Graduate Students Analysis
Successful Students
Ashley Porter

Introduction

On April 9, 2010, the WASC reaccreditation committee asked eight successful graduate students to sit down and discuss what makes a San Francisco State University student successful, and how we could further the successes of these students, and the student body in general. Over the course of two hours, the focus group was asked various questions under a series of topics to understand the successes and barriers of students at San Francisco State, and how the university can help those in the years to come.

The discussion of success, and barriers thereof, brought about three major themes: (1) initiative and awareness of each individual student; (2) the financial obligations each student must face; and (3) the sense of communication throughout the university.

This analysis will help provide points of reference for both the WASC accreditation committee and the university to better understand both the successes and barriers to students at San Francisco State University.

Analysis

How would you define “successful” student?

Although the participants of the focus group provided many different and detailed answers to this question, the main idea stayed the same – success was up to the individual. Words such as individual awareness, initiative, and motivation were used frequently. One participant averred that a student had to be program specific to be successful, saying:

“I think it depends on the graduate program itself. For me, the more successful students are the students that have to be outgoing, networking, and doing extracurricular activities. I think if someone is studying computer science, he has to be more apt to computer programming and a different set of skills... So a shy student can be an excellent student in computer science field or technical field, but if he or she was an MBA I would not consider them a successful student, because shyness or being very conservative... they may work hard, but that does not make them a successful manager.”

In this instance, it is obvious to see that this participant believes that an individual must pick the right degree program. The other participants agreed that it is still up to the individual student to understand what program will bring them the most success. The “power of one” was a common theme with the group throughout the conversation.

Participants felt that successful students were not those on top of the grade curve, but rather those who were willing to try hard to build skills, take risks, and were passionate about their areas of study. The students all agreed that taking risks and making mistakes were necessary to grow and be successful. One participant mentioned that students should “not be afraid to fail.” Another student followed by saying, “even if you’re not the one making the mistake…maybe that’s a mistake about a deficit you may have.”

It seemed apparent that the students felt that believing in something and working hard was much more important than a letter grade.

Although not asked about the budget or financial obligations, one participant was eager to mention it as a barrier to success immediately. Another participant shared their views on how a feeling of security can help promote success within a student.
“I think you’re trying to talk about ease and peace of mind – feeling safe, being able to focus on your studies makes a successful grad student…when you can focus specifically on the works of your studies. I mean obviously you have life and life happens, but if you’re constantly thinking ‘where am I going to get the next…’ you can’t totally focus on [school]…we see that in real life, that situations with money don’t allow people to focus on what they do - whether its family, whether its school, so I think that’s a very important thing, safety and security.”

All the participants agreed with this statement, and safety and health were seen as imperative parts of a successful student. The budget would be addressed later, but it was agreed that financial stability was a major role in a student’s success.

**Do you see yourself as a successful student? Why or why not?**

All the participants agreed that they were able to see themselves as successful students. The students contributed this success to taking opportunities to be part of something outside their course-load. They stressed the importance of networking within their departments, and independently broadening their spectrum of knowledge. As one participant stated:

“The program I am in, I love. And through it, I actually developed some other interests that delve into other majors and programs at state. I’ve taken initiative to look outside what is in my program to recognize what I’ve learned in my program and the strengths within it, but also being [able] to look broadly at the graduate programs offered at CSU and taking advantage of other programs and reaching out where I can to fill interests or goals that I have. In that way, I feel like I’ve been successful. To take classes in other departments, and working with my own professors to fill gaps within knowledge.”

This was very much reflective of what other participants had to say; that the love of knowledge and the ability to expand it outside the classroom through researching, networking, and expanding your horizons was key to a student’s success. In this way individual motivation and a student’s sense of being were stressed.

One participant felt that although she was successful as a student, she was unsuccessful in other ways. She discussed her struggles finding a balance between work, personal life and school. She also discussed her views on success in the classroom:

“…what is it that I want from who is here, and kind of pushing forward and asking questions if I’m not satisfied, pushing forward, and I feel like amongst my peers, I’m one of those people that asks the questions for them to get them the answers… They leave saying ‘I don’t know what they just asked us to do.’ And if you don’t know what to do, why weren’t we asking for clarity? And that really confuses me. I feel that one thing that is a step to success is that if I don’t get it, I am going to keep asking until I get it.”

Many students nodded in agreement with this statement. This once again showed that the participants’ felt that independence and self-motivation were integral keys to their success.

After being prompted to talk about more about the external factors of success, such as faculty support and academic advising, the participants had mixed reviews. Although one student raved about his advisors:

“I have two grad advisors. And I can meet with them literally at the drop of the hat - they are very accessible. If I tell them the day before, they can meet with me the next day generally. They’ll take the time…they’ll listen to my ideas or concerns.”
This participant had kind words about his advising committee. Most agreed that they were satisfied with their advising experiences. Only one student had any complaints. Her issues involved her perceived lack of communication between students and the department.

“Sometimes it’s a blanket e-mail, where some things qualify for second year students and third year grad students, but some things don’t apply to [first year grad students], and it’s not made distinctly clear. So, then it goes back to [the issue] I have with all these peers in my first years saying ‘I don’t know - do we have this due? I thought it was due later.’ And it’s like: you’ve got to read clearly, it’s not for you, but it’s not very clear. So, in regards to that, I am hoping that it will get better.”

Overall, students attributed their success and the success of others to individual motivation. The group stressed that having the desire and passion to learn is more important than letter grades.

**Can you identify any barriers to success that you faced at SF State?**

Although the participants of the focus group had all recognized themselves as successful students, each felt as though there were things that the university could do to better their education. Inadequate campus-wide communication became the main theme in this discussion. The conversation was directed more towards the campus community rather than the individual. One student started the conversation by describing a situation she is currently having with her advisors:

“The faculty advisor has shifted. The former advisor is on leave. It’s only for a short period, but what she has articulated to us is that there isn’t a very good support system for her where she is made aware of how to advise her students or where to send them if they have questions. For instance, I needed to get some paperwork today, and I was sent to the wrong offices…”

This statement induced a conversation about inadequate communication throughout the colleges and the university as a whole. The group asserted that as successful students they believed they were more adept at searching for the information they may need. The group concurred that students who aren’t as assertive may face problems finding certain information. One participant used her department orientation as an example:

“[I] think particularly in my department, our orientation to the program happened for a few hours on one day, and that was it - we haven’t had anything like that since then. The navigation of our curriculum is quite intense...I think it’s really easy to feel lost.”

Most of the students agreed that a better orientation would be a great help. This issue was especially significant for those who take classes at the downtown campus. These students felt they were never given an opportunity to see all that the main campus had to offer. One of these participants stated:

“There is a body at our university, [there is] the student service center. But we are at the downtown campus, so we are not [at the main campus] most of the time. There is so much information, and sometimes at the downtown campus we feel we’re being isolated. What’s going on [at the main campus]? We don’t know, nothing at all, no information...So if there is a manual...than it would be easier for students to know what’s happening and who should I contact ...”

Throughout the conversation, it became apparent that although these students have been successful, they still feel they have been hindered by the university’s lack of communication. As one participant stated, “I’m not talking about barriers to success, I am trying to express barriers to progress, and as you progress through the system.” Yet the moderator was quick to point out that a barrier to progress was indeed a barrier to success.
The participants suggested that the university devise a method to make campus-wide communication both dependable and informative. Another participant also suggested that the students take some responsibility:

“If we haven’t even told him that it’s a problem, then, you know, the e-mails will continue coming in this particular format, and it goes back to the students never saying ‘this is not very clear, is it a difficult thing to have a split list, or something?’ It needs to go both ways.”

**Did available financial aid opportunities provide you with enough support?**

In previous conversations, participants stated that they felt an imbalance between work and school. This imbalance was expressed as a constant stress and potential hindrance to their success. All participants agreed that financial assistance did not offer enough support. When asked what could have helped more, every participant chimed in with the single word - “grants.” The students agreed that the grants being offered were so small that they weren’t worth the effort. As one participant stated:

“So many of the grants and scholarships are so tiny that it’s not worth the time to pursue them. I mean, I work – I had a different career prior to going back to school and I was able to maintain some work in that field and it made more sense just to work if you’re talking about the amount of time that goes into doing these things.”

To this particular student, having health insurance and benefits from a job meant more than losing time for homework. Most of the students agreed with this statement. Another student said:

“I wonder if all the CSU’s, if all graduate students across the board are offered at the same amount without thinking about the different costs of living. I live in Oakland so I commute to school. Even still, the living costs are significantly higher than if I was going to Chico State. And so I think there needs to be some sort of reparation for students that attend [SF State] considering the fact that we are paying a lot more to attend this school rather than any other CSU.”

The other participants all nodded in agreement. The group then received perspective on the issue of financial aid from an international student:

“For international students the fees have increased something like seventy percent. If you consider the depreciation of our currencies… it’s really hard. I knew that I was going into the masters program, and it would be very expensive for me. But they charge an increase of fifty five percent…and there aren’t jobs on campus, and we can’t work outside.”

This student also stated, “I’ve seen many students living in two bedroom apartment, like ten-eleven students in one apartment.”

The worries of the international student seemed to drown out those of the others, who groaned and apologized as he spoke. One thing rang true throughout this conversation – all the participants were feeling hindered by the added stress of financial obligations.

**Does the university provide support in the classroom?**

It became apparent through this discussion that the subject of support in the classroom varied from department to department. Some students raved about the styles of each professor:
“The professors provide to all learning styles, very supportive. Whether it [is for] visual learners, auditory learners. So my professors, not only do they know and have knowledge of what they are teaching, they are also capable of teaching.”

Others did not feel the same amount of support:

“A consistent complaint within my cohort is that there is a real lack of expression of pedagogical theory being utilized by instructors. We’re like, ‘where is the evidence that what you are trying to convey to us is based upon some sort of theoretical framework that allows you to transfer that knowledge?’”

Those at the downtown campus were faced with other challenges due to the amount of international students in the MBA program. As one student stated:

“There are people, who come from different countries, and they may not be able to write great business [papers] but there are no resources for you to proof your writing. So in the end, their teammates have to proof their entire twenty page paper to make sure everything flows.”

The idea being supported here is how little the downtown campus knows about the resources of the main campus. Again, the students suggested that the university provide them with a manual or guide. The separation of the two campuses is definitely taking its toll on the students at the downtown campus. However, no further recommendations were offered.

Based on this discussion it was clear that support levels varied amongst the separate schools and colleges, and all participants agreed that this was true.

**Does the university aid the students in their goals towards graduation?**

Participants expressed that graduate requirements were clear and that although their departments faced certain deficits due to funding, each department was doing their best. One participant stated:

“I think the department is built to urge students to get a Ph. D. ultimately. This is not considered to be the last step, but the entry point to further education. So within the department there is a lot of support. Emotional support, especially, but also attending to what exists outside. So even though it’s not purveyed in the best of ways within the field of individual contact with the professors, they are really keen on conveying to [students] what possibilities exist…”

Another student claimed that the colleges are quick to point out that they are doing the best they can, given the circumstances.

This was not the first time that the idea of college independence was expressed. This particular student felt as though the university did not support her college as much as others. Other participants then chimed in, saying how lucky they felt that their college fought so hard for their classes.

Overall, the general consensus was that faculty was equally supportive on the whole. However, it was expressed that some colleges received more support from the university than others.

**If you’ve been able to overcome these barriers, what did you need to know in order to do so, and where did you get that information?**
During this conversation the strength of the individual was expressed again. Two participants outwardly said that they were not told where to get information, so they found it themselves. As one of these participants stated:

“I think for the MBA program, they’re not going to spoon feed you, you have to take some kind of initiative. It’s up to you [to ask questions].”

This mirrored what the participants had stated so far - the motivation to ask questions made particular students more successful.

Another student addressed the topic of those who are not independent motivators. The participant stated:

“I worry about the fact that if it’s just addressed once, that’s fine for me, I can do that, I will also seek out the information necessary. But it’s not adequate for so many other types of students and other types of fields. So the fact that it seems like its cross disciplinary, this problem, is really important.”

Throughout the discussion, it became evident that the participants felt that the university was more adept to support self-motivators. Most of the participants were of the opinion that many students were not aware of certain requirements or possibilities. According to the participants, overcoming these barriers required the students’ ability to take initiative and seek out relevant information. The overall assertion was that the university does not provide students with adequate information. Consequently, they claim that if students were provided with more basic information, they would be more successful.

**What expectations did you have about San Francisco State, and are they being met?**

In general, the students expressed that most of their expectations have not been met. One student in particular was upset with the MBA’s lack of external networking.

“I heard San Francisco had lots of cool companies in the technology field. Silicon Valley’s near here - computers, Facebook - everyone’s nearby…So I thought it would be more career friendly. At career fairs, there would be all these big companies coming to career fairs, and for internship opportunities. But so far I haven’t seen any of these companies.”

The library was also discussed - one student said that she had expected more study space, and was saddened by the closing of the library.

**What about faculty, did you have any expectations about faculty at SF State?**

Most participants said that their expectations about faculty had been met, if not exceeded. Praises were to the university’s student health services - as one student put it “being uninsured, I love it!” Other participants expressed their satisfaction with the multicultural atmosphere of the university (although the MBA students at the downtown campus still felt segregated). One participant said:

“I always walk through the Malcolm X and Cesar Chavez center, and there’s always something going on. Whether it’s hip-hop, whether it’s activism, whether it’s art; there’s something happening…you [may] be exposed to something you may never have been exposed to. But that’s definitely something the main campus offers that I know some people don’t get, but I expected that.”

Although the MBA students did not have as much exposure to this, all of the other students agreed that the campus as a whole is a diverse and cultural community.
What about the classroom environment, what did you expect or hope for?

A few of the participants felt as though their expectations had not been met. One participant felt as though she was not challenged enough. According to this participant, her undergraduate classes were too easy and left her feeling dissatisfied. However, once her master’s classes began, she felt challenged.

What about technology, what did you expect or hope would be available or used at SF State?

One participant complained that her department did not try to incorporate technology enough. Most of the students expressed that the online components of their classes were lacking. One MBA student expressed that iLearn should be become more of a social networking device. The student gave an example of a project he was doing on Bank of America:

“We have these resources, these people, in my own class, and I don’t know he’s working at this company, and I was struggling outside to find this contact for that. So I think if iLearn was more categorical and more extended, that I could enter it, and I could see the profiles of my other colleagues, like a more extensive Facebook linking. It would probably be more helpful.”

This student also expressed his concerns for faculty who do not know how to use iLearn. Another participant stated:

“That’s something that is across the university. I have some professors – it’s a choice, they don’t have to use [iLearn] – but I know some don’t use it because they haven’t been able to find the time or [haven’t] made the time to learn how to use it and some use it very minimally, like ‘I’m just going to attach this document on this iLearn thing.’”

This participant admitted that she was a newcomer to this technology. With this and other student comments, it seemed as though training in the iLearn system would be beneficial to both faculty and to students.

The topic of the iLearn system also raised financial concerns among the group. Students expressed concerns about printing papers from this resource. One student pointed out that:

“[There is] an added tax on students because students have to print out everything. Well you don’t have to print; I mean I can’t read from that. Especially when you’re in a master’s program, you’re reading research papers that are 28 pages long… you end up spending quite a bit of money on printing, whereas before it was on the school because the teacher had to print all the pieces of papers.”

It became apparent that the budget crisis went far deeper than just tuition fees and furlough days - in these times; every expense is taken into account. Although the students agreed that the additional cost of printing could be avoided by reading papers on their computer screens, the students concurred that it would be nice to have the option to take notes or highlight key terms – an option that is unavailable through iLearn.

What about your ability to compete in the workplace?

On this topic of discussion the participants were less than complimentary toward the university. Advising was an issue, with many students agreeing that this was a problem across departments. Although the participants felt there was plenty of help on their way towards graduation, they felt that the university lacked the tools to help them after graduation. One student further stressed the importance of
individual motivation and initiation. The general consensus, however, was that the individual colleges and university on the whole lack the resources to assist students after graduation.

Many people now use more electronic communication (Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc.) than ever before. How do you think this affects how you study and learn?

Although one participant stated that these new technologies provided an element of distraction within the classroom setting, all the students agreed that they actually helped students communicate with one another. As one student explained:

“Technology has been great for my cohort. We live in so many different areas. We have to [communicate with] people that commute from Davis and so through e-mail and through Facebook connections that we’ve built, we’ve been able to really bond and have been able to understand the materials a lot better. If we didn’t have the technological connection, I doubt we would be as close of a cohort, because of the physical space.”

The majority of participants agreed, praising these new technologies as a communication tool rather than a distraction.

Is the university prepared to support all students?

Two of the students spoke on this subject, stating that many students were not adequately supported by the university. They again brought up the idea that funding was a major issue. One of the students asserted:

“Students that can’t work in addition to go to school because they have to go to school on a full time basis for whatever reasons, because their department’s own demands. That really drags out of the pool of people that would be attending, people that are really missing funds.”

According to this student, lack of funding was not only an area that hindered individual students from being successful, but it also hindered populations as a whole.

Have the budget cuts affected your experience at SF State? Is there anything positive that has come from the budget cuts?

When asked to look at budget cuts positively, the participants stated that there was now a sense of unity within the campus.

One student suggested that the university take this opportunity to get creative and to look to innovation:

“If you can’t invite to campus corporate business men from other places, from New York, you know, we can’t pay them to provide guest lectures. But probably we can try video conferencing but it has never happened. So I think it’s a very small, silly idea, but that innovation, it is happening on advising front, administrative front, but not in academics, at least not for me.”

All the students agreed that the budget was a real and ongoing issue. They also agreed that more should be done to work with the resources that university is given.

Conclusions
The general consensus among the participants is that more should be done to provide students with better access to information.

The group agreed that communication to departments, faculty, and students at the university is lacking. More should be done to further the development of communication tools campus wide, and to make sure that all students and faculty are receiving the adequate information they require.

According to the group, finances are an important issue faced by many different student populations. The group concurred that more should be done to assist both current and incoming students. Even in the face of this adversity, the participants agreed that they couldn’t allow the current budget crisis get in the way of their education.