CCSSE Follow-Up Study

Student Focus Groups: For a Deeper Understanding of Student Engagement

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Introduction

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is a nationally recognized tool used to assess the degree of student engagement in community colleges. Built upon important theoretical underpinnings including Tinto’s integration framework, Astin’s studies on student involvement, and Kuh’s concepts of student engagement (Nora, Crisp, & Matthews, 2011), the survey has been validated in numerous studies (McClenney & Marti, 2006). In the survey, students’ level of engagement is ascertained through five benchmarks: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners. For example, students are asked how often they participate in class discussions, work with classmates outside of the classroom to prepare assignments, work with instructors on activities other than coursework, use a computer lab, join student organizations, and their general evaluation of the educational experience at the college. Analyses of student responses allow colleges to assess the strength and weakness of each benchmark area and pursue further investigation that results in forming policies to strengthen student engagement.

A companion to the CCSSE, the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) was administered simultaneously with the CCSSE. A tool to gather “information from faculty about their teaching practices; the ways they spend their professional time; and their perceptions regarding students' educational experiences,” data from the faculty survey allows for a comparison with student data and provides for additional ways of looking at student engagement at the college.

Citrus College students and faculty participated in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) in the spring of 2012. Analyses indicated that Citrus students were less engaged in
several key areas than the overall 2012 cohort nationwide: active and collaborative learning, student effort, and student-faculty interaction. Equally important, the faculty survey results indicated a significant discrepancy between student and faculty perceptions in areas such as engagement in the classroom and receiving faculty feedback. These findings suggested the institution would benefit from having a deeper understanding of student perceptions on these issues prior to making recommendations or outlining a plan of action.

Following in-depth discussion of the survey results and consistent with the college’s five-year strategic plan,1 the Office of Institutional Research, together with the Institutional Research and Planning Committee (IRPC), commenced a spring 2013 college wide qualitative research project consisting of a series of focus group interviews with Citrus College students. The overarching objective was to better understand students’ thoughts and opinions regarding student engagement and to:

- gain a better understanding of student needs
- understand student perceptions of reasons for high or low levels of engagement
- hear suggestions from students on how to improve student engagement
- enhance college-wide awareness of the importance of student engagement
- improve student engagement by providing research-based recommendations to the institution

This report is a précis of the findings from the student focus group interviews. Following a brief literature review and description of the project’s research methodology, analyses of the interviews and discussion are provided. Appendices include the invitation to students to participate (Appendix A) and the interview questions (Appendix B).

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1 Citrus College Strategic Objective 2.2.5: “Conduct a series of formal assessments (including student and faculty focus groups) to identify student learning needs and strategies to address those needs”
Review of the Literature

To regain America’s lost ground in producing the largest proportion of youth with college degrees, the Obama administration and key organizations involved in higher education reform proposed a focus on college completion and job training to prepare young adults for the 21st century economy (Shear, 2010). As the largest single sector of American post-secondary education serving 44 percent of all first-time undergraduate students, public two-year and community colleges play a critical role in supporting the administration’s goals (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Hebel, 2009). Community college students, however, consistently lag behind their peers at four-year institutions in degree attainment and certificate completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). For example, nearly two-thirds of students who start at four-year institutions completed a bachelor’s degree in six years while only 35 percent of community college students earned a degree, a certificate, or successfully transferred to a four-year institution within six years (Century Foundation, 2013).

Reasons for the disparity in graduation rates are multifaceted. Research consistently shows that community college students are likely to be associated with one or more risk factors that may impinge on college completion, including that they:

- hold a GED rather than a regular high school diploma
- begin post-secondary enrollment one year or more after high school graduation
- enroll part-time
- are low-income and/or financially independent
- are responsible for dependents or other family members
- are a single parent and/or
- work full-time while enrolled in college

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2 Among the 25 member countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. ranked 1st in 1995 but moved to 14th in 2008 in the percent of students who entered college and obtained a four-year degree.
A stubborn gap in degree attainment rates is particularly salient for low-income students and students of color—the very students often concentrated at community colleges (Melguizo & Kosiewicz, 2013). Community college students tend to be less academically prepared than their four-year peers and are more frequently first-generation and less likely to get information and support from family (Bahr, 2010; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Grubb, 2006; Horn & Nevill, 2006). Moreover, scholars argue that community college students are less familiar with academic routines and frequently find the path to program or degree completion unclear or overly complicated. In addition, they struggle more frequently with mental health issues including anxiety, stress and depression (Grubb, 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Summers, 2003).

In light of community college students’ relatively low academic preparation, high number of potential risk factors and limited knowledge of academic structures and requirements, it becomes increasingly critical to engage students in the institution as a means of supporting their post-secondary goals. High levels of engagement, defined by Tinto (2012) as integration with college faculty, staff and peers and with academic work, have consistently been found to be positively associated with a variety of desirable academic outcomes including academic performance, persistence, and goal attainment (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2007; Nora, Crisp, & Matthews, 2011). Tinto’s integration framework, foundational in linking student engagement with persistence in post-secondary education, asserts that students need to be integrated within their institutions both academically and socially in order to persist and succeed (Tinto, 1993). He argues that “greater engagement in learning activities in the classroom,
especially those that are seen as meaningful and validating” and increased contact with faculty “both inside and outside the classroom” increases student success (Tinto, 2012, p. 65). The literature shows that engagement in academically oriented social organizations provides students with emotional support and “promotes academic involvement” (Tinto, 2012, p.65). Importantly, data shows that the impact of engagement is greatest for academically underprepared students, such as those enrolled in community colleges (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006 as cited in Tinto, 2012).

After reviewing the 2012 Citrus College student and faculty CCSSE/CCFSSE results, three areas were identified as needing further investigation in order to better understand strengths and weaknesses: active and collaborative learning, student effort, and student-faculty interaction. Of the five CCSSE benchmarks, Citrus College data indicated students had lower or significantly lower levels of engagement in these three areas as compared to the 2012 CCSSE cohort (all other community colleges who participated in the survey). Specifically, items that measured student frequency in asking questions in class and participating in classroom discussions were ranked low in multiple CCSSE areas. Analyses of faculty surveys also highlighted a discrepancy between faculty and student perceptions in the frequency with which students asked questions in class or contributed to class discussion. Additionally, students and faculty differed in their perception of how promptly students received feedback from instructors. Academic challenge and support for learners were also identified as important areas for further investigation. Together, these areas make up the five outcome areas on which the current study was focused.
Methodology

Participants

This study used a purposeful sampling methodology in order to achieve a diversified sample. During the spring 2013 semester, the unduplicated student count was 16,396. For the purpose of this study, this population was divided into six groups:

- General
- Disabled Student Programs & Services (DSP&S)
- Extended Opportunity Programs & Services/Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (EOP&S/CARE)
- Honors
- Veterans
- International students

The general group included students who enrolled in the spring term but were not part of any of the other five groups. In order to represent the diverse student body on campus, the students who belonged to the six groups were sampled separately to ensure that they would be represented in the final sample. The total pool from which students were sampled was 500 with the following breakdown:

- 285 students selected randomly from the General group
- 50 students selected randomly from the DSP&S group
- 50 students selected randomly from the EOP&S group
- 25 students selected randomly from the Honors group
- 40 students selected randomly from the Veteran group
- 50 students selected randomly from the International student group

Data Collection Procedures

Students were invited to participate in the focus group interviews through an email invitation (Appendix A). The invitation was linked to a survey on SurveyMonkey© which gave prospective participants an option to select a convenient interview date and time for

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3 The General category was drawn from the population of all Citrus College students without regard to their participation in any particular program.
participation. Students who responded to the survey received an email confirmation and reminder phone calls were made prior to interviews to ensure attendance. A total of five interviews were scheduled through this method. Food was offered as an incentive to participate and was provided at the end of all nine focus group interviews.

In addition to email invitations, one faculty member volunteered his course time for the focus group interviews. The researchers divided his class into three groups with about fifteen students in each group, bringing the total groups to nine including the pilot.

To assess the five outcomes outlined above, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed consisting of a total of 16 questions (Appendix B). In addition to the five outcome areas noted above, the interview questions included an additional area intended to help the college better understand students’ perceptions of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the institution.

A total of 63 students participated in the CCSSE follow-up study/focus group interviews during the spring 2013 semester. On average, seven students participated in each focus group, with the largest group consisting of 14 students and the smallest group consisting of three students.

Prior to participating in the focus group interview students signed consent forms with each receiving a copy for his/her records. Participants were also given name tags and were invited to identify themselves with a pseudonym so that they could be addressed during the session without compromising anonymity. Additionally, participants were given an index card and asked to write questions or comments that they didn’t want to voice publicly. At the end of each session, participants completed a student profile sheet that included demographic
information and asked additional questions about financial need and responsibilities beyond academic work.

Focus groups were conducted in various classrooms and/or conference rooms on the Citrus College campus with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. All sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

Each focus group was led by one facilitator and one co-facilitator from the Office of Institutional Research or the IRPC committee who had participated in a training prior to the start of the formal focus group interview process. Facilitators opened the sessions and provided an introduction of the study. The facilitator was also responsible for asking the questions listed on the interview protocol (Appendix B), probing participants for deeper meaning, and guiding the interview in the appropriate direction. The co-facilitators took notes and jotted down key information that might not or could not be captured on the audio recording, such as the number of participants in attendance, verbal or physical expressions, group mood, and quotes or phrases that stood out. The co-facilitator also monitored the time and made sure to collect all consent forms, index cards, and student profile surveys.

Data Analysis

Research analysts in the Citrus College Office of Institutional Research conducted the data analysis, with one analyst assuming the position as lead. The project lead analyst developed a coding scheme for identifying important topics and trained the other analysts to ensure inter-rater reliability. Topics were organized based on the specific content area with which the questioning was associated. For example, questions related to “Student Effort” were broken up into two topic areas—level of effort and drafts.
Once all themes were identified and articulated, four coders developed a protocol for assigning specific codes, organized by the six interview protocol topics, to the data. Protocol development was an iterative process where two transcripts were chosen at random to be reviewed by two of the four coders. Each coder reviewed the transcripts to become familiar with the interview content and to enable them to discuss the codes which emerged. An initial list of codes was developed from this first review and a codebook was created. Next, two additional transcripts were chosen at random and reviewed by two of the four coders. This review yielded additional codes that were added to the initial codebook. All researchers met again to discuss the meaning of any new codes that emerged, to refine the list by removing redundant or ambiguous codes, and to establish coding integrity across the four transcripts. The codes and their related text were compiled and reviewed for the following elements:

- Distinctiveness – the quotes and phrases are directly relevant to the code
- Integrity – the working of the code captures what the quotes and phrases convey
- Reliability – the code appears in more than one transcript

Once a finalized codebook was established, the additional five transcripts were coded by one of the four coders.

To ensure that the coding process was consistent among all coders, two rules were developed. First, only one code could be used for a specific phrase or quote. In the event a quote or phrase appeared to belong to more than one code, the coders agreed to break the phrase or quote apart and assign each portion of the quote to the most appropriate code. Second, codes should correspond to the question topic. For instance, if the question asked was regarding student effort, then the appropriate code should begin with the topic “student effort.” If the question was regarding classroom discussions, then the appropriate code should begin with the topic
“classroom discussions.” The agreed upon codes were utilized first. In the event that was not possible, a new, more applicable code was added to the codebook.

The next step in the data analysis was the second cycle coding process. The purpose of second cycle coding was to group all of the codes into distinctive categories. Each category reflected the purpose of the research, was exhaustive, and mutually exclusive. For example, all data coded with respect to “benefits” were grouped into one category. If necessary, categories were broken into subcategories. A summary of all the themes, categories, and subcategories was developed (Appendix C).

Sample

A total of 63 students participated in this CCSSE follow-up study during the spring 2013 semester. The results from the student profile survey provided information regarding participant demographics, as well as the different programs and services in which the students participate. Of the 63 students, the following demographic characteristics were found:

- 48% of participants were male, 52% were female
- 60% of the sample were 18-21 years old; the overall sample ranged in ages 18-41 years old
- 47% of participants were Latino/Hispanic, 30% were White, 8% were Asian, 5% were Black/African-American, 5% were Two or More Races, 2% were Pacific Islander, and 3% were Other
- 30% of the participants were in their first academic year at Citrus College
- 54% of the sample were taking a total of 12 or more units, while only 13% were taking 6 units or fewer
- 43% of participants were first-generation college students

Additionally, each of the six student groups (e.g., DSP&S) and other student groups not purposefully sampled (e.g. student government/ASCC) were represented in the final sample, as follows:

- DSP&S (17%)
- EOP&S/CalWORKs (14%)
- Honors (11%)
• Student Government/ASSC (11%)
• Veterans (6%)
• International Students (3%)
• Other (16%) 4
• Didn’t belong to any of the above-mentioned programs (43%)

Fifty-seven percent of focus group student participants were eligible for financial aid with 52% percent indicating their college expenses were covered by financial aid; 43% receive assistance from their family; 41% contribute their own income or savings; 1% receive some support from an employer; and, 8% through other, unspecified means.

Participants also reported on activities and responsibilities that they have beyond academics. The majority of participants indicated they were employed off-campus (62%) with 35% reporting they work more than 20 hours per week and 22% of the group working 30 or more hours per week. Twenty-nine percent of participants were employed on-campus, with 67% working up to 20 hours per week. The majority of students reported they spent fewer than 10 hours per week commuting to and from class (86%). Approximately one-third of participants had responsibility for providing care for dependents such as parents, children or spouses each week. Lastly, 41% of participants stated they spent up to 20 hours per week participating in community organizations, religious groups, politics, etc.

The results from the focus groups are organized around the six outcome areas outlined in the study design: Active and Collaborative Learning, Student Effort, Student-Faculty Interaction, Academic Challenge, Support for Learners, and Strengths and Weaknesses. Each section reflects one of the six outcome areas. Within each outcome area, comment codes were grouped into themes and further broken down into categories.

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4 Participants were instructed to select all of the programs in which they participated. Therefore, the total percentage exceeded 100% as some students participated in more than one program.
Results

Outcome 1: Active and Collaborative Learning

Focus group participants were asked about their experiences with classroom discussions. Three major themes emerged from their responses: **benefits of participation, factors impacting participation, and recommendations**. Nearly half of the interview participants mentioned the benefits of asking questions in class and participating in classroom discussions. Across all groups, the major theme that emerged focused on the increased learning associated with asking questions in class and participating in classroom discussions. In particular, students indicated that discussion helps to “reinforce the material,” helps them to better process the information, and creates a “better [classroom learning] experience.”

While students understand the benefits of speaking up in class, recognition does not necessarily translate to actual behavior. Students frequently commented on factors that impact whether they participated in class discussions or asked questions. For the current study, factors that students indicated impacted their level of participation were defined as characteristics, attributes, behaviors and/or rationale. Data showed these factors could be divided into three main categories: **faculty characteristics, student characteristics, and course type**. Faculty characteristics were defined for this study as any trait, quality or action a faculty member displayed in class that students indicated served to encourage or discourage them from actively participating.

**Factor one: Faculty characteristics**

Eighty-six student responses related to and were grouped in this category. Of the 86 responses addressing this theme, three faculty characteristics or behaviors—encouragement, setting standards and expectations, and personal characteristics—emerged as the most salient.
Encouragement from faculty was frequently cited as a common behavior which students felt stimulated them to participate in class.

A lot of teachers say that no question is stupid and it really helps because if I have a question and I don’t understand something and some other people do, or if I wasn’t paying attention or something, my professors are, like, happy to go over the material again if need be.

I actually do want to give credit to one of my professors that I currently have right now; he actually opened the environment for the whole classroom discussion on every problem that he does. He says that, “if at any step you feel uncomfortable, or you don’t know what’s going on, or you feel like I’m going the wrong way, ...you raise your hand and I’m going to stop what I’m doing. I’m going to let you participate on the board, do it your way, and then we’ll take a look at it and observe, kind of analyze.”

The second faculty characteristic that was frequently identified by student respondents was setting standards and expectations for class participation at the beginning of the course.

I think that when a professor sets a standard the first day of class for all students, you know he is going to put you on the spot. It kind of makes it easier as the class progresses for people to be able to ask questions and participate.

...the syllabus helps, you know what you’re going to do, what’s to be expected of you, and you...get a feel for the class.

My bio teacher would ask a question to each student to see if they, like, learned something. So, he would literally go through the rows asking questions and everybody had to participate.

Participants acknowledged that making participation part of the overall course grade could also encourage or discourage speaking up in class.

[Some instructors give]... like, 5%, and a lot of people are like, that’s not really a grade changer. I can ignore that 5% and still get a good grade in the class. Well, if they make it 10% or 15%, then it’s like, wait, that’s the difference between an A or a B, or a B or a C.

The third category detailed by student participants—faculty characteristics—lends itself to both discouraging and encouraging in-class participation. Students reported that faculty with open and warm approaches towards students made them feel at ease. When faculty members’
exuded “passion” and a “cheerful” and “friendly” attitude, students were more likely to ask questions and participate in discussion.

*Even if it doesn’t initially start off with much engagement or discussion, the passion of the faculty pushes it in that direction and the students tend to participate or reciprocate it.*

*…there are the professors that are just warm and welcoming and you feel more comfortable asking them a question.*

Alternatively, students indicated that some faculty seem “unapproachable” and “intimidating,” or that faculty react to questions with sarcastic or dismissive attitudes—approaches that lead them to remain quiet and uninvolved in class.

*I think a huge part of being engaged in a classroom, and when you ask a question, it’s almost the reaction of the teacher… their tone of voice makes it seem like that question isn’t relevant…*

The literature supports these student viewpoints. In his seminal work, Eble (1979/1988/1994) argues that “good teachers will be singled out as enthusiastic, energetic, approachable, open, concerned, [and] imaginative…they can motivate students, pose and elicit questions and are reasonable…” (as cited in DuBois, 1993, p.2). According to Lowman’s research (1984), “…superior teaching involves…interpersonal skills. Such skill allows one to create the sort of warm, close relationship with one’s students that motivates them…” (p.2).

**Factor two: Student characteristics**

Students recognized that their own characteristics also serve as factors that impact in-class participation. Participants argued that they were more likely to speak up in class when they felt comfortable, not embarrassed or intimidated. Students frequently stated that their level of comfort depended on the tone set by the faculty member. For example, students felt that when the faculty was cheerful and friendly, they felt more comfortable asking questions and
participating in class. However, when students felt faculty were unapproachable, they indicated they became intimidated, withdrew and were less likely to participate.

...he’s a really funny teacher, so he’s got a really laid back feel. So, you’re more open to ask questions. You’re not scared, you’re not intimidated. Some of the professors are very hoity toity and are very proper, and if you don’t ask the question in the right way, kinda like...Yeah, that’s a stupid question, don’t ask that. And half the class is wondering [the same thing].

[I participate] if I feel comfortable with the teacher. Other than that, I don’t talk.

In addition to feeling comfortable, students also suggested that their participation frequently depended on how prepared they were for class. When students had done the readings, homework, and/or had prior knowledge about the topic, they were more likely to participate or ask questions. Conversely, they indicated that when they hadn’t prepared or were not familiar with the topic they were less likely to participate.

I believe [lack of class participation] stems from many different areas, but one of the few areas, which I’ve noticed first-hand with some of my classmates, is a lack of study time.

When you know more what you’re talking about and you’re more confident in the material, it’s so much easier to voice those questions because you’re not like oh, am I saying something super stupid right now because I wasn’t prepared and I don’t know the material as well as everyone else does? So if you feel like you know it well, then it’s easier to voice those questions.

**Factor three: Course type**

Students also stressed that their class participation could depend on the type of course being taken. Focus group participants suggested some courses were more conducive to class discussions than others. Specifically, liberal arts and English courses were perceived as more conducive to fostering discussion and class participation than science and math courses.

Lastly, some students offered recommendations for what could be done to encourage more in-class participation. Overwhelmingly, students’ advice to their peers was to give direct feedback to faculty if they were having issues or didn’t feel comfortable speaking up in class. As
one student said, “it has to be constructive criticism and, so, yeah, so [the instructor will] be aware…”

Other student recommendations included allowing students to anonymously submit their questions to reduce feelings of intimidation or embarrassment; to make class participation a greater percentage of course grades; and have instructors be more interactive and provide more contextualization to capture students’ attention during class lectures.

Based on student comments, it can be concluded that students acknowledge the benefits of classroom engagement but are often are reticent to fully participate based on multiple factors. Among participants’ recommendations was that students provide feedback to instructors related to classroom climate that inhibits student participation. Consistent with student recommendations, in Overall and Marsh’s (1979) seminal work, a strong relationship between midterm student feedback to professors and positive cognitive and affective outcomes for students was found. Moreover, studies across the decades have shown that student feedback helps faculty identify areas where instruction and class climate may be strengthened (Ovando, 1994; Wachtel, 1998; Marsh and Roche, 1997). Thus, providing an opportunity for students to think about the experience they are having in class and provide confidential feedback to the instructor may have multiple positive benefits.

**Outcome 2: Student Effort**

During the focus group interviews, as in the CCSSE, students were asked about the level of effort they put into their coursework in general, and were also asked, specifically, about their experiences with preparing multiple drafts of assignments. Therefore, analysis of Outcome 2—Student Effort—has been subdivided into two categories: effort and drafts.
Overall effort

When discussing the topic of student effort with focus group participants, two major themes emerged. Students commented both on the amount of effort they put into their courses as well as the factors that impacted their level of effort. Students reported that the amount of effort they put into meeting faculty standards and expectations varied widely. A total of 43 comments were focused on the amount of effort students put into coursework. Just 5 of the 43 comments (12%), however, suggested students judged their own level of effort as “high.”

Overall, student comments on level of effort fell into four distinct categories with participants indicating that they tailored the amount of effort they put into coursework based on 1) the level of difficulty of the course, 2) faculty expectations, 3) enthusiasm for the subject matter, and 4) faculty passion.

Students commonly asserted that they worked harder in courses that were less intuitive to them or dealt with subject matter where they felt they were weak.

*It depends on the class, too. I mean, there are classes that come natural to you, like psychology stuff doesn’t come natural to me, so I would have to put more time into those classes. Science and math come real natural, so I would end up putting less time to meet my own expectations.*

*...it depends on the class...If I were taking a history class—I would have to be spending a lot more time on the history class because that’s always been one of my weak points.*

Essentially, students indicated that they adjusted the amount of effort they put into courses depending on their perception of the difficulty of the course content. They completed required assignments based on their individual strengths and weaknesses.

When questioned about the level of effort they expended to meet professors’ standards and expectations, students indicated that when they perceived faculty had low expectations or faculty had not communicated high expectations, they reduced their level of effort, completing
the minimum to pass the course. While students did not provide a clear definition of what they meant by “passing the course,” the quotes below reflect their attitudes and behaviors regarding effort as related to their understanding of faculty standards and expectations.

*I try my hardest to meet them—most of the time I won’t do the extra credit or go above and beyond... But I will do whatever it takes to get the A.*

*Um, [it’s] not, like, something I’m proud of, but I definitely adjust my level of effort to what’s required by the teacher.*

*...she asks us to read the sections that we’re going over the next day before class so we can ask questions, so I’m starting to do that now. She has high expectations.*

Asked why they didn’t put more effort into their coursework, student comments centered on a low level of enthusiasm for, and engagement with, the particular course. Students indicated that when they did not feel engaged with the subject matter, they lacked motivation to put forth high effort. Additionally, they reported paying more attention, being more active in class, and being more prepared for class when they were fully engaged. While many factors can motivate student interest in and enthusiasm for class content, the most frequent factor emerging from the interviews was faculty passion. Students consistently asserted that when faculty members were passionate about the subject matter it increased their interest and motivated them to exert more effort.

*Because my teacher, he presents that passion that I was talking about earlier. That passion that he has, it makes me more motivated and wanting to learn more about it.*

*But, when you have teachers that want to be there, want to show up, want to have—they want to see it click, and it just makes you want to actually try harder. It makes you want to put in more effort. Makes you actually want to show up to class.*

Student voices echoed the literature when they discussed how faculty passion impacted their level of effort. Studies of teacher expressiveness or teacher enthusiasm—speaking
“expressively or emphatically, using humor, maintaining eye contact, and physical movement” - have been linked to enhanced student learning in studies spanning several decades (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 117).

Students were also asked what hindered them from putting more effort into their classes if and when they are aware more effort was needed. The majority of students reported that lack of time kept them from allocating more energy to schoolwork. Employment and family responsibilities, such as caring for children and/or younger siblings, were the major obstacles students cited to finding additional time to study. Students also reported that a lack of self-motivation and even laziness often impacted the degree of effort they exerted.

A related body of literature argues that some student groups (e.g., first-generation students) have often not had the exposure and experience to master the “college student” role. Expertise in the form of role mastery argues Collier and Morgan (2008) “involves a combination or both explicit and implicit knowledge” (p. 442) that is critical for students to respond to the “increasingly customized or context-specific versions of a particular role” such as those found in academe (p. 427). While these students may grasp course content, they may not have the tacit knowledge to fully understand what is required and the level of effort it will take to be successful in class. Instead, they may assume they lack motivation or are lazy focus group participants indicated.

**Drafts**

In addition to overall effort, students were asked about the number of drafts they prepare prior to submitting a paper or project. Two major themes emerged within this section: benefits and impacting factors. Many students reported on the benefits of preparing multiple drafts.
Particularly, students identified increased learning and improved performance as two main benefits of preparing multiple drafts.

 Once you’re done with your first draft— it’s just like your ideas and your brainstorm—and then it’s best to go do another revision just to finish the technicalities of the essay...it’s a bit annoying, but it will make your essay more polished and clean.

 However, while students acknowledged the benefits of preparing multiple drafts, the majority of students reported that they typically prepared a single draft. Three factors were most commonly cited to explain their willingness or ability to prepare multiple drafts: time, instructor requirements, and self-confidence. Students indicated time constraints keep them from preparing multiple drafts. Some students specifically stated that juggling multiple courses and other activities such as work or sports were inhibiting factors. Others reported waiting until the last minute to begin working on a paper or a project and then not having sufficient time to complete multiple drafts.

 Students stated that they were more likely to prepare multiple drafts if they were required by the instructor.

 It’s one draft unless a professor asks for a prior draft... it depends on the professor.

 Other students stated that they were confident in the first draft they created or that the first completed draft had actually undergone significant edits during construction and, therefore, they did not allocate time to prepare additional drafts.

 Most of the time I will feel confident in what I wrote and that it’s more than adequate and I’ll just turn that in, and usually it gets a good grade, and I’m fine with just turning in just one draft.

 I’m using a computer, so it’s not like when I write the paper for the first time I just write it out in one stream of consciousness and I’m done and that’s perfect. I am rearranging paragraphs and, you know, reworking sentences, but by the time I’m done with that, I’ve got a [good] paper.
Many students did note that they began with an outline before writing their papers or essays. Students clearly articulated the benefits of preparing an outline in that it helped them to organize their thoughts and ideas.

*It’s just like, figure out if this paragraph is going to be this, and [an outline] just helps me tie everything in a lot faster than just starting to write things.*

Again, it is apparent that students understood the benefits of preparing more than one draft. Many students reported that when instructors were available to provide feedback on early drafts, they took advantage of and benefitted from the support.

Some student respondents asserted that their level of effort could be attributed to their intrinsic motivation, “perfectionist” tendencies, and desire to do well. Said one participant,

*I’d be ashamed to turn anything in that I didn’t know was 100%.*

Similarly, others indicated that because they thrive on the positive feedback, they are likely to prepare multiple drafts as they wanted faculty “to read [their work] and be, like, wow, this is a really good paper!”

What students recognize from personal experience—that preparing an outline helps “tie everything in a lot faster than just starting to write things”—is supported in the research literature. According to Kellogg (2008), effective text composition requires that an extensive range of knowledge is available in the writers’ working memory. An outline provides access to content-specific knowledge in long-term memory and “helps writers to focus on text generation in producing a first draft” (Kellogg, 2008, p. 16).

**Outcome 3: Student-Faculty Interaction**

Focus-group students were asked about their expectations regarding faculty feedback and how they utilized feedback from professors. Three themes emerged from this set of questions: 1)
expectations for feedback from faculty; 2) experiences with faculty feedback; and 3) explanations of their expectations.

**Expectations**

Students were clear that they had very high expectations related to feedback from instructors. As students articulated, their expectations referred to both the timeliness with which feedback is received as well as the quality of the feedback. While interview facilitators did not press students to define what they considered “timely feedback,” several students indicated that they expected instructors to respond to emails within a day or two and to provide graded assignments by the next class session.

**Experiences**

Students asserted that they wanted and needed feedback from instructors. They also reported having both positive and negative experiences related to receiving feedback from faculty. Specifically, students commented that when they perceived instructors were irritated or frustrated by student questions, they were less likely to seek feedback. Students indicated that some faculty seemed “scary” and that they felt some faculty didn’t “have tact when they respond to questions and [they] are semi-rude.” When instructors did not seem accessible, students indicated they were discouraged from wanting to seek feedback, even when they had questions about course content or assignments.

Also salient were comments regarding positive experiences when asking for feedback. “Most professors are very professional,” one student indicated.

* [I] e-mail them, go to their office hours. If they don’t have any [office hours], they’ll make time. Most of them will make time to see you before class or hang around and talk to you after class.*
Focus group participants expanded on their thoughts regarding feedback relative to instructor availability and timeliness. Many stated that they found a majority of professors available for feedback and that most provided feedback in a timely manner. There were, however, also concerns from students regarding faculty feedback in this area. Importantly, students were acutely aware of the negative consequences when professors were not available and/or did not provide timely feedback. A sense of frustration and concern for the learning process was evident when students felt timely feedback was not available or provided.

And, it’s frustrating [when I don’t get feedback] because I keep checking [Blackboard©], I keep checking it. Check it day and night, day and night, day and night, and I’m waiting and, I’m like, okay, is she going to post it up? Doesn’t ever post it up. And the quiz is the next day.

But some instructors are kind of sloppy, so you have no idea if he lost your work. Sometimes I just turn in a paper...and we never get it back, so you never know how much you missed...

It seems like [my professor is] just too busy. I’m trying to talk to her and she’s like okay, okay, but she’s not really hearing me out.

Explanations of Expectations

Several modes of receiving feedback were discussed by focus group students. The most common mode in regards to receiving feedback was through the use of Blackboard©, discussed in four of the nine focus groups. Students indicated that using Blackboard© enabled them to check for accuracy as well as manage their progress in courses.

I think that the use of Blackboard© is our form of feedback, where we can just check up on our grades right away, and if a professor decided not to use Blackboard©, it kind of hinders you because you have no idea where you are at...If Blackboard© is there, why can’t we use it?

The ones that use Blackboard© are the ones that I’m able to keep up with in class.

With the use of Blackboard©, students indicated that they were able to make sure their grades were being calculated accurately and that they were getting credit for all assignments they
had submitted. When there appeared to be a discrepancy, students said they were able to see it on Blackboard© immediately and discuss it with the faculty member.

_Last semester [on] my English Blackboard©, one of my grades was wrong, so I let [the instructor] know about it and he fixed it. But, if he doesn’t use Blackboard©, I would never see that._

Participants also indicated that another preferred mode of receiving feedback was one-on-one meetings with instructors. In this way, students believed they were able to get the detailed feedback they were seeking.

Moreover, students also asserted that they wanted faculty to provide legible and detailed comments about the strengths and weaknesses of their work. This feedback, they believe, was central to helping them improve the quality of their work.

_I also feel like [it’s important for them to] write on the actual paper or assignment or whatever it is. I like to see it instead of them just writing “good job”. I like to see the comments._

Students’ statements reflected their high expectations regarding the level of detail they desire because of the fundamental benefits feedback provides. Specifically, students asserted that feedback is a critical aspect for improving their own performance.

_For me, with math classes especially, when I get my test back or my homework back [and] it just marks which ones are wrong and it doesn’t explain how I do it right and that’s the biggest thing because it doesn’t become about how I can fix it, it just becomes you did bad and if you keep this up you’re gonna fail. And…I’m not able to improve on that with that feedback because I don’t know what to do. I take it to a friend [or] I have to take it to a tutor, and they have to explain and it’s never the professor._

Focus group participants’ discussion on detailed feedback was consistent with research on effective instruction. Bain (2004) stated highly effective college faculty use “examinations and assignments…to help students understand their progress in learning” and “encourage development” (p.152). These faculty members make clear distinctions between learning and
performance and also recognize that the work students submit is an opportunity to evaluate their own teaching. Feedback to students, asserts Ambrose et. al. (2010), is most effective when it is formative and “explicitly communicates to students about some specific aspects of their performance relative to specific target criteria…helping students progress toward meeting those criteria” (p. 139).

Overall, interview responses made it clear that students needed and expected faculty to provide timely, detailed feedback that they were able to utilize for their personal academic development. Timely feedback was also important to students so that they could track their progress and ensure grades are recorded accurately. Overwhelmingly, students asserted a desire to meet one-on-one with faculty who are accessible and encouraging. Additionally, students valued Blackboard© as an important feedback tool.

**Outcome 4: Academic Challenge**

When asked about the level of challenge of Citrus College courses, student responses varied. Themes that appeared most frequently in their comments were the benefits of having challenging coursework and perceptions of the level of challenge in courses they completed. Based on student remarks, it is apparent that they see value in challenging coursework. The most common benefits of completing challenging courses were increased confidence, an opportunity to become more disciplined, and personal growth.

Overwhelmingly,⁵ students indicated that they believe courses at Citrus College are not sufficiently challenging and that they would value more challenging coursework. Student perceptions of the level of challenge in their courses were dependent on multiple factors. Most frequently, students indicated that the level of challenge in courses college wide depended on course type, student characteristics, and faculty characteristics. For example, students stated that

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⁵ Twice as many comments indicated courses are not challenging enough compared to too challenging.
some courses are just inherently more challenging than others. In particular, math and science
courses were perceived to be more challenging than social science and liberal arts courses.

Student characteristics also affected the perceived level of challenge. Students
commented that their learning style, attitude, and personal motivation played a role in the level
of perceived course challenge.

*It also depends on the student, as well. If the student just goes in there, like
whatever, I’m just going to hope to pass it, listen and maybe copy down my
friend’s notes after. If they’re not going to take it seriously, of course it’s going to
be challenging because they’re not going to understand the material. If they put
the effort into it and they understand, they learn, they ask questions, it still might
be challenging, but a little bit easier than for some people who don’t put the effort
in.*

In addition to student characteristics, respondents also mentioned faculty characteristics
they believe impact the level of challenge perceived by students. For example, students stated
that some professors are stricter and hold higher expectations. Additionally, faculty enthusiasm
and rapport with students appeared to moderate the level of perceived difficulty as well as
increase student motivation to put more effort into the class.

*I think the professors should try to make the classes a little more interesting.
When it’s dull, it’s hard to stay focused and hard to be motivated.*

Furthermore, quite a few responses revealed that the level of difficulty of a course does
not correlate with the courses value.

*Some classes are easy, some classes are hard, but it doesn’t correspond to if the
class is good or not. I’ve had hard classes where I didn’t learn much and I’ve
had easy classes that were amazing and I learned a lot and [they’ve] had a big
impact on my life.*

Comments regarding course challenge suggested that students valued and welcomed
challenging courses. While challenging courses are appreciated, their perceptions regarding the
level of challenge they experienced in their courses varies. Perception depended largely on the
type of course (i.e. liberal arts, math, science), expectations of faculty, and students’ own learning styles, attitudes, and personal motivation.

**Outcome 5: Support for Learners**

Focus group questions related to Outcome 5—Support for Learners—were divided into two sections: student support services and financial aid. Students were asked about which student support services they were aware of, the extent to which they utilize services, and factors that may hinder or encourage usage. Similarly, focus group participants were asked about their access to and knowledge of financial aid services and queried about how the college might increase awareness of financial aid.

**Student Support Services**

When asked about services, six areas of Student Support were most frequently mentioned by focus groups participants: Peer Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, the Writing Café, Book Check, EOP&S and DSP&S. Of those, Peer Tutoring and Supplemental Instruction garnered the most responses. Although students were aware of many of the services available to them and acknowledged the benefits of using these services, only a few stated they regularly utilized services. However, students discussed factors impacting their usage and they made recommendations for increasing usage among the student body.

Time/schedule, self-motivation, and intimidation/embarrassment were factors most widely cited as explanations for not utilizing student support services, especially as it related to Peer Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction and the Writing Café. Timing and scheduling appeared to be the major factors that hindered students from taking advantage of these services. Students stated other responsibilities, such as work or other classes, prevented them from utilizing these services. Students suggested that the hours these services were offered were not consistently
conducive to their schedules. Moreover, quite a few students admitted to not having the
motivation to seek out and utilize offered services.

I know I’ve been guilty before where I need to do something but I just don’t want
to or sometimes it will feel like an inconvenience to take time out of my schedule
and go do something extra, even though it hurts me in the long run, you
sometimes don’t feel like doing it. I think some students think that way.

I think it has a lot to do with time management. A lot of students don’t take the
time out of their day to go and take like 30 minutes and check their essay at the
Writing Center, or even ask a question at the STEM Center...

Additionally, students suggested that they haven’t utilized some services, such as Peer
Tutoring, because they found that it was not helpful largely due to the qualifications of the tutors.
Student comments indicated that peer tutors should not only have successfully passed the courses
for which they tutor, but they should also be current with the material in order to adequately
respond to student questions and needs.

I’m not saying you have to have an A+ in calculus, but you need to really know
what you’re teaching me because this kid didn’t even know what he was teaching
me. He had to constantly go back into the books and look which was right.

If you’re going to teach someone that, especially a language, you should definitely,
definitely know it. You shouldn’t be having to be using a dictionary and bothering the
other tutor that’s working with another student to help me.

Students also recommended that professors assist in the tutoring centers more frequently.

Well, my English teacher, he helps out in the Learning Café and I think that’s
kind of cool besides using just students. You have actual professors volunteering
their time ...and he’s, literally, like, ‘if you need help with your paper, come visit
me. I will be there. I will help you with your stuff.’ But he’s also helping other
students as well. So, maybe if we could get some of the other professors that
would like to help with students. Those are going to be the ones that are more
energized. Are going to want to help you work it out and figure out...

Concerns about the book check services were also discussed. Specifically, students were
concerned with the over-time-limit fees, the lengthy waiting period, and the availability and
variety of book options.
It was, literally, 15-20 minutes I had it too long and they were, like, “alright, you owe us a dollar.”

Additionally, students recommended that they be allowed to choose their own tutors in the Writing Café and be able to schedule hour-long sessions as opposed to being limited to 45 minutes. Further recommendations coming from focus group participants to increase the use of student support services included having instructors provide incentives or extra credit for utilizing services, especially as it relates to Supplemental Instruction, and to provide on-line tutoring options.

Students also requested additional study and/or lounge areas that they could utilize between classes, as well as additional computer labs. Students noted that the study areas and computer labs were overcrowded. A few students even mentioned needing separate study and lounge areas so those students who want to eat, lounge, or talk before, after or in between classes don’t disturb those students who are trying to study.

Financial Aid

The majority of student respondents were aware of financial aid options. Specifically, most students commented on taking advantage of the Board of Governors (BOG) fee waiver, G.I. Bill, Pell Grants and student loans. The BOG waiver and Pell Grants were discussed most frequently. Only a few students stated that they had been awarded scholarships. While students seemed knowledgeable about general financial aid services, many were not aware of specialized programs and scholarship opportunities.

When asked how they were made aware of specific financial aid resources, most students stated it was through peers or family members, high school counselors, the Citrus College website, completing the FAFSA, or attending the new student orientation. The most common sources of information were family and peers and filling out the
FAFSA. Quite a few students stated they were unaware of financial aid resources, and did not know where to go to get the information. Several students stated that they do not use the Citrus College website as a source of information. One student stated,

“*No one goes on the website. People go to Blackboard and Wingspan.*”

This would suggest that simply putting the information on the website may not be sufficient for relaying information to all students.

Students offered recommendations regarding financial aid services, most of which were in reference to providing more information about the services and options available. Specifically, students recommended the dissemination of a periodic newsletter outlining financial aid options, information packets mailed to their homes, posters hung around campus, and/or a financial aid resource fair. The volume of responses concerning the distribution of more information suggested a widespread concern about increasing awareness regarding financial resources.

Focus group participants, recounting family challenges linked to the recession, also recommended that more financial resources be allocated for students considered middle-income. Arguing that students from middle-income families are often ineligible for government loans, grants, or scholarships they are, nonetheless, in need of financial assistance according to respondents.

Lastly, many students voiced concern with the unit limit placed on financial aid, indicating that the number of units earned should not necessarily affect one’s ability to qualify.

*I’m a returning student and when I first attended Citrus…I paid for everything out of pocket... When I came back...I learned of financial aid, got my financial aid and was actually able to use financial aid for the first time that semester and the following Spring semester. Then I was told I wasn’t eligible...anymore because I had too many units...I think, if there’s a cutoff that’s fine, there should be a cutoff. But, the cutoff should start from the time you start using the financial aid, and it should only include those units that [financial aid] has been applied to.*
The research literature is flush with studies on financial aid distribution and unmet need (defined as the cost remaining after financial awards, family contributions and student earnings). Evidence consistently shows that as unmet need increases, students’ chances of persistence declines. Studies show, however, that the gaps are most salient among low-income students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Outcome 6: General Strengths and Weaknesses**

Focus group participants were asked to share their perceptions regarding the general strengths and weaknesses of Citrus College. Students frequently indicated that the faculty was an easily identifiable strength. Particularly, students expressed that Citrus College has faculty that take the time to help and motivate students.

*I guess an overall strength would be the faculty.*

*Great professors. They take the time to help you... My first teacher was a crazy experience. He actually made me want to continue, which is nice. It does affect you, their teaching.*

Students also stated that, in their view, one of the greatest strengths of Citrus College is the campus environment indicating it has a very “homey” feel which makes it comfortable and inviting for students.

*I really like the atmosphere of this college, that was why I was drawn here. I live in Chino, so I have Mt. SAC, Chaffey, and Citrus kind of all close to us...I liked the feel of this environment; it’s very homey, it’s very welcoming, it’s very green. It’s a nice place to be on a nice, warm, sunny day. You feel good about yourself, you feel like you’re doing the right thing.*

“Unity” was another word students used when discussing why they come to Citrus College, describing a sense of connection with other students and the larger academic community. Finally, students emphasized that the size and location of Citrus College is an advantage. Most students stated that the college was close to their homes and easily accessible,
although many students indicated they came from communities out of the service area. In addition, students commented that the smaller campus size makes it easier to get to know other students and to get around campus.

*I’ve seen that the other colleges don’t have the order and the structure that we do, I don’t know if to say we are smaller or what not, but it seems like...the students give back more and the faculty are able to give back to the students more than other colleges.*

Student parking was the number one complaint across all focus groups. Students believed there was insufficient student parking and that they used valuable time searching for spaces.

*I think in the morning you stress out so much about trying to find a parking spot that sometimes it throws off your whole day...*

Other areas students identified as weaknesses were the registration process, counseling, food services, bathroom maintenance, and campus security. Specifically, students appeared to be unhappy and, perhaps not fully aware of registration priorities and the registration process. They expressed concern with the fairness of priority registration, as well as with the waitlist process. Some students stated that they believe it’s unfair for new students to get priority registration as they may not take classes as seriously as those students who are attempting to graduate or transfer. Many articulated that they believe international students and honor’s students have an unfair registration advantage over other students who may be equally serious about their studies.

Students also expressed frustration with counseling services. Two concerns with counseling came up during the interviews: not having sufficiently long appointments and receiving what they believe is inaccurate information regarding transfer.

*I wait two and a half weeks to talk to you to get my guidance plan and it’s, like, I don’t understand why you schedule appointments and then when we do get them, they’re so short. Not enough time to get anything accomplished.*

*I feel like we’re given information to get an AA, not just the core requirements needed to transfer to continue on.*
...counseling here is not very good. I'm here longer than I need to be, I only needed these classes after I spoke to a rep from the college I’m trying to transfer to...[But on the positive side]there are counselors from other colleges here, so they can give you that information that you might not have gotten from the counselors from Citrus.

Students indicated that they believe food services are too expensive and lack variety, while bathrooms were reported as not being well maintained or stocked with supplies. Lastly, students commented on the need for increased security such as surveillance cameras, more lights around campus, as well as an emergency plan.
Discussion

The CCSSE follow-up focus group interviews, conducted in Spring 2012, have provided a greater understanding of students’ experiences, behaviors and needs in the classroom and within the wider college community. The 63 students who participated in the focus group study mirrored the composition of students college-wide in terms of age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Fulltime students had a larger percent in the sample (54%) than their overall representation on campus (about one-third). Student feedback offers insight into what we, collectively as a college community, can do to promote student engagement and ultimately increase student learning and academic success.

Students recognized the importance of classroom engagement and the benefits to their cognitive development and overall academic performance. Their comments suggested they would like more interactive and contextualized opportunities in class. From what they expressed at the interview sessions, students recognize that encouragement from faculty has a positive impact on their level of engagement. Faculty characteristics, presenting an open and warm demeanor in the class, for example, also play a positive role in promoting active and collaborative learning for students. Moreover, students indicated that the classroom climate needed to be respectful and safe for them to fully participate.

Students appreciated the fact that when they had prepared for class, they felt more comfortable asking questions and participating in class discussions. They also recognized that some courses, those in liberal arts and English, for example, were more conducive to class discussions than others, including math and science courses.

In addition to preparing for class, they recommended their fellow students directly communicate with instructors if they didn’t feel comfortable speaking up in class. Students also
encouraged faculty to make participation a meaningful part of the overall course grade as a way
to coax reticent students into more fully participating in class.

When student effort was discussed with focus group participants, it was clear that
students tailored the amount of effort they put into coursework to the level of difficulty and type
of course. Students reported that when faculty members communicated high standards and
expectations, increased student effort followed and they acknowledged that they have a tendency
to do the minimum to pass the course. Therefore, they argued, what is required by the instructor
directly impacted the amount of effort they put forth in their coursework.

Students maintained that faculty passion, defined as teacher expressiveness and
enthusiasm, was an additional factor that influenced their motivation. Students consistently
asserted that when faculty seemed passionate about the subject matter, students’ interest and
level of effort increased. Lastly, students stressed that constraints on their time often prevented
them from putting more effort into coursework.

Robust discussion of the number of drafts of papers and projects that students prepared
occurred in the focus group sessions. Students recognized the benefits of preparing multiple
drafts. They indicated that the use of outlines helped them organize their thoughts and, even
when they may have drafted only one complete version of a paper, it went through many
iterations as they edited while writing. Students also indicated that if instructors required
submission of a preliminary draft, they were more likely to make time to write multiple drafts.

It is clear that students had very high expectations related to feedback from instructors
indicating they expected to receive clear and constructive feedback from faculty in a timely
manner. They expected formative and detailed feedback on papers and tests, as well as during
one-on-one meetings, which they could utilize to improve performance. Students also saw
Blackboard© as an important tool that enabled them to monitor their course progress. They articulated frustration when assignments were not logged onto Blackboard© in a timely fashion or when instructors opted not to utilize Blackboard© at all.

When the conversation focused on academic challenge at Citrus College, students indicated they valued and welcomed challenging courses. Students recognized the benefits of taking challenging courses, indicating that enrolling in and completing challenging courses increased their confidence, taught them discipline, and helped them grow academically and personally. Yet, a majority of focus group participants reported that courses at Citrus College were not sufficiently challenging.

Students recognized that there was a nuanced difference between academically challenging courses and their more undemanding counterparts. They argued that course type, faculty characteristics and student characteristics all played a role in determining how they viewed a class. Specifically, they indicated that math and science classes were typically more challenging than coursework in liberal arts and social science. They acknowledged that student learning style, motivation, and attitude played a role in the perceived level of difficulty and, that faculty expectations, strictness, and level of enthusiasm all served to make courses more or less challenging. Students asserted that instructors who were more enthusiastic and had strong rapport with students could make a challenging course less daunting and, thus, increased students’ motivation to apply themselves.

Feedback regarding student support services indicated that the major factors hindering students from using support services include the schedule of such services, intimidation or embarrassment, and lack of motivation. Students recognized that budget issues may be a major reason why the support centers weren’t open for longer periods of time. Students expressed
concern over the ability of [some] peers to provide the kinds of support they needed when they went to tutoring centers. They also suggested that the amount of time allocated per person in the Writing Café and with book check-out services was insufficient.

For the most part, students were aware of typical financial aid options but focus group participants had limited information on the range of scholarships available to Citrus College students. A conversation with the Director of Financial Aid revealed that over the past year several initiatives have been launched regarding the availability of financial aid resources including: Financial Aid Literacy Awareness Fair, web page interactive video clips, advertisements on marquees, financial aid handbooks, workshops in classrooms, email blasts, comment boxes, bi-annual workshops for nursing students, FAFSA workshops, articles in *The Clarion* and STEM newsletter, TV monitor announcements, and extended office hours. Participants voiced concern that the financial aid unit limits may be arbitrary and may not take into account when students actually began receiving financial aid. They did not appear to have sufficient information about federal regulations that set limits on the number of units a student can attempt and inform the policies at Citrus College. Students also suggested that larger and more numerous study areas and lounges would be beneficial and would provide them with the space to engage with peers academically and socially.

Overall, students regard Citrus College as a positive learning environment. Many indicated that a significant strength of the college is its faculty. Students appreciate the “homey” feel to the small campus and the luxury of attending classes at a small college.

The weaknesses of Citrus College cited by students included limited parking and campus security, expensive and limited food services, and poor maintenance of restroom facilities. Parking was always perceived as in great demand on this campus. However, according to the
college’s Educational and Facilities Master Plan conducted in 2011, a calculation of the ratio of student headcount to the parking slots available is 3.3 at Citrus College, a number lower than 5 which is the typical standard that community colleges strive towards.

Students’ frustration with registration processes and eligibility for priority registration may have something to do with the severe budget cuts the college experienced in the last 4-5 years. With the improvement of the budget situation, the college is gradually adding classes back suggesting this may not be an issue moving forward.

While students voiced some dissatisfaction with the college cafeteria, changes have recently been implemented. For example, a more affordable choice ($3.50 per meal) has been added to the menu. Student complaints about restroom maintenance should be taken seriously but, it is also important to recognize that budget cuts and hiring policies may have had a significant impact on facilities upkeep in recent months.

Some of the concerns expressed with counseling appear to be related to the fact that students’ initial education plans may include coursework towards completing an AA/AS degree or coursework that provides students with a variety of transfer options (e.g., UC vs. CSU). Students indicated that they want to be informed that they could transfer to a four-year university without completing a Citrus College degree.
**Recommendations**

Many students commented that when the standards and expectations are set at the beginning of the course, they are more likely to adhere to those standards. To increase active participation students suggested that faculty incorporate class participation as a larger percentage of the overall grade. It is suggested that faculty brainstorm ways to better clarify the standard of discussion and participation at the outset of the class ensure that those standards are stated explicitly. Additionally, identifying and utilizing research-based pedagogical strategies that draw students into class discussion (e.g., fishbowl strategies, jigsaw activities, project-based and problem-based teaching/learning, etc.) may more fully engage those students reticent to participate (Priles, 1993; Smart & Featheringham, 2006; Hadaway & Young, 1994; Stephens & Brown, 2004).

Focus group discussion made it clear that students recognize they are more likely to participate when they have prepared for class. Yet, many students find it challenging to access and critically read college-level texts which are relatively formal in structure and style. Faculty may consider providing additional guidance for ways students can approach the reading, and may wish to encourage a thorough reading of texts by assigning response journals, completion of graphic or semantic organizers, or a pair-share activity at the beginning of class (Hadaway & Young, 1994; Stephens & Brown, 2004).

Students frequently commented that faculty characteristics play a large part in their decision to participate in class. Based on this input, it is recommended that the college provide professional development opportunities for faculty that focus on strengthening characteristics that communicate enthusiasm, high-positive energy, approachability, openness, and concern which have been correlated with student motivation (Eble, 1979, 1988, 1994). Class
participation is likely to lead to greater engagement in the classroom which is positively related to academic performance, persistence, and goal attainment (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2007; Nora, Crisp & Matthews, 2011).

Focus group data suggested that the amount of effort students put into their courses is correlated with the level of perceived challenge of the course. Faculty may want to review courses and pedagogical approaches to reassess the amount of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and communication skills that are expected of students. While increased course rigor will necessarily require additional academic scaffolding by faculty, student participants indicated they want and expect these challenges in the courses they complete at Citrus College.

To increase the likelihood that students turn in high quality work, faculty might consider requiring all students to submit an outline, concept paper/project or rough draft in advance of the final paper or project. Students stated that they are likely to write more than one draft for a project or paper, or at least create an outline, if faculty requires them to do so. They also acknowledged the benefits of preparing more than one draft but indicated they often do not spend time on multiple drafts unless it is mandatory.

Passion appears to be related to student engagement which is related to motivation. Student comments suggested that faculty passion is linked to student passion. Yet passion is a term that may have multiple definitions and a variety of interpretations depending on the situation. It is recommended that the college provide structured opportunities for faculty to refine their personal teaching style and explore how their passion for course content might be better communicated to 21st century students.
Many students find that Blackboard® is extremely helpful in assessing their progress and managing their courses. All faculty may consider adopting and regularly using Blackboard® or turnitin.com® to provide feedback and post grades and assignments. Also, many students stated that a detailed explanation on their paper, project, or exam is preferred, even for assignments on which they have done well. Students commented that they achieve greater understanding if faculty explains why a good grade was awarded to ensure they continue in the right direction. Therefore, faculty may consider providing more detailed feedback to students regarding all assignments. According to a study reported by The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (Black & William, 2007), low achievers do well when they are provided with high quality feedback although it has been often found that students may not consistently utilize the feedback given to them (Orrell, 2006). To increase utilization, quality feedback should meet three conditions: examples of good performance, detail about how their current performance relates to “good” performance; and information regarding how to close the gap between their performance and “good” performance (Walker, 2011). A recommendation would be for the college to provide training workshops or roundtable discussions for faculty to share their experience and tips of using Blackboard® or Turnitin.com® with their peers to increase the overall use of these tools.

While discussing Outcome 5: Support for Learners, students communicated a sense of apathy related to utilizing the services offered on campus. Students recommended faculty give extra credit points for utilizing such services as the Writing Café, Supplemental Instruction, and Peer Tutoring to increase motivation. In addition to being unmotivated, students also commented that they are often unable to utilize the services because they are not offered at a time convenient to their schedule. Staff in charge of these services might discuss expanding service schedules to better fit students’ needs, perhaps extending hours later into the evening or opening on Fridays.
and/or Saturdays. Additionally, students expressed a sense of embarrassment when utilizing academic support services. Helping students overcome the stigma associated with using support services may need to be a coordinated effort between faculty, staff, and student government. Rethinking the way in which services are advertised by removing the potential stigma that is associated with the specific services such as Peer Tutoring may be a first step. If students are able to perceive these services as enhancement tools and not tools to use only when performance is low, it may reduce feelings of intimidation and embarrassment.

Students also commented about the abilities of peer tutors. Many students who did utilize Peer Tutoring said that oftentimes the tutor was unhelpful. It is recommended that staff discuss the qualifications of student tutors and perhaps develop a more rigorous qualification assessment that includes content mastery, communication skills and empathy.

With regards to financial aid services, it appears, based on student comments, that students are less aware of available scholarships. Per students’ recommendations, newsletters, flyers and a financial aid resource fair are all things that can be incorporated to ensure students are getting the most up-to-date information regarding financial aid planning.

A campus weakness most frequently mentioned was in reference to student parking. Students would like to see an increase in the amount of parking available. However, according to data collected in the Educational and Facilities Master Plan (2011, page 412), Citrus College’s 3.3 to 1 student headcount per parking space ratio is below the State recommended ratio of 5 to 1. In other words, based on the enrollment and headcount projections, no additional parking is required for this master plan cycle (from 2011 to 2020). What appears to be the key aspect of the parking issue is communication. Communicating with students about the various locations of the parking spaces and the most impacted periods in each lot is essential.
The second most frequently mentioned weakness of Citrus College was in regards to the registration process. It appears that students either do not understand how priority registration works or deem it unfair. Specifically, students are concerned that the college affords priority registration to early decision and international students making it more difficult for students who are trying to graduate or transfer to register for required courses. To respond to students’ concerns, it is recommended that an effort be made to communicate with students more thoroughly and broadly to ensure they are aware of state regulations under which the college registration process has been developed.

Students voiced concern about counseling services including the abbreviated nature of scheduled appointments and confusion about completing courses for an Associates degree versus completing transfer requirements. New mandates from the California Community College Chancellor’s Office under the Student Success & Support Program (SSSP), currently being adopted by Citrus College, may provide satisfactory response to student concerns. Ongoing dialogue among members of the SSSP committee and the counseling faculty will continue to refine services, respond to state mandates, and meet the myriad needs of the student body.
Conclusion

This study was conducted with the goal of providing the college community with a broader understanding of the 2012 Citrus College student and faculty CCSSE/CCFSSE survey results. The student focus group interviews provided an avenue to explore underlying explanations for the college’s low engagement results and the discrepancy between faculty and student perceptions. The study provided greater insight into the CCSSE results and also offered campus constituents an opportunity to better appreciate Citrus College students’ experiences, concerns, needs, and challenges.

Through the use of focus group research methodology, the Office of Institutional Research was able to collect a breadth of information in areas of student engagement, student-faculty interaction, academic challenges, and support services, as well as opinions on the college’s strengths and weaknesses. The information gathered will be used to inform best practices and identify areas needing further investigation and improvement at Citrus College. After review of this report by all campus constituents, the college may want to refine recommendations and outline a plan of action.
Appendix A: Invitation for Interview

Dear Students,

Good news! Do you want to share your experiences as a student at Citrus College and enjoy free pizza? If you answered yes, this is the research project for you!

Some points of details:

- Last year Citrus College students participated in a Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).
- In an effort to uncover more details from areas in the survey the Institutional Research and Planning Committee (IRPC) is conducting a research study with current Citrus College students, in groups of 10-12 students.
- We would like to hear your thoughts and opinions regarding your experience on campus; your input can help us provide better support to Citrus College students.
- We estimate that it will take you approximately 90 minutes to participate in the focus group interview.
- Pizza and drinks will be served at the end of the interview to thank you for your participation.
- Simply click on the link below, or cut and paste the entire URL into your browser to make an appointment for the focus group interview: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SPLMTZN
- Online reservations must be made no later than March 22nd – SPACE IS LIMITED
- Your input is very important to us and will be kept strictly confidential (used only for the purposes of research for this project).

If you have any questions, please email me at lhao@citruscollege.edu, or contact my assistant, Ms. Linda Swan, at lswan@citruscollege.edu.

Sincerely,

Lan Hao, Ph.D.
Director of Institutional Research
Citrus College
Appendix B: Listing of Interview Protocol Questions

Student Focus Groups: For a Deeper Understanding of Student Engagement

Interview Protocol Questions

Outcome 1: Active and Collaborative Learning
1. Talk to me about classroom discussions. What are your experiences?
   a. How often have you asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions?
   b. What motivates or discourages you from speaking up in class to make a comment or ask a question?
2. In what ways can professors encourage students to participate in class discussions, offer comments or ask questions?
3. What are your thoughts on the importance of speaking up in class to make a comment or ask a question?
   a. How much does it affect your learning?
4. Does preparing for your class help you ask questions and make comments in class?
   a. How much time in general do you prepare for your classes?

Outcome 2: Student Effort
5. Raise your hand if you typically prepare two or more drafts of a paper or project prior to turning it in to your professor?
6. X (say number of hands raised) of you raised your hand and X (say the number of hands not raised) of you did not. Can you tell me why you do or don’t prepare more than one draft for a paper or project?
   a. What do you think is the importance of preparing multiple drafts?
7. How would you describe the level of effort you put into meeting professors’ standards and expectations?
a. Probe: What does that mean?
b. Probe: How much time would you spend?

8. If you think you could put more effort into your studies, why didn’t you do that?

Outcome 3: Student faculty interaction

9. In terms of the feedback you receive from your professors, what are your expectations?
   a. What are your actual experiences regarding professor feedback?
      i. Probe: timely? Helpful?
   b. What do you do with the feedback that you receive from professors?
      i. Probe: Ask why they may not discuss feedback with faculty if it is not mentioned.

Outcome 4: Academic challenge

10. In general, how challenging do you feel the courses are at Citrus College?
    a. How do you think more challenging courses would affect the amount of time and effort you put into your studies?

Outcome 5: Support for Learners

11. What are the support services you are familiar with at Citrus College?
    [FYI: computer lab, writing café, math lab, tutoring, supplemental instruction, etc.]
    a. What benefits, if any, do you see in using these services?
    b. What factors do you think discourage students from using these services?
    c. To what extent do you feel you are encouraged to use these services?
    d. Are there other services you would like Citrus College to offer?

12. What type of financial support do you have access to at Citrus College? How did you find them out?

13. In what ways do you think the college could provide more support relating to financial aid?
General

14. In your opinion, what are the college’s strengths?
15. In your opinion, what are the college’s weaknesses?
16. (if time permits) Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you so much for your time.
Appendix C: Summary of Codes

Outcome 1: Active and Collaborative Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Impacting Discussions</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Number of transcripts</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Characteristics</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Being prepared, Confidence /feeling comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Characteristics</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>Encouragement, Having an open/welcoming personality, Class structure (set standards and expectations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Course</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Some courses are more conducive to holding discussions like liberal arts, English, less in science and math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benefits

| Increases learning | 22 | All |

Recommendations

| Recommendations | 12 | 3   | Suggest you should give professors feedback on how they could make the class better |

Outcome 2: Student Effort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Effort</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Number of transcripts</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors impacting effort</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Time, Student self-motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of effort</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Level of difficulty, Faculty expectations, Enthusiasm for subject matter, Faculty passion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drafts

| Factors impacting preparing more than one draft | 44 | 11 | Not having enough time, Whether drafts are required, Confidence in first draft, Prepare an outline |
| Benefits | 14 | 6 | Improves performance and writing organization |
## Outcome 3: Student Faculty Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Faculty Interaction</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Number of transcripts</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Timeliness Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>Mostly positive Negative experiences affect students seeking help Keep track of progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanations</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>Preferred mode of feedback Utilize feedback for academic development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Outcome 4: Academic Challenge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Challenges</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Number of transcripts</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased confidence Opportunity for greater discipline Personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4 coded as too challenging 8 coded as not challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Correlation between the level of effort students exert and course challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Challenge depends on the subject. Social science courses seem to be easy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Depends on students learning styles and their own personal motivation to meet the challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Outcome 5: Support for Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student Services</strong></th>
<th><strong>Types of Services</strong></th>
<th><strong>Contributing Factors</strong></th>
<th><strong>Benefits</strong></th>
<th><strong>Recommendations</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Top 4 services mentioned: Tutoring, SI, WC, Book check</td>
<td>Intimidation/embarrassed Time/schedule Self-motivation Tutors are not helpful (specifically for peer tutoring) SI: becoming an SI leader is too challenging Book check: fees, waiting time, more books</td>
<td>Increases learning Provides support</td>
<td>Give incentives/extra or make mandatory More study areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Financial Aid</strong></th>
<th><strong>Type of financial assistance of which students are aware</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sources of information</strong></th>
<th><strong>Recommendations</strong></th>
<th><strong>Qualifications</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BOG</td>
<td>G.I. Bill</td>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>Call for more information regarding financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pell Grant</td>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>High school counselors/teachers</td>
<td>Email reminders about financial aid opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loans</td>
<td></td>
<td>CC website</td>
<td>Post around campus/newsletters/mail info packets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New student orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Outcome 6: General Strengths and Weaknesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Strengths</strong></th>
<th><strong>Total number</strong></th>
<th><strong>Number of transcripts</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subcategories</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>Faculty (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Campus environment (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Size and Location (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Weaknesses</strong></th>
<th><strong>Overall</strong></th>
<th><strong>Subcategories</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Parking (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Registration (13) – unfair priority registration/ can’t get classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Food services (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counseling (9) – improper guidance/information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


