who didn't respond to email and had limited availability during office hours. "Replying to emails that's kind of a big thing because if you have a question [and] you don't hear back for four weeks or something, then that can be challenging." One student talked about a professor who was very flexible and responsive. She felt that made a big difference for her succeeding in the course. "She's always reachable. She tells you, you know, you can email her and she'll definitely get back

to you. Taking my science classes with her has just been a huge success, knowing that she's actually there." Most students agreed that having more access to their professors was key to their success.

In most of the groups, students mentioned needing to work. Some also spoke about family responsibilities at home. "A lot of people in Madera are struggling financially." They connected this to their success in that they needed to work as to not burden their families with college expenses and they needed a good career as soon as possible. They also connected it to needing professors to be open to appointments outside of regular office hours because often the limited hours did not work with their schedules.

Feeling Welcomed and a Sense of Belonging

Many students reported feeling welcomed and supported at the college. They state that they have felt supported by the college for the most part. One student stated that she connected with Associated Students early on and that created a community for her. Other students mentioned that the college could do more to support student engagement. "Put some effort into that, where you know, young people, or just students can engage with each other and in meaningful ways I think that would improve the college experience." These students felt like the college lacked a focus on building community for the students. Some stated, "I don't know if it's very human or person or individual-centered. I'm doing it, but there's a difference when you feel like oh that's really inviting."

Students questioned whether the college was committed to building community because of the lack of a focus. Several students specifically mentioned that events with motivational speakers and cultural events that celebrate the cultures of the communities represented by the students would help engage students and build community. "I would say that the college could be more welcoming for other diverse groups by setting up a fun event that honors their cultures here on campus, or serving up some traditional food."

An African American student in one group shared that she felt microaggressions that led to her feeling discriminated against. "Personally, I have experienced some challenges here and there, just because being an African American, but if more is done in school, I think that will really be helpful for students to not feel, you know, just because they're this [race] they can tend to have been overlooked."

College and Career Gender Stereotypes

Several students shared notions of viewing college or feeling that their communities view college as primarily a female domain. "Because they're seen as women right they're not seen as equal, and so I think men are just like 'Okay, I have to go to work.'" A couple of students mentioned that they felt like college is designed for female students more than male students in the programs offered and teaching style. "I also think men and women learn differently, and I think the way the school system is built, there's a higher chance for women to be able to benefit from the system as opposed to men and I think it's just because of the way we learn, we learn differently." Another student added, "most men like to do more, I'll say, practical stuff like work with their hands."

Students noted that in the local community young men often feel pressure to get a job immediately after high school. "In my community like in the Mexican community it's more like seeing good, a woman goes to school and men go straight to work like in construction." Similarly, some students mentioned views about careers that align with more traditional views about the type of work men and women seek out. They even felt like the advertising they see for the college is often about nursing or health fields, and because of that college is often seen as a traditionally female domain. "Not a lot of males are really into nursing majors." They thought it might be contributing to why the college currently enrolls far more females than males.

A returning student reflected on how easy it was to get used to lower-wage jobs and lose sight of college. "I never really went to college, because I just kind of settled. I got into a factory, a good job, and I just kind of settled for that, you know, and kind of saw my life in retirement with that." Some students also stated that they just didn't know the college had programs like welding and machine technology.

Recommendations

Based on these findings and to assist the college in making use of these findings, CLP has extracted six key recommendations to support the college's work to be more inclusive and welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds:

Recommendation 1: Support faculty in developing equity-minded syllabi and classroom practices. Encourage syllabi to include flexibility, options for office hours by appointment, alternate ways to reach faculty, and communication response time expectations.

Recommendation 2: Develop a student engagement plan and calendar that includes events with speakers, events to celebrate cultures, activities of student clubs, and presentations or workshops from local employers. In this planning, consider establishing affinity groups for Black/African American and Asian students who may be feeling minoritized because of lack of representation.

Recommendation 3: Work to transform the belief that college is for women and that the career paths for men are limited to the trades. The college might consider developing a communication campaign that helps male students and parents of high school students to see college as a place for all gender identities. This information could show wage gain after a two-year degree and four-year degree. The college could bring speakers to campus to help male students see themselves in a variety of career paths to help broaden their scope of the opportunities available at the college.

Recommendation 4: Consider cultivating more "earn and learn" opportunities where students can participate in on or off-campus paid work experience opportunities. Work with counseling faculty to communicate these opportunities to students in the onboarding process and work with instructional faculty to promote the opportunities and the benefit to students' career development.

Recommendation 5: Work to ensure basic need support such as housing, food pantry, and Cal Fresh and financial aid resources and associated programs are integrated into the onboarding process for students as part of a holistic support structure.

Recommendation 6: Develop a marketing and outreach plan that appeals to Asian, Black/African American, Native American, and male students. Make clear the opportunities and career paths available at Madera College. Work with local high schools to distribute these materials and outreach to students.

Conclusion

Increasing student engagement at the college seems to be very important to the students. They want to feel like they have a community at their college, and they want that community to represent their culture as well as the cultures of other students at the college. Gender stereotypes are prevalent for students. These are leading to mindsets that may be preventing some male students from fully committing to college. Working to dismantle that thinking by reaching into the high schools and into the community will be important moving forward. Students are reporting a need for more access to their professors. While it was not the case with every student, many reported having trouble getting their questions answered when they sent their professors emails. Supporting faculty to understand the impact of that, will help them to change policies and practices to be more student-centered. Also, it may be helpful for the college to offer support for these changes to syllabi, including classroom practices and policies. One way could be for faculty to participate in a learning community or work in partnership with others at the college.

Focus Group Protocol & Methodology

Focus Group Methodology

At the request of Madera College's Institutional Research office, Career Ladders Project (CLP) held five virtual focus groups with 30 students at the end of fall semester 2021. Students were recruited through targeted emails and via communication from campus committees. Interested participants were encouraged to sign up for the focus group that they identified with most strongly. There were focus groups for each of the following populations: first-generation and/or Pell-eligible students, re-entry students and adult learners, men of color, and men of all backgrounds; there was also a general population/non-specific focus group open to all. All focus groups were held virtually, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed to ensure that the summary of findings and recommendations accurately reflects the opinions expressed by the focus group participants. CLP summarized and synthesized the insights and recommendations of the participants.

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. We have been asked to include student voices and experiences in discussions with your college's leaders and faculty about how the college can better serve students.

Would it be OK to record the conversation, so that we can capture your ideas as you present them? As we write this up, we will not be using your names. We want you to know that we think everything you have to say is important, and we are here to learn from you and your experiences here at Madera.

We would like to hear from everyone, whether your experiences are similar to or different from others. Are there any questions?

General group questions

1. Let's go around, introduce yourself, and please just tell us a little bit about why you decided to go to college.
2. What was your experience when you first started at Madera?
   o Probe: How did you figure out how to do things? (if they ask for more …. like register for classes, get financial aid?)
3. Where did you go to seek help?
   o Probe: I heard you name (insert services named) what about (moderator list general types of services students may not have named - tutoring, counseling, the library)?
4. Do you know anyone who has had to stop or drop out before finishing their program?

    o Probe: What do you think could have been helpful?

5. What kinds of things can the college do to help students overcome their biggest challenges and stay in school?
    o Probe: What do you want faculty/staff to know and better support your success?

6. Madera's student population is mostly female. Why do you think the college has a mostly female student population?
    o Probe: Do you have any examples of men who did not come to Madera? Why might that be?

7. Madera wants to welcome and support a diverse student population. In your experience are there any student groups who feel less welcomed and supported?
    o Probes:
    o How might the college feel more welcoming (named group) to students?
    o Do you have any examples of (named group) students who chose not to come to Madera? Why might that be?

Closing

Now, we are close to the end. We have talked about a lot of things. Let's take a moment to think through what might be most important when it comes to helping more students hang in there and finish their programs of study or degrees. Let's go around and share any final thoughts you may have on this—maybe something we talked about, or something that just occurred to you.

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