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Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Grossmont College

Student Focus Groups:

Campus Climate

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Executive Summary

In fall 2017, Grossmont College (Grossmont) engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of student focus groups with African-American, Pacific Islander, Latino, Middle Eastern, former foster youth, and older returning students on the topic of campus climate. A total of 10 focus groups with 36 students were conducted. The goal of this research is to provide Grossmont administration, faculty, and staff with a better understanding of the experiences of Grossmont students, particularly students' perceptions of the college's culture to better understand how students experience and engage with faculty and staff and with the institution as a whole. The key overarching themes that emerged from the analysis of the feedback from all focus groups were:

- **Sources of motivation to attend college.** Students described a number of factors that motivated them to both attend Grossmont and persevere in pursuing their educational goals. These factors included persistence, self-motivation, and a sense of individual responsibility; support from family and friends; positive relationships with Grossmont faculty and staff; and the desire to overcome negative stereotypes.
- **Experiences of historically-underserved students at Grossmont.** Overall, students spoke positively about their experiences at Grossmont. However, several participants described feeling discriminated against and that some instructors lacked cultural sensitivity.
- **Family Obligations and Cultural Expectations.** Students from particular ethnic minority backgrounds and first-generation student participants expressed how family and cultural expectations can impact their educational experience.
- **Sense of overall connection to the college.** Students expressed feeling connected to Grossmont to varying degrees. Many identified participation in special programs and/or involvement in student clubs as the source. However, they also observed an overall lack of engagement among Grossmont students and that many students are unaware of campus activities, while others were busy juggling the demands of school, employment, and family responsibilities.
- **Concerns about finances.** Students shared their struggles balancing work, school, and life, which were compounded by transportation issues and the high cost of textbooks.
- **Perspectives on student services and support.** Students voiced strong concerns regarding a widespread lack of awareness about the resources and services available to them, as well as limitations on access to those resources when students needed them most. Students lauded the categorical programs in which they participated, such as EOPS and Puente, for providing critical resources and support. When it came general counseling, students described mixed experiences.
- **Experiences with academics.** Participants described mixed feelings regarding their academic experiences. Some expressed appreciation for particular instructors who had

demonstrated a high level of overall support and understanding of their students. Others encountered faculty who seemed to have little interest in developing relationships with students or understanding the difficulties they faced outside of the classroom.

The seven recommendations below provide Grossmont faculty, staff, and administrators a powerful opportunity to consider actions the college can take to best support student success.

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

While it is clear that budgetary concerns and a potentially unwieldy counselor-to-student ratio must be taken into account with respect to general counseling policies and practices, numerous options are still available to Grossmont that would enhance students' counseling experiences. For example, Grossmont could explore providing general counselors with additional professional development focused on keeping them up-to-date with the large amount of often-shifting information they must be able to accurately share with students. Additionally, a system that enabled students to consistently work with a dedicated counselor would facilitate the development of stronger relationships between students and counselors, and, in doing so, increase counselors' capacity to understand students' goals, help them overcome obstacles to these goals, and, ultimately, pave the path to success.

2. Create policies and practices that respond to a thorough understanding of the challenges and constraints faced by low-income students.

Although there was no specific focus group comprising low-income students, "low-income" was indeed a characteristic with which students in all of the focus groups identified. Students discussed the myriad ways financial challenges affected their attendance, which then cascaded into affecting their academic performance. Even when students received Board of Governors' waivers and other financial aid, they still struggled to meet both large expenses, such as textbooks, and even seemingly small expenses, such as transportation and parking.

Specifically, the college may want to look at its financial aid disbursement policies and consider programs such as book advances¹ or other types of innovations to ensure that students receive financial aid in a timely manner. Furthermore, the college could identify ways to create more jobs on campus to reduce students' commute time and stress trying to balance work and school responsibilities. On a related matter, students suggested the college pay work-study students weekly or bi-weekly instead of monthly, which is the current practice. Finally, the college could explore less expensive and healthier food options for students.

3. Explore ways to support faculty in creating safe and inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and heard.

The college should consider providing professional development on inclusive teaching strategies, for example, to support and build faculty's capacity to address the needs of students with a

¹ This program is offered to assist students who attend colleges within the Maricopa Community College District in Phoenix, Arizona (<https://my.maricopa.edu/financial-aid-and-services/book-advances>).

variety of backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities. These teaching strategies can contribute to an overall inclusive and safe learning environment, in which students feel equally valued.

4. Robustly engage students in the design, development, and testing of communication strategies regarding the resources available to support their success.

When asked to offer suggestions to the college leaders, students requested that the college improve the ways that students are informed about the resources and services available to them. However, simply announcing the availability of a certain service or program is not sufficient. Instead, a creative and recurrent communication strategy that reaches students at all levels, whether a bewildered newcomer or seasoned veteran, should be implemented. Most important to creating a strategy with the greatest chance of efficacy is that the students themselves are deeply engaged in the design, development, and testing of messages and media. After all, only students can truly know what messages will really resonate and what delivery methods and venues will be effective among their peers.

5. Ensure tutoring services are able to meet student need and demand.

Students identified one-on-one tutoring offered by the Tutoring Center as particularly impactful. To expand access, the college could explore adding more tutors and re-examining the current scheduling system to ensure students have access to tutors at times that will benefit students most.

6. Regularly capture student feedback that can be used to inform and modify processes, practices, and policies throughout the institution.

While the 10 focus groups described in this report provide a significant window into the educational experiences of Grossmont students and suggest numerous opportunities for improving the student experience, capturing student feedback as a one-off event can only provide the institution with limited insight into the perspectives of the most important members of its community—students. As such, the RP Group recommends that Grossmont develop and implement strategies to continuously and robustly incorporate student feedback into its administrative processes, such as planning for new initiatives, assessing the effectiveness of key services, introducing curricular/pedagogical innovations, or simply gathering input regarding the quality of the educational experience at Grossmont.

7. Empower everyone who works at the college to be a source for student support.

For students to feel supported both academically and socially, the college must promote a culture where all faculty, staff, and administrators feel student success is everyone's responsibility. In order to empower every person working at Grossmont to provide appropriate student support, personnel across the college must have the opportunity to discover exactly *how* they can, both in their position and as a member of the college community, directly contribute to student success. The college needs to provide professional development and support to help personnel develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support students, and continually practice these new skills with the full cultural and logistical backing of the college.

The college has an opportunity to build upon this initial step of eliciting student views by developing a systematic process to regularly engage student voices. Further understanding these experiences could help the college's efforts to improve everyone's experience at the college and effectively promote equitable student success.

Introduction

Project Overview

In fall 2017, Grossmont College (Grossmont) engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of student focus groups on the topic of campus climate. The goal of this research was to gather students' perceptions of the college's culture to better understand how students experience and engage with faculty and staff and with the institution as a whole. The data gathered from the student focus groups will be used in conjunction with data gathered from focus groups conducted with faculty, staff, and administrators in spring 2017. Drawing parallels and distinctions between students' experiences with those of faculty, staff, and administrators will help inform the college's efforts to improve everyone's experience at the college.

A total of 36 students from the following populations participated in 10 focus groups held between October 17 and 20, 2017: African-American, Pacific Islander, Latino, Middle Eastern, former foster youth, and older returning students (25 and above).

Organization of This Report

This report begins with Section 1, which outlines the key research goals and limitations of the focus group findings and briefly discusses how college administrators, faculty, and staff can meaningfully interpret the findings from the focus groups. Section 2 presents an overview of the outreach and recruitment process implemented by Grossmont College's Associate Dean of Student Success and Equity to engage students in the focus groups. Section 3 describes the characteristics of the students who participated in the focus groups. Section 4 explores the key themes that emerged across the 10 focus groups and students' perspectives on these themes are shared in their own words via quotes. Section 5 offers college leaders a set of recommendations for consideration. Finally, Section 6 provides some concluding remarks.

Section 1: Areas of Inquiry

Research Goals

The student focus groups focused on exploring the topics below:

- (1) How students would describe the culture at Grossmont to someone who is unfamiliar with the college
- (2) How Grossmont culture might differ for particular groups of students
- (3) Challenges students face at Grossmont, particularly regarding registration, enrollment, relationships with faculty and staff, accessing and utilizing academic and student supports, and general experiences inside and outside the classroom
- (4) Strategies the students employed to address these challenges

- (5) Assistance students have received at the college to help overcome these challenges, and
- (6) Students' recommendations on how to better serve students and improve the overall educational experience at Grossmont College.

Transcripts from each focus group were collected and analyzed for emerging themes by RP Group researchers.

Limitations of Focus Group Findings

These focus groups provide Grossmont College with direct feedback from students regarding their academic and personal experiences at the college. Considering the perspectives of students from each of the groups targeted for this project is essential to developing a true understanding of how to respond to student needs and best promote equitable student success.

At the same time, it is critical to avoid generalizing focus group findings about any one particular group of students or the student population as a whole. Firstly, only 10 focus groups were conducted, with 36 students attending. This sample size is clearly small compared to the total number of students at Grossmont College. In addition, students who are invited to participate in or self-select to join a focus group are often those who are motivated, interested, and/or driven to provide feedback about their experiences. While their perspective is both important, one cannot ignore the fact that the perspectives of those students who chose *not* to participate remains absent. Finally, another factor that makes this group of students less representative of the overall student body is that two-thirds of the students who participated in the focus groups are in special programs, such as Puente, EOPS, CARE, Umoja, Athletics, and Guardian Scholars to name a few. Others are employed by the college as student ambassador or mentors. These students, therefore, may be more engaged and well-resourced compared to other Grossmont students and thus may not reflect the perceptions and experiences of all students at Grossmont.

Lastly, the nature of focus groups limits the degree to which findings can be generalized across an entire population. While each focus group was structured around a consistent protocol with the same set of questions, discussions went in different directions based on the personalities, interests, and dynamics among participants. As a result, certain issues were raised or more deeply explored in some focus groups, while in others these subjects did not surface, despite the fact that these topics may have been equally relevant to participants. Furthermore, group dynamics and group composition can also influence what the participants say, or do not say, during discussions.

As such, it is important to take the findings in this report seriously while simultaneously keeping in mind that they represent a limited perspective on Grossmont College. Therefore, soliciting student feedback regularly is important to obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the general student population's experience and to empowering the college to develop strategies that enable all students to thrive.

Section 2: Participant Recruitment Process

Target Populations

A cross-functional team including the Associate Dean of Student Success and Equity, EOPS counselors, staff from Student Affairs, and the Title V outreach coordinator came together to discuss the need to gather student voices through a series of student focus groups that would take place in fall 2017. In order to determine which student groups should be invited to participate in the focus groups, the team reviewed findings from previous student focus groups conducted in 2014. Based on the team's conversation, they identified the particular student groups they wanted to know more about. These students groups included:

- African Americans
- Pacific Islanders
- Latinos
- Middle Easterners
- Former Foster Youth
- Older returning students (25 and above)

Furthermore, the team decided it would be beneficial to disaggregate the focus groups for each race/ethnicity by gender, particularly for African-American and Latino students. In addition, while there is a large Middle Eastern student population served by Grossmont, little is known about these students. Most Middle Eastern students are classified as "White" on the question of race/ethnicity on their college application. The "White" label has resulted in the inability to gather statistical data on Middle Eastern students. The dearth of information about these students' makes it difficult for the college to understand if there are unique issues or experiences among this student population that warrant the college's attention.

Finally, the student populations identified by the team were then vetted through the following councils/bodies: President's Cabinet, Student Services Council, Institutional Effectiveness Council, and Leadership Council.

Outreach and Recruitment

Grossmont College's Associate Dean of Student Success and Equity headed the participant outreach and recruitment process and provided the following description. Announcements regarding the focus groups were made through five classroom presentations (two ESL classes, one football defensive players class, one biology class, and a cross-cultural studies class); at the Club Fair held on the campus' main quad September 20-21 (two student ambassadors walked round campus recruiting students on both days); and additional tabling was conducted the week prior to the focus groups (October 9-12) near the college's cafeteria and in the quad. At each of these events, students who expressed interest in participating in the focus group were asked to complete interest cards (see Appendix D), which were then used to identify students for each of the focus groups.

The Associate Dean of Student Success and Equity sent notifications to all the directors/coordinators on the Student Services Council (Access Resource Center (ARC), student clubs, Associated Student of Grossmont College (ASGC), Health Center, Counseling, Admissions and Records, Financial Aid, Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), CalWorks, Career Center, Transfer Center, Child Development Center) requesting their support recruiting students for the focus groups.

Finally, students who participated in Donuts with the Deans were emailed information about the focus groups.

Students were informed through their point of contact, and through outreach materials, that participation in the project was strictly voluntary and that they would be provided a \$10 gift card to campus dining services for their participation in the project. Outreach letters were translated into Arabic and Spanish (see Appendices A, B, C)

The day before their scheduled focus group, students were emailed, called, and sent a text message to remind them to attend.

Section 3: Participant Characteristics

Focus group participants comprised 36 students: 10 African-American, nine Middle Eastern, five Pacific Islander, 11 Latino/Hispanic, and one White.² Of these students, two were also former foster youth. With respect to gender, 14 students were female and 22 were male. Age-wise, most were within the traditional 18-25 age range, with eight older students who were returning to school after an extended absence from education.³ A little less than half of these students reported working at least part-time; six were working at Grossmont.⁴ These students had been attending Grossmont between one and seven semesters (some students had started in non-credit ESL). Furthermore, students shared a broad range of career interests and were pursuing majors such as communication, digital arts/graphic design, culinary arts, psychology/social work, multimedia design, business, nursing, administration of justice, criminal justice/forensic technology, sociology, occupational therapy, and kinesiology.

Section 4: Key Findings: Common Themes across Focus Groups

Focus Group Themes

While students spoke about their own unique experiences, the analysis of the feedback from all focus groups revealed common perspectives across the following seven key themes:

² Student racial/ethnic backgrounds were self-reported during the focus groups.

³ The age of focus group participants is an approximation based on participatory observation and comments shared by students.

⁴ Students' employment status is an approximation based on comments shared by students during the focus groups.

1. Sources of motivation to attend college
2. Experiences of historically-underserved students at Grossmont
3. Sense of overall connection to the college
4. Concerns about finances
5. Perspectives on student services and support
6. Experiences with academics

Each theme is explored in detail in the following sections. Where appropriate, student quotes are included to provide specific insights into students' perspectives and experiences.

Theme 1: Sources of Motivation to Attend College

Most of the students responded to the topic of motivation, discussing what drove them, both internally and externally, to attend and persist in college despite the challenges that many encountered at Grossmont and in their personal lives. Students described personal characteristics, such as persistence, self-motivation, and personal responsibility as keys to driving their educational pursuits. Moreover, many identified the importance of the support from the people in their lives, including Grossmont personnel, peers, and family/friends. Finally, students shared how low societal expectations for certain demographics can also be a source of motivation to get a college education.

Personal Motivation

When asked what compelled students to come to Grossmont and what keeps them in college, they cited intrinsic motivators, such as the desire to do something meaningful or improve upon something they are already good at, feeling competent, and being in control of one's efforts. Two students shared:

I want to finish what I started. I am enjoying learning [and] my major; digital art. I'm also getting to learn how to be out in the real world. I'm getting more experiences than I would if I just graduated from high school and didn't do anything. I feel like I'm getting more help and I feel motivated to continue to pursue a career ... I'm not sure if I want to transfer or not. I'm still deciding. But I want to at least finish with something. All or nothing.

I want something more, and I know that the only way I'm gonna do it is through a better education. I'm not a teeny tiny bopper anymore. I know from working for many years, that if I want to move up from minimum wage and not be in a monotonous job and actually have a career I look forward to going to everyday, where I can build a savings account and not be worried about living paycheck to payday loan just to make it, I'm gonna have to do something different. And, it's gonna start with going to school.

Another student described her motivation as stemming from growing up in a low-income family and wanting to have a better life for herself:

Personally it's just me. I just want to have a good career. I came from [a] low financial background; my parents weren't wealthy. Not that I had a bad life at all, no. But I couldn't get everything I wanted. It was hard. That's why I want to have a career.

Family

For many students, family provides a personal source of motivation to attend college. For example, one student described how she felt encouraged by her family and was inspired by the sacrifices her family made, so she could have a better life. In her words:

The people that keep me motivated are my mom and my youngest brother because they struggle a lot. My mom has given up her whole life [for her children]. And my dad has sacrificed a lot too. Now that I'm older, I just really want to give back to my mom and my dad because they've done so much for me. And my younger brother too because, he has some learning disabilities and I want to be there for him when I'm older so I can provide for him, just in case [my mom] can't.

Other students felt they were not just in college to achieve personal goals. They are there for their family—parents who did not have the opportunity to attend college, siblings, and the children they have now or will have in the future. Two students described their desire to be role models in their families:

I'm older. When I got my GED I want[ed] to show my daughter that I can do this. I can go to school and get an associate's. I want an associate's. I want to start my own business and you can't just start your own business without taking classes. I want to prove to her that you're never too old. I explained to [my daughter] that if I would have had somebody that was saying, "Hey look, this is what you need to do; once you get out of high school, go into the culinary business, because that's what you want to do." ... Then I could have been a lot further along now ... I hope and pray I can continue to go here and get my associate's and walk across that stage.

I go because I have to teach my children never give up no matter how long it takes to complete something. I started college, my first time, in 1993. [I left college because I] had five children. I decided [to come back to college because] I wanted to finish so that [my children] would learn to finish. I wanted to lead by example.

Two other students explained that a desire to contradict low societal expectations can also be a source of motivation:

Most people in my demographic don't always go to school and then people don't expect them to go to school. I want to defy those odds. People didn't expect me to graduate [high school]. I made it a point to graduate. Not just for them but to prove to myself I can.

Trying to get a job is really hard because they see your last name and [certain employers] put your application in the trash ... I want to get a really good job so that I can say I did that and I'm a person of color. I didn't get [the job] because my last name was White. I got [the job] because I earned it. I want to get a really good job for my uncle because he expects a lot of me and I want to do it for my parents. Most of all I want to do it for me.

Peers, Faculty, and Staff

Students indicated the importance of having a peer network of support on campus; being around people who share the same struggles and feeling that they are not alone helps many students stay focused on school. Many of these “peer networks” are embedded into special programs such as Puente and EOPS. Two students described their experiences being a part of one of these programs:

[The Puente first year experience is] a [learning] community where we would go to class together and I think that's what helped everybody stay and keep coming to class. We all did this together. And, if somebody wandered off, it'd be like, "Hey where you going? Come on." That really helped.

[Mid-week Meltdown] is something for us [former foster youth] to get together and relate to other students that have similar backgrounds. We have discussions and everything in there. It's very helpful. We talk about our feelings and what it was like in foster care. What it's like now. [Mid-week Meltdown] has really helped me out as a person and I'm sure it's helped everyone else.

In addition to personal motivation and encouragement from family and peers, students expressed how much they valued the support from faculty and staff at the college and considered it another reason to persist in college. One student shared:

Getting involved was what got me through. I think if I didn't get involved, I really wouldn't know what I wanted to do. And I think the fact that there's staff that support students, not from a perspective that they're a staff or they're a faculty or they're dean or they're president or vice president, but when they come from a place that is more humane I feel like I can connect with them.

Honestly what keeps me coming here is definitely my counselor, and the [Puente] program. She's awesome, she's honestly one of the best counselors.

Another student added:

There's a lot of hardships, but one thing that I have always seen is Grossmont has always been there to help no matter if it [is a] staff or a student. Like any problem you have and you find the right person, they will help you. They'll welcome you with open arms. And that's one thing I have always loved of Grossmont... is their open arms.

Finally, a fourth student shared feeling motivated by her teachers:

My professor, she's just so full of life and that's what keeps me motivated to keep going to that 8:00 a.m. class even though I'm super tired. She wants you to be prepared for school. [The rest] of my professors will invite everyone to office hours. [For example,] at the end of your first exam, you get your scores back [and] she says, "I have office hours on these days, make sure to go to them. I want to go see all of you if I can." All my professors are like that. They want you to succeed. They don't make you feel like you want to fail.

Theme 2: The Experience of Historically-Underserved Students at Grossmont

When focus group participants were asked if they faced any challenges succeeding *academically* at Grossmont that could directly be attributed to their ethnic/racial background (i.e., African American, Latino, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander) or belonging to a "special population," the discussion shifted to participants' perceptions of the college's campus climate and culture. Across nearly all focus groups and a significant proportion of participants, comments were positive in describing the culture at Grossmont. Two students shared:

I personally don't see anyone viewing me any differently. I feel supported here and understood for the demographic I fall into (former foster youth). I think I'm treated equal. I haven't been judged differently because I'm in foster care.

It's a pretty diverse campus, I don't think anyone feels any different [because of] their race so, for me personally, it's just been normal. And everyone is friends with everyone.

A recent high school graduate compared her experience between high school and college.

I say it's way better than high school because you feel like the people are really adults, they respect you more, way more than the high school [... There's no bullying. They wouldn't comment on anything like how you're dressed [in a burka].

While the students in the focus groups did not appear to face academic challenges resulting from being members of a specific ethnic/racial group or "special population," further exploration of these students' experiences as members of historically underrepresented groups, revealed other types of challenges associated with being a "students of color." The most salient topic that emerged was issues of identity.

Identity

While some students in the focus groups seem to embrace the college's diverse population, several comments were made by students across focus groups regarding the visibility or non-visibility of different ethnic/racial groups on campus; experiencing "culture shock" coming to Grossmont, which is located in a very "White" and politically conservative area of San Diego County, from communities predominantly made up of "people of color;" and feeling discriminated against for their background and/or political views. Three students described:

The majority of African Americans on campus stay close together because they know what they had to do just to get there? African Americans students just [want to] keep everyone accountable and help each other out. We had to work hard to get here ... Those are the [students] that form a brotherhood. [Other students are] still cool and everything, but I do tend to see that more African Americans they just group together on campus.

My last name is Cook and [when] people see me and they're like, "You're not White. Your last name is throwing me off, what are you?" Like who does that? So many people here are like, "Where are you from?" [I say,] "San Diego. [Then they say,] "Where are you really from?" [Again, I say,] "San Diego." And they're like, "Where are your parents from?" [Then I say,] The Philippines.

As an Asian person of color, there were so many White people on campus. I was so surprised. And that really hit me because I'm so used to being in a community full of Mexican, Filipino, and Black people. We're in Santee, so I expect there to be a bigger population of White people, but coming here, just seeing it, just feeling it was so hard. I'm a person of color; I'm the only one in this room who is Asian. It hurts.

While the transition from being the "ethnic/racial majority" to an ethnic/racial minority" is not easy for many students of color, one focus group participant viewed the majority/minority shift as a growth and learning opportunity. In her words:

I'm from San Ysidro High School, so I think 98% of our school was Hispanic. I think it's good to experience that culture shock, because you're not going to be surrounded by that community your whole life. Unless you decide to stay ... I think being exposed to different types of cultures and the way people are thinking is very important to your success in college. Because you're going to run into those people, or even sometimes professors that stand against who you are as a person. And you're just going to have to deal with it.

Filipino American students specifically expressed feelings of isolation and the sense that their experiences are not understood at the college. They expressed feeling "invisible" because they did not see themselves represented in student life and/or through special programs such as Puente and Umoja.

One non-Filipino student described not seeing Filipino culture represented on campus:

Yes, definitely as a non-Filipino, I agree with you guys because I've never really heard anything about the Filipino culture [on campus]. That really just brings to light how the [college] should support Filipino students and include them in celebrations of students from different races. I think the Latino community is very well represented here on campus, also due to Puente and the Dreamers.

Similarly to Filipino students not feeling understood, former foster youth and immigrant students expressed that the college is not fully aware of the issues they face. In the words of one student:

I would really love to see individuals who are not affiliated with the Dream Center understand what undocumented students really need in terms of them getting help financially and getting help with counseling for mental health issues. That's something I don't see.

A foster youth student cited:

There's so much that each of us as current foster youth experience, whether it's homelessness, poverty, anything. Having our instructors or deans see what we witness, what we deal with, will open their eyes to the opportunities and resources that we need. Of course everyone needs money. Everyone needs food. Everyone needs supplies for school. But there's stuff outside of school that we need support for...

Moreover, students in a number of focus groups expressed feeling discriminated against by their peers and expressed concerns about feeling unsafe to express their views. In the words of one student:

I had a chemistry class last spring. I think [there were] three or four people of color in that class. And there was this group of who were basically Trump supporters. I felt extremely uncomfortable around them only because they would talk about how they hated this and talked negatively about immigrants. So it was just kind of nerve wracking to the point where sometimes I wouldn't even want to come to class because I was so anxious. It would come to that point where I would feel kind of uncomfortable interacting with them, because I didn't know how they would talk to me, or respond to me. I wish I could have said to them; "Shut your own values down and be more considerate of the other people in the room." I [didn't because I] was too afraid. They were all pretty big guys and I'm kind of small. I was just afraid that after class I would get harassed or something.

Theme 3: Family Obligations

Students from particular ethnic minority backgrounds and first-generation student participants expressed how family obligations can impact their educational experience. Latino, Middle Eastern, and Filipino focus group participants discussed the importance of their immediate and extended family ties. In some cases, family pressure has an impact on their academic success, as family members will more often than not put family first and school second.

Three students shared:

I have to take care for every single one of my [family members]. And, if I don't, I would be like the biggest disappointment in their life. Plus, I go to school Monday through Friday, six to seven hours a day. That's just school and class. And then I have to be studying a lot.

I have to take care of my family because I'm the only one that speaks English, fluent English in the family. My mom is disabled so she can't drive. I have to take her everywhere, she has to go, doctor...

I take care of nine people. My mom and my sister who are disabled. I have to take care of everything for these two. Plus, feeding seven people, doing the laundry, shopping, doctors' appointments, and whatever.

Theme 4: Overall Connection to the College

Research on student success, including studies conducted by the RP Group, has shown that feeling valued, connected, and engaged with their college is a critical factor that contributes to overall student success.⁵ One student described the benefits of being involved on a college campus:

When I first came to Grossmont College, I didn't feel like I was a part of the community here. Only because I wasn't associated with any clubs or programs on campus. Being introduced to [the] Science Club, Networking Leadership Club, Peer Mentoring Program, and other little communities of people helped me find where my niche is in the college. After I found out [about] these clubs and organizations being available on campus, I feel really connected to this campus, which I think is crucial for student success.

Students also spoke about feeling valued at the college. One student said:

I feel like my experience here at Grossmont has in a sense brought out a better side of myself. I'm a lot more confident in my abilities to succeed through EOPS, through the classes I've taken, through the resources I've been given. I mean, I'm here, I've been here a lot longer than I wanted to but, I feel like that [has] just been a process I've personally gone through with this college.

⁵ For more information, please see the Student Support (Re)defined project website at <http://rpgroup.org/Our-Projects/Student-Support-Re-defined>.

A different student mentioned:

[Faculty and staff] value [students] a lot. Whenever [faculty and staff] see something that's negative like the [impact] of politics on minorities or [other] ethnic groups, faculty, staff, and the people who work here step up to the plate. They develop and establish resources [like the Dream Center] for those who have been affected by hardships or politics... Overall, they do whatever they can to help those who are in need like those who are [undocumented or are] DACA recipients.

While programs, clubs, and events are a way to promote student life on campus and increase students' connection to the college, some focus group participants shared that students in general, do not participate because they are either too busy or not aware of the various activities organized by student clubs. Two students cited:

Most of the time people come here take their classes and go home. And they don't really stay enough to see what's available on campus and that kind of like takes away from their experience.

It would be cool to be a part of a club. But I don't really know of any clubs on campus.

Another student who had actually attended several events on campus commented:

I've gone to on campus events. They have some really incredible events on this campus and bring in some really amazing speakers that just have passion and get you like passionate about [the subject they are presenting on].

Theme 5: Financial Concerns

There is a growing body of research showing that students' ability to pay for non-tuition costs such as food, housing, and transportation to the high costs of textbooks or handling unexpected financial obligations, such as car repairs or medical bills can make or break their ability to complete their educational goals.⁶ In concurrence with the literature, students at Grossmont cited economic issues as hurdles to their academic success. Specifically, students reported experiencing financial hardships related to: not being able to buy needed supplies for their courses, their ability to afford internet at home, making ends meet, and child care. Some students also indicated working while going to school and having family all of which impact the amount of time they have to dedicate to their education.

One student shared not being able to afford to have internet at home and not always finding it feasible to stay on campus to access the internet to complete her assignments:

Thanks God I have Section 8, [and qualify for the Energy Savings Assistance Program offered by] SDG&E (San Diego Gas & Electric). Every month, I have to come up with \$500 to pay my rent so I don't have cable or Internet, anymore. If I could just have the Internet, I'd be fine.

⁶ On the Verge the Costs and Trade-offs Facing Community College Students, The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS), April 2016

A single mom who made the choice to stop working to focus on school full-time described:

Just trying to juggle, no income (this student relies on public assistance to get by) and paying for gas to take my daughter to school, and gas to get me school, make bills, and figure out when and where do I have time and extra help watching my daughter so I can get homework done and [study for] examinations. [Childcare has] gotta be free outside of my daughter's schooling time, because I can't afford it.

A student enrolled in the Culinary Arts program cited that she was being penalized because she was unable to buy the necessary equipment required of the program:

I've been in class [since] August 21st, like two months. I wasn't able to get my supplies; I need my chef clothes. I need my knives. I need all of [those things] and I wasn't able to get [them] because I [hadn't] gotten my financial aid. I was getting marked down.

One student who had access to financial aid expressed concern for his/her fellow students who do not:

[College] is very expensive. We get financial aid so it is okay. But, what about other students? They're paying for their classes and then books. They also have to pay for parking, which is so expensive.

Many students across the focus groups shared not having a choice but to work at least one part-time job to help pay for college, and support their family, which for some students leads to difficulties in finding the right balance among their family, school, and work obligations. One student described:

Balancing [work, school, and family] it's hard. I'm so weak in some subjects and because I'm not as equipped as the younger students, I have [extended family], I have a job, and now I have a husband. There's things that I'm having a hard time with that balance. Because I'm struggling so much with certain classes because I'm not equipped. I feel like everything in my life suffers and it starts to spiral a little bit.

Theme 6: Perspectives on Student Services and Support

Grossmont College, along with other community colleges in California, offers all students a range of general support services, such as counseling, as well as resources, such as financial aid, to help them meet educational goals. In addition, the college has a number of programs designed to provide additional support and resources to specific student populations. Some of these programs include the Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), Puente, Umoja, CalWORKs, and the Access Resource Center (ARC). However, the mere existence of these services does not guarantee that students will, in actuality, benefit from them. First, students need to know about what is available to them. Second, those services need to be both accessible and capable of providing the assistance that students need.

Students across the focus groups shared mixed experiences related to finding out about the resources available on campus, and interacting with general counselors and financial aid staff.

Participants also shared their appreciation for the special programs available on campus that provide additional resources and supports.

Overall Awareness of Campus Resources

Students across the focus groups expressed appreciation for the resources and services available to them at Grossmont. The primary resources referenced by students including the Tech Mall, English Writing Center, Math Study Center, tutoring, mental and general health services, Gizmo's Kitchen (food pantry), Peer Mentor Program, and comprehensive support programs, such as EOPS, Cooperating Agencies Foster Youth Education Support (CAFYES) Program, Umoja, Puente, Dream Center, Accessibility Resource Center (ARC), Guardian Scholars, and CalWORKs. When asked whether they were aware of the resources available at Grossmont, focus group participants had varying opinions. Some students indicated feeling the college was already doing enough to promote available programs and services via flyers, posters, TV monitors and information fairs on campus. For example, one student who felt Grossmont sufficiently facilitated students' awareness of resource availability noted:

[The college] has people standing outside sometimes, and they're like, "Hey how are you doing? Have you ever heard about this? This is what we offer." ... [Other times], you walk by and there's booths [with information about different programs]. [The college] seems to do a lot, which is awesome.

On the contrary, other participants also indicated that the college could do more to communicate the availability of resources to students. These students described learning about a particular service by chance, such as from a friend or simply happening to stumble upon it. Additionally, a number of students reported not knowing that some services existed until their second or third semester at the college -- "*I didn't know about the health center or career center until my third year.*" Furthermore, participants indicated that they could have been helped to an even greater extent had they known about these services earlier. Three students illustrated:

Well, when I first came to Grossmont, I found that finding resources available on campus were kind of difficult for me to find out about because the website sometimes is not updated. So I kind of wish there was more exposure towards the different resources available on campus like Puente or Umoja. That would've made my first semester a little bit better.

Everything is so fast at the very beginning, it was kind of very overwhelming and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what classes to take; I didn't know which ones were good or bad. And then just by other students, I started hearing about Rate My Professor and all that good stuff and that helped.

I really wish that I had had a peer mentor like [the college is] doing now. [A peer mentor] could have helped me find resources. At first, I didn't know about the tutoring upstairs. It wasn't until like my second or third year when I found out [the college] had that. Just knowing those services for students would have helped me a lot rather than just getting my ed plan for something I didn't even know I wanted to do.

A fourth student added:

I just know it's mainly available online. You have to be active about it, you have to look for these things but...they do flyers, that's how I find out about most of the things. If I don't see a flyer, then I don't know about it. And I think that's the problem ... It's important to have the flyer, but for me it's not enough.

Students also commented that the flyers were too small to read if you are “rushing” by on your way to class and that the lack of consistency in taking down flyers after the event/activity has passed makes it difficult to figure out which events are current. Lastly, second language learners (ESL) said that, even if they did notice the flyer, it was not always easy to read and understand if the level of English was too high. One student illustrated:

As a second language [learner] and for Middle Eastern people... let's say, for example, this flyer, they don't understand because [for a] beginner speaker... it's hard to understand what it is.

One student mentioned that the college could also better promote outside community resources, especially for students who do not qualify for special programs and therefore cannot access the resources these programs provide. In this student's words:

I feel Grossmont does a really good job supporting their students, but they could do a whole lot more for their students like going out to community and reaching the communities their students live in. Actually helping to bridge that gap where if you can't get a bus pass on campus, there's an organization that can help you get it.

Counseling

Focus group participants offered a range of feedback regarding their experiences with general counselors at Grossmont. For example, some students described the powerful benefits of connecting with a counselor who cares, while others citing the frustration of getting conflicting information about the classes they should be taking or receiving little guidance from counselors. Two students shared positive experiences with general counseling:

I had a whole week of [filling out] college apps and financial aid for other colleges. Then on top of that school, and midterms coming up. I had a stressful week. Just being able to reach out to my counselor [and ask], “Hey, can you squeeze me in for five minutes?” And going over there to talk to him [where he asks],... “What are your doubts? Why are you overwhelmed?” Just letting it all out. [My counselor] just shut the door [and said], “We're gonna sit here and talk.” That's when I had huge hope. Like the whole week I was stressed, and I [talked to him for] 30 minutes, not just 5. It just helped me relax and know that I can push through it.

I go to the [counselor] that was recommended to me, and he [gave] me a great plan. He goes out of his way to call the nursing program at [San Diego] State and call people on campus over the phone. He really asks me specific questions ... He's so awesome. But then you're left with those hit or miss counselors.

One student described receiving little guidance or that some of the academic advice she received was unhelpful or even inaccurate:

I've had like four [counselors] throughout my semesters here and each of them has given me different plans. Like my first plan, my gosh, that one was so bad, like [the counselor] gave me three English classes. Who does that?

Another student shared difficulties in accessing a counselor and feeling rushed when she did get to meet with a counselor:

So horrible. I tried to make an appointment with the counselor, [and the staff] said; "There's no appointments now." I was like, "Okay, I'll come in at walk in time." I went there and the counselor is just like in a hurry. He wants one question only and then that's it; he answers it and I leave.

Financial Aid

The majority of focus group participants mentioned receiving financial aid. While a valuable resource, many students experienced challenges accessing the financial assistance they needed. Some students felt that the Financial Aid Office staff was simply not helpful, while others cited delays in receiving financial assistance as a problem. Two students described various experiences with the financial aid process and staff:

What I encountered was that I got a lot of help, thank goodness, from a [financial aid office] supervisor. It wasn't because I know him or because I work with him; I do not. I said, "I'm not getting the answers that I need from your workers. Can you help me?" And he sat with me and made it his project to help figure out what I needed. What I discovered at the financial aid counter itself was that each person had a different answer for the same question. And it was very difficult because I would go back every other day to ask the same question. The financial aid department itself drove me crazy this semester.

I went [to the financial aid office] and I told [a staff person], "Just give me half of [my] Pell grant." [The staff person] said, "No, because you were late to give the consortium agreement." I told her that [I turned the agreement in] months ago. [The staff person] then said, "Don't worry. We'll give you your money, \$740, in two days." I said, "Okay." Nothing happened. I called [financial aid] again, they said, "Don't worry. [Your money will] come next week." Nothing happened. I miss[ed] my bills, I overdraft[ed] my credit cards, everything [got] messed up. I came [back to financial aid to see] why they [weren't paying me, [asking them], – "Just tell me the exact date." [The financial aid staff] said, "We'll give it to you on [the] 20th of October. So, I have to wait again.

A thirds student shared:

I made an appointment with my financial aid advisor. I just don't think he was very, I'll just say, caring. Everybody else here [at the college] cares about what's going on. My financial aid advisor was like, "Well, you know, this is what you get when you file late... See this thick pack of paper, this is all the students that filed late, so it's probably going to be six to eight weeks [before you get your financial aid]." I'm like, that's not helping me. I'm thinking to myself, "Why do you have to be so jerky about it?" I understand that you have a lot of stuff going on, and you have a lot of students. But you're here to help them, that's your job. Your job isn't to be rude. I walked out of there [and] my heart was just like this man does not care and he is going to probably do whatever he can to slow [down] the process even more.

VETERANS AND FINANCIAL AID

Although there was no explicit focus group dedicated to learning about the experience of veteran students, a number of students in the focus groups identified themselves as veterans and others shared growing up in military families. Under the GI Bill, veterans can transfer their educational benefits to dependent children through the Dependent Educational Assistance program. Students from military families in particular, described the lack the knowledge about how education plans are connected to veterans' receipt of their financial benefits among general counselors. In the words of one student:

For me, I received my financial aid from the military. So I wish there would be more exposure [for financial aid staff about] military financial aid and how to apply for it. It took me almost six months to have all my paperwork done because every time I would go to the office, [a financial aid staff] would be like oh you need this. I just didn't know what to give them.

Specialized Support Programs

As mentioned previously, many of the students in the focus groups are part of various support programs, such as EOPS, Guardian Scholars, CARE, CalWORKs, Umoja, and Puente, which offer a high level of support, such as dedicated counselors. These "special or categorical programs" require students to meet certain criteria for eligibility, such as financial need, enrollment in 12 or more units, being a current or former foster youth, first-generation college goer, or having a diagnosed disability.

Supports are designed to meet the particular needs of these student populations and often provide more intensive, individualized assistance. For example, many special programs have dedicated counselors, who are well-versed in the resources available to students and the processes for accessing these resources. In addition, both the structure of these special programs and the nature of serving a smaller student population typically facilitates the development of deeper and more consistent relationships between students and faculty/staff.

The students participating in these special programs appeared to feel highly supported. Unfortunately, these programs have limited capacity and are not able to serve all the students who are both eligible and eager to participate.

Two students shared:

When I came to Grossmont I had horrible circumstances. I found I was often confused about what I was supposed to be doing. Whether it was classes, what major I wanted to be in, and I didn't know the services I [qualified for]. Fortunately, I was able to find a counselor with EOPS; he's been my counselor since I first got here. He was like this guiding force [telling me], "You can qualify for this and you can probably get this scholarship." ... He opened a lot of doors for me on campus.

If I give [program counselors] a clear direction of what I want my end result to be, I'm confident in the counselors I'm working with right now with EOPS. I mean if you build a rapport with the counselors and you check in ... which I love ... CARE and EOPS have you check in at minimum three times a semester. They help you plan and map out exactly what [classes you need to take]. These are your long term goals [and] this is where you are. [Program counselors] map out [how to get to your goal] in a way that's cool.

A third student added:

[Program counselors] make me remember why I love being in the program. [The program] is so intensive. [Counselors] sit down with you and they make sure you're on the right track. It's really great how [counselors] work with you. Not only [do counselors work] one-on-one [with you], but it feels like they have no other care in the world when you're in that office.

In addition to dedicated counseling, students mentioned valuing other program resources, such as textbook vouchers and transportation cards, free printing, and a dedicated space to access computers and "hang-out." Two students shared:

For me, it's a great college actually because there [are] many different programs students can benefit from for example, a program that I work with, CalWORKs, they give money for books and transportation, for people [who are] receiving cash aid from [the] County.

I was very lucky and very unfortunate to find out that ARC [offers] free printing. I was like, "Wait, really? Wow! That's really awesome." ARC also has a space where they have computers to type your work and then print it out for free. This is a great help for students.

Campus Food

Finally, students spoke about the high cost of food on campus and how much they have appreciated the recent food pantry opened by the college (Gismo's Kitchen). For many low-income students being able to afford food, especially healthy food, can be a challenge. Students described the cost of food offered by the college's cafeteria as prohibitive not to mention the lack of healthy food options. Students noted that the college recently opened a food pantry (Gizmo's Kitchen) that provides free food much like a food bank does. However, while Gizmo's Kitchen is a valuable resource, it does not address the broader issue of access to healthy and affordable food for all Grossmont students.

Four students illustrated:

[The college] provides a food pantry. And that's actually helped me out a lot. School food is expensive and I don't have time to go somewhere like a McDonald's to the dollar menu. I have to eat at school and I noticed that the food prices in the cafeteria are kind of high.

Food -- it's pretty pricey. It's almost going to a gas station and having to buy like an apple for \$2.00. A cup of pudding is almost three bucks. I don't think that helps out a lot of students. I mean we're not all made of money, you know.

Honestly? There is no good or healthy food in cafeteria at all. A lot of fat, a lot of oil. Oh my gosh, a lot of fried things.

I started bringing food from home because whenever I'm going to eat [in the cafeteria], it's just going to make me sick. If I don't eat something that's healthy my stomach hurts. And I just don't feel good.

Theme 7: Experiences with Academics

Finally, focus group participants offered a range of feedback regarding their academic experiences at Grossmont. Students had mixed perspectives on their relationships with faculty, with some describing the powerful benefits of connecting with an instructor who cares and others sharing the frustration of encountering teachers who they felt were not as interested in supporting their success. Participants also expressed appreciation for the variety of academic support services available at Grossmont, particularly peer tutoring in mathematics. Lastly, the lack of course availability was raised as an issue.

Relationships with Faculty

Participants' experiences with their teachers were mixed across the focus groups. On the positive side, two students described:

[My professor is] actually going to be the guy [faculty] that gets me out of this school. He is engaging and truly amazing. He records every lecture, he's always willing to help. Even if he's frustrated with you, he'll tell you, "This is frustrating. But you know that it's not personal?" I think that really, I was going to quit. I was about to give up and then you encounter one faculty member that just changes your whole outlook.

I'm a visual learner. My first teacher [provided] handouts and they would have like a step-by-step process on how to do a problem. [The teacher] would also write it on the board versus some teachers I've had where they just talk really fast, write something on the board [and] then erase it. I'm more of a visual person. I actually like when they have handouts because I have something to reference.

Two other students added:

My professor, she'll give a little like fire talk to keep you motivated. And that's what I love about her. I was thinking about switching to a different major; public health instead of nursing. Then [my professor] gave us a really cool, motivating talk and it reignited my whole love and passion for the nursing program and the medical field. My professor always e-mails [the students] like almost every week saying, "[These are my] office hours. This is how to succeed in class." I think the whole constant communication really shows that she really cares and wants us to succeed.

[My professor] always checks up on you. If you miss class he says, "Hey, what happened? Why weren't you in class? Is anything going on? Are you eating? Have you slept?" [Professors] know what's going on, and make you feel like I want to strive. [Professors] are here for you to strive and here for you to be successful. And at the end of the day, when you transfer, they wanna be there. And it's just the way that some [professors] were taught and they wanna make an impact.

In contrast, two students shared having unhelpful experiences with faculty:

I'm not too good in math. [My professor] knew how to deal with the kids who were great at math. I don't know if that's what she was trained for, but she didn't really know how to approach the students who weren't good at math. It was like me and other students who were just trash at math were on the backburner all the time, and we were barely getting by. You could go to her office and ask her, "What was this on the homework?" [She] would say, "Check your notes." [We'd say], "We checked our notes. Can we get some assistance?" [She still says], "It's in the notes."

I've [told my instructor] I need to come and see you. I can't meet you at normal office hours due to the fact that I'm a single parent. I would have [no] way of getting anything done with you in your office if I had my four and a half year old with me. [My instructor isn't willing to work with me and schedule a time outside of [his office hours] to meet.

A couple other students added that some faculty appear not to like their jobs, which detracts from the learning experience:

You have teachers who seem like they hate their life. Honestly, they're just sitting there frustrated trying to get through the lesson. [Other] teachers seem [to be] here for the money. If a student is trying to reach out to the [teacher], they're trying to push you to other resources besides themselves ... so they can just go home.

There's been teachers where [it seems like they] hate the class because they don't really connect with the students. Or they don't make an effort to.

Many students cited that seeking assistance from adjunct faculty was especially difficult because unlike full-time faculty, they lack of office hours.

One student shared:

I think it's more about contacting them. You don't have time to talk with adjunct instructors since they don't have office hours and [students] only have 10 minutes between classes and sometimes there's a class already waiting outside. You e-mail them, and they don't respond. You ask [the instructor] [at the] next class [and] they [tell you they] responded. [When they do respond], instructors don't get back to you for weeks. And usually it's been important. A lot of [instructors] just don't answer or they expect you to do it on your own.

Academic Support Services

Focus group participants noted that they both used and appreciated the academic support services provided by the college, including the library, Tech Mall, Math Study Center, Tutoring Center (one-on-one and group tutoring), guidance courses, and English Writing Center. While students felt that having tutoring available for different subjects was helpful, once students were with a tutor, they shared having mixed experiences with the tutoring itself. Two students shared positive experiences with their tutors:

[The college] has an English Writing Center which basically all, or most of the English teachers will recommend [to students] if we have a paper due, or any kind of short essay [to write]. [When I go, I] have the prompt as well as the typed or written response to the paper or the assignment. [The tutors], they'll review it. They'll walk us through what makes sense grammatically and all that kind of stuff. Then [the tutors] will give you some good feedback. [For example,] I'm an emotional writer so I always put myself into things, and [the tutors] are like you can't always do that with every [writing assignment] sometimes, you have to take yourself out of it. I appreciate that constant reminder.

At the Tutoring Center they're all students and they're able to [tutor] in different subjects [like] statistics [and] calculus. Most of the tutors already know me. I like how I have a variety of tutors available that can help me. I know that we have specialized tutoring for certain classes like anthropology or humanities. I appreciate those resources because sometimes [the material in my courses] gets confusing.

In contrast, two other students shared their dissatisfaction with the assistance they received from the Tutoring Center:

I've had both great experiences and terrible experiences. Before your appointment you have to ask, "What are the reviews on this tutor? What do they tutor? How many students do they get? How busy are they?" When I first went [to the Tutoring Center], I was expecting all [tutors] to be great because they're all tested to be a tutor to make sure they know the material. But, I've had appointments where the [tutor] spent the whole hour Googling one question.

One time, I went to get help in my math class that I dropped because it was too hard. The tutor didn't understand my math as well. I thought [that] to be a math tutor you had to understand every single [type of] math? [The tutor] was just sitting there struggling as much as I was struggling.

Finally, students expressed their frustration with the Tutoring Center's appointment process and availability of tutors. Focus group participants described having to make an appointment for one-on-one tutoring a week in advance. One student described:

I would say that they would need to work on is the upstairs tutoring center, which is like one-on-one tutoring. Because you have to schedule in advance, and they get booked completely and it's hard to get in.

Another student mentioned:

If you go on Monday [to make a tutoring appointment], it's for next Monday. You can't set up [an appointment when it is convenient for you] like I want an appointment for three weeks from now on a Thursday because the next Thursday I have an exam. I have to stay on top of the weeks to make sure I get an appointment the Thursday before my exam. That's kinda hard for students.

Section 5: Recommendations

Based on the perspectives articulated by students across the 10 focus groups, the seven recommendations below provide Grossmont faculty, staff, and administrators a powerful opportunity to consider actions the college can take to best support student success.

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

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

While it is clear that budgetary concerns and a potentially unwieldy counselor-to-student ratio must be taken into account with respect to general counseling policies and practices, numerous options are still available to Grossmont that would enhance students' counseling experiences. For example, Grossmont could explore providing general counselors with additional professional development focused on keeping them up-to-date with the large amount of often-shifting information they must be able to accurately share with students. Additionally, a system that enabled students to consistently work with a dedicated counselor would facilitate the development of stronger relationships between students and counselors, and, in doing so, increase counselors' capacity to understand students' goals, help them overcome obstacles to these goals, and, ultimately, pave the path to success.

2. Create policies and practices that respond to a thorough understanding of the challenges and constraints faced by low-income students.

Although there was no specific focus group comprising low-income students, “low-income” was indeed a characteristic with which students in all of the focus groups identified. Students discussed the myriad ways financial challenges affected their attendance, which then cascaded into affecting their academic performance. Even when students received Board of Governors’ waivers and other financial aid, they still struggled to meet both large expenses, such as textbooks, and even seemingly small expenses, such as transportation and parking.

Specifically, the college may want to look at its financial aid disbursement policies and consider programs such as book advances⁷ or other types of innovations to ensure that students receive financial aid in a timely manner. Furthermore, the college could identify ways to create more jobs on campus to reduce students’ commute time and stress trying to balance work and school responsibilities. On a related matter, students suggested the college pay work-study students weekly or bi-weekly instead of monthly, which is the current practice. Finally, the college could explore less expensive and healthier food options for students.

3. Explore ways to support faculty in creating safe and inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and heard.

A few focus group participants described having experiences in their classes where they felt unsafe and vulnerable because of their ethnic/racial background and or political views. The college should consider providing professional development on inclusive teaching strategies to support and build faculty’s capacity to address the needs of students with a variety of backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities. These teaching strategies can contribute to an overall inclusive and safe learning environment, in which students feel equally valued.

4. Robustly engage students in the design, development, and testing of communication strategies regarding the resources available to support their success.

During the focus groups, students frequently started sentences with, “I didn’t know about...” or “If I had known, I would have started earlier with...” or “It wasn’t until I heard from a friend that...” Across various focus groups, students talked about a range of college services that are designed to support them—tutoring, health services, or special support programs for which they are eligible. However, they frequently indicated that they initially did not know about those resources, and that the discovery process was a haphazard one. Frequently, students learned about a useful service informally from a friend rather than proactively from the college.

When asked to offer suggestions to the college leaders, students requested that the college improve the ways that students are informed about the resources and services available to them. However, simply announcing the availability of a certain service or program is not sufficient. Instead, a creative and recurrent communication strategy that reaches students at all levels,

⁷ This program is offered to assist students who attend colleges within the Maricopa Community College District in Phoenix, Arizona (<https://my.maricopa.edu/financial-aid-and-services/book-advances>).

whether a bewildered newcomer or seasoned veteran, should be implemented. Most important to creating a strategy with the greatest chance of efficacy is that the students themselves are deeply engaged in the design, development, and testing of messages and media. After all, only students can truly know what messages will really resonate and what delivery methods and venues will be effective among their peers.

5. Ensure tutoring services are able to meet student need and demand.

Students identified that one-on-one tutoring offered by the Tutoring Center as particularly impactful; however, they found that accessing those services could be problematic. For example, students described having to make an appointment a week in advance to see a tutor. Students experienced an inflexible scheduling system in which they could not schedule an appointment at a time when they really needed help. To expand access, the college could explore adding more tutors and re-examining the current scheduling system to ensure students have access to tutors at a time that will benefit students the most.

6. Regularly capture student feedback that can be used to inform and modify processes, practices, and policies throughout the institution.

While the 10 focus groups described in this report provide a significant window into the educational experiences of Grossmont students and suggest numerous opportunities for improving the student experience, capturing student feedback as a one-off event can only provide the institution with limited insight into the perspectives of the most important members of its community—students. As such, the RP Group recommends that Grossmont develop and implement strategies to continuously and robustly incorporate student feedback into its administrative processes, such as planning for new initiatives, assessing the effectiveness of key services, introducing curricular/pedagogical innovations, or simply gathering input regarding the quality of the educational experience at Grossmont. Above all else, community colleges are designed to promote and facilitate student success as best as possible, and all efforts to achieve this goal can only be enhanced by a full integration of the student voice.

One approach to building on its initial effort in this arena would be for Grossmont to schedule and conduct regular focus groups throughout the year, inviting students across the general population as well as targeting those from groups that are particularly struggling to succeed. Regardless of method, it is critical that the college institute a regular and ongoing feedback loop through which students' perspectives are not only collected, but also analyzed, reflected upon, widely shared, and incorporated into institutional decision-making and operations.

7. Empower everyone who works at the college to be a source for student support.

Students across the 10 focus groups shared mixed experiences with the relationships they had with faculty and staff at the college. Grossmont College is not only an organizational entity; it is also a network of complex human interactions. For students to feel supported both academically and socially, the college must promote a culture where all faculty, staff, and administrators feel student success is everyone's responsibility.

Instructors and counselors may see their roles at the college as already inherently about support. In contrast, others may not see how what they do directly supports students, such as individuals

working behind the scenes in payroll, maintenance, or administration. However, everyone who works at the college can potentially play a valuable role supporting students.

In order to empower every person working at Grossmont to provide appropriate student support, the college must do more than simply telling staff to “be more supportive” of students and then leaving it to them to figure out on their own how exactly they should be supporting students. Personnel across the college must have the opportunity to discover exactly *how* they can, both in their position and as a member of the college community, directly contribute to student success. The college needs to provide professional development and support to help personnel develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support students, and continually practice these new skills with the full cultural and logistical backing of the college.

Conclusion

This report summarizes key findings from 10 focus groups comprising a diverse group of 36 Grossmont students. A variety of themes emerged describing Grossmont’s institutional culture as well as the programs and people students’ value and the challenges shared across student populations. By sharing their challenges and recommendations, focus group participants have provided Grossmont with tremendous insight into what must be done to create a culture that promotes equitable student success.

These focus groups marked an important beginning for making student perspectives more visible at Grossmont College. Looking at the college through the lens of students’ experiences—rather than the lens of policy, administration, finances, organizational charts, or logistics—could dramatically help to evolve the campus community’s (faculty, staff, administrators) understanding of the institution, shaping practice in powerful new ways. The college has an opportunity to build upon this initial step of eliciting student views by developing a systematic process to regularly engage student voices in the planning, design, assessment and refinement of college practices, particularly those central to student equity.

Appendix A. English Invitation Letter

Dear Student,

Get Involved! We want to hear from you!

Grossmont College is conducting a series of focus groups in which you will have an opportunity to talk about your personal experiences at Grossmont with other students. These focus groups will be facilitated by a researcher who is not a Grossmont College employee.

Everything that you share will **remain confidential**; records of who participated in the focus groups will also **remain confidential**.

We care about your success. We understand that you may be facing significant challenges as a student at Grossmont. We are interested in learning how we can help your experience at GC be the best it can be! Help us in this effort.

Please indicate which group with which you self-identify. Please select **only one group**:

Latino/Hispanic

Latino/Hispanic Male

African American

African American Male

Pacific Islander

Current and Former Foster Youth

Middle Eastern Women

Middle Eastern Men

Students who are 25+

Students who receive services from the Accessibility Resource Center (ARC)

Students who participate will receive a \$10 voucher to the cafeteria!

Appendix B. Spanish Invitation Letter

Querido estudiante,

¡Involúcrate! ¡Queremos escuchar de ti!

Grossmont College está llevando a cabo una serie de grupos de enfoque donde usted tendrá la oportunidad de hablar sobre sus experiencias en Grossmont con otros estudiantes. Estos grupos de enfoque serán facilitados por un investigador que no es un empleado de Grossmont College.

Todo lo que comparta **será confidencial**; los registros de quienes participaron en los grupos focales también permanecerán confidenciales.

Tu éxito es importante para nosotros. Entendemos que puedes estar enfrentando desafíos significativos como estudiante en Grossmont. ¡Estamos interesados en aprender cómo podemos ayudar tu experiencia en GC a ser lo mejor que puede ser! Ayúdanos en este esfuerzo.

Por favor indica con qué grupo te auto-identificas para participar en un grupo de enfoque.
Seleccione un solo grupo:

Latino/Hispano

Hombre Latino/Hispano

Afroamericano

Hombre Afroamericano

Isleño del Pacífico

Jóvenes de crianza (Foster Youth)

Mujeres de origen del Medio Este

Hombres de origen del Medio Este

Estudiantes mayores de 25 años

Los estudiantes que reciben servicios del Centro de Recursos de Accesibilidad (ARC)

Appendix C. Arabic Invitation Letter

عزيزي الطالب,...

شارك معنا, رايكم يهمننا!

تنظم كلية كروسمنت مجموعه من مجاميع (كروبوات) ستتمكن من خلالهم امتلاك الفرصة للتحدث عن خبرتك وتجربتك مع زملائك في كلية كروسمنت. هذه المجاميع او الكروبوات مداره من قبل باحث مستقل وليس احد موظفي كلية كروسمنت. ان كل المعلومات التي ستستخدمها ستبقى في غاية سرية من ضمنها الاسماء المشاركة في هذه المجاميع .

كطالب في كلية كروسمنت فاننا نهتم جدا لنجاحك ونتفهم مواجعتك لمختلف التحديات. يسعدنا ان نتعلم كيف يمكننا ان نساعدكم في تجربتكم في كلية كروسمنت بافضل الامكانيات المتوفرة! ساعدنا في ذلك المجهود.

الرجاء اختيار المجموعه الصح من الاختيارات ادناه للمشاركة في هذه المجاميع. يرجى اختيار مجموعه واحده فقط:

ابيض / لاتيني

ذكر هسبانيك / لاتيني

الامريكان الافارقه

الذكور من الامريكان الافارقه

جزر المحيط الهاديء

شباب رعاية خاصه

النساء من الشرق الاوسط

الذكور من الأوسط الشرق

الطلاب ممن يزيد اعمارهم عن ال 25 سنه

الطلاب المستلمين خدمات مركز مصادر المساعده (اي ار سي)

Appendix D. Focus Group Student Card

Focus Group Participant Information

GROSSMONT
COLLEGE



GCCCD ID# _____

FIRST NAME: _____

LASTNAME: _____

CELL PHONE NUMBER: _____ (To receive text reminder)

EMAIL:

GROUP WITH WHICH YOU IDENTIFY (Please select one):

- Latino/Hispanic - **WEDNESDAY, October 18th 4:00 PM-5:30 PM**
- Male Latino/Hispanic - **THURSDAY, October 19th 1:00 PM-2:30 PM**
- African American - **THURSDAY, October 19th 8:00 AM-9:30 AM**
- Male African American - **THURSDAY, October 19th 10:30 AM-12:00 PM**
- Male Middle Eastern - **WEDNESDAY, October 18th 11:30 AM-1:00 PM**
- Female Middle Eastern - **WEDNESDAY, October 18th 9:00 AM-10:30 AM**
- Pacific Islander - **FRIDAY, October 20th 9:30 AM-11:00 AM**
- Students who are 25+ - **TUESDAY, October 17th 5:00 PM-6:30 PM**
- Students who receive services through the Accessibility Resource Center - **TUESDAY, October 17th 3:00 PM-4:30 PM**
- Current & Former Foster Youth - **WEDNESDAY, October 18th 2:00 PM-3:30 PM**

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY

The 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.

Project Team

Ileri Valenzuela, Senior Researcher

www.rpgroup.org