GQ: What do successful students have in common?

What is your definition of a “successful” student?

The first question initiated much discussion within the focus group. It was clear that this topic was important and would lead to other issues that the participants wanted to discuss. Although their definitions varied slightly, the participants generally agreed that a ‘successful student’ was defined as someone who had skills and could demonstrate knowledge. One lecturer described a successful student as someone who: “can integrate their content knowledge to solve problems. Somebody who can apply what they’ve learned to real world problems.”

Another lecturer agreed, while adding that a successful student is one that can “write, critically think, and speak out into the world.” Another lecturer added that successful students “need to have a complete set of skills related to writing.” When asked if there were other things that came to mind when thinking about a successful student, one of the lecturers said, “self-confidence…derived by having skill sets and the chance to demonstrate them.”

One lecturer wanted to add “that success for students is graduation from this institution [because the] graduation rate at SF State is pretty dismal.” Two of the lecturers agreed that self-confidence and feeling a part of something were factors in being a successful student. The lecturers seemed to touch on the following questions before being prompted, allowing the discussion to flow smoothly.

What does SF State do to help students succeed?

When asked what SF State does to help students succeed, the topic of self-confidence was once again mentioned. One lecturer said: “It’s about [students] not feeling like they’re the only ones here at the institution…If they know that this university belongs to them and they belong to it then they would feel more confident in navigating a huge system.”

The participants nodded in agreement when one participant brought up that there are “certain steps” that can be taken to help students navigate their paths at SF State and ultimately reach graduation. Although each lecturer discussed the specifics of their individual departments, there was a group consensus on the importance of providing fundamental core classes to underclassman, as well as making sure students are fully prepared upon arriving at college. One lecturer said: “One [certain step] is to move the fundamental writing class down to the undergraduate, the freshman [and] sophomore level, which will allow that fundamental writing to occur before someone declares a major. A second [certain step] would be a rigorous reexamination of the articulation agreements.”

Another lecturer added, “Our department is undergoing a process of sort of trying to determine what gateway courses can lead further into the majors so that students who are really not prepared or are not sure that this is really right for them can make that decision early on in their undergraduate career.” This led into the moderator’s next question.
What does SF State do to assist students in their goal toward graduation? What doesn’t SF State do?

When asked what SF State does to assist students in their goal toward graduation one lecturer said, “Good advising, to have really good advising…Lecturers were given advising units, but because of the budget those roles have been taken away from lecturers and have been passed on to people who maybe don’t know, or don’t care to spend as much time in that administrative role.”

Another lecturer mentioned that the faculty are constantly working on providing adequate advisement to students. According to the participant, “It is important to be patient with students that haven’t done the fundamental research or don’t have the capacity to do the fundamental research to plot a strategy for graduation.”

One lecturer suggested that many students do not have the motivation necessary to be successful, “students that don’t do well often don’t have basic study skills [and] they don’t realize they have to keep up with material on a daily basis.”

Another lecturer agreed and added that finances and time management are two other important aspects to consider when a student isn’t doing well. This lecturer said, “most of our students are working part time to full time while going to school and so time management for our students is a huge, huge issue.”

Another lecturer agreed by adding, “all of our students are working full time, working part time, taking care of a family, taking care of a lot of other responsibilities besides just school and it’s very difficult.”

What factors are the most relevant when students do not do well in your classes?

There was a general agreement among the lecturers that the English and writing requirement necessary and important basic skill. One lecturer said, “[Students] need English and math - both basic skills.” However, this lecturer added, “a real disadvantage is not having enough practice in real life problem solving, and because of the way our system kind of pushes people through taking multiple choice tests and so on, they get accustomed to that and not so much accustomed to writing essays.” This lecturer viewed English as more of a departmental issue and math as a relative nonissue.

Another lecturer revisited a previous question, saying, “If we could agree that the professors who teach courses that are certified to transfer to SF State, could administer an exit exam, that way, they and we, would know the competency level and, they and we, could use that for advisement and make sure that the students, before they hit classes, which are majors and graduate students, already have designated skill sets.”

The other participants agreed that this would help in making sure that those fundamental skills are retained. One lecturer added that it’s “probably a good idea, just in general, when our students are progressing from one level to another in their courses, that somebody gives you an exam and you can say that you passed these competencies, or that you have this set of skills.” All of the lecturers then agreed that most of the students in their departments are all motivated, but don’t necessarily have the skills that will allow them to succeed.

When the lecturers were asked if they see faculty in their department working with and mentoring students, they had a difficult time generalizing, in terms of comparing the faculty advising with the advising of a lecturer. One lecturer said: “I think it depends on the faculty, to be honest. We’ve got several that go out of their way to help students, and then there’re several that don’t.” This lecturer also said the same about lecturers, “there are folks that really work with students and there are folks that really
don’t.” In response one of the participants said, “in our department all of the lecturers are extremely supportive and extremely involved with all of the students.”

Do you see a difference in students who begin their studies at SF State as first-time freshmen vs. transfer students?

For the most part, the lecturers didn’t have much to say on this topic. However, one lecturer did say: “I think that just generally the age is a huge difference. Our first time students are no longer 25 and 26 year olds, they’re right out of high school. I mean, we’re seeing an age shift. I think we’re seeing a demographic shift.”

If you could change something the university does to deal with these problems what would it be?

All of the lecturers agreed that there needs to be some sort of introductory course that is mandatory for all incoming students to take in order to familiarize them with the university.

One lecturer said: “We need a first year experience course for all of our students. A course that students come in, first time freshman, and its study skills, it’s inter-department so they get orientation to the content at a very basic level but that they get their study skills, they learn time management, they start their advising. All those things happen the very first semester they’re here. They learn about the university, they have tutoring services come in; they talk to financial aid folks. They get oriented to where they are. I think it would make huge difference for our students.”

All of the other lecturer participants agreed. According to the group, there were structural issues that needed to be addressed. As one participant put it, “lecturers need to be given training in advisement for new lecturers.” It wasn’t ideal for the lecturers to be placed in an advising position without any specific instruction or training.

Does SF State provide support for different learning styles? If yes, in what ways? If no, what’s missing?

For the most part the lecturers thought that SF State does a satisfactory job in providing support for different learning styles. However, the group did express some concerns.

One lecturer stated that “it’s up to the instructor whether they use or take advantage of [learning support] or not. Like someone who’s simultaneously sign language interpreting a lecture, or the desks, or having an aid.” Another lecturer said: “Well I would say that one area that San Francisco State falls down and pretty heavily, is that we don’t do anything for our second language learners on this campus. We have a tremendous number of students who don’t speak English as a first language and there are no support services for those students.”

Another lecturer said: “I haven’t noticed any changes that much difference in learning style, but I think language is correctly being identified here as a sensitive issue. I don’t feel that I’ve been told what the policy is as an instructor about how I’m supposed to handle the written work of non-native English speakers, whether to hold them to the same, whether the policy is to hold them to the same standard as the native speaker.” Everyone agreed with this statement. It is clear that providing equal support for non-English speakers is a definite concern amongst the lecturers. Something important to note was when one lecturer said “I wasn’t even aware that there is ESL help, I knew kind of vaguely, but if I have an ESL student and I’m expecting them to write a paper, I want to know there’s somewhere they can go and get really good help, and not just sporadically.” This shows that not all of SF State’s resources are well known or well advertised.
GQ: What could we do to ensure that more students are successful?

What could your department do to help students succeed?

There were two very different responses to this question. One lecturer said, “I want there to be, again, consistency with writing help.” Another lecturer said “the university is going to have to increase its investment and tools [because] students are struggling.” The group agreed that they need more tools to their students to succeed.

GQ: Are our remediation efforts successful?

Do you think our remediation efforts are successful? Why or why not?

One lecturer said: “I can speak a little bit to that since I teach freshmen and sophomores and they’re going through the English and the math sequences. I think the English, the getting rid of the remediation English is the best thing that could happen.” This lecturer added by saying: “I feel like pushing our students through an intensive writing piece their first year is invaluable. I would say what I see happening institution wise with the math sequence is a huge problem. Students have to pass math 59 or 60 to get to 70 to get to math 124. If they don’t pass their math class in their first semester they have to go and take it at a community college and come back into the sequence. I think that’s a mess. That’s a really clunky way of getting students to get where they need to go for math and they won’t. Students won’t come back. We’ll lose them in that transfer.”

Another lecturer said: “Our students in the past have gotten really stuck in remedial courses that they’ll take the same math class over and over and over again and can’t get through it because, because there’s not support in those courses.” After the moderator mentioned getting rid of JEPET there was a little bit of discussion on the recent GWAR classes. Everyone agreed with a lecturer who said: “I think those courses are also really helpful. I think that the movement towards GWAR which is the writing within the discipline makes so much sense also.”

One lecturer also mentioned that GWAR classes are helping students learn to write in their specific area or discipline. Another lecturer asked: “What about a technical writing requirement? I mean they learn how to do a basic report, they learn the types of reports; they learn basic written formats for documents. They write a technical report and in some cases you can individualize the technical writing course according to college.”

The other lecturers agreed that this is a good idea. One lecturer mentioned that this is already in effect in one department.

GQ: Upon leaving SF State, do students feel they’re prepared enough and able to achieve their academic/career goals?

Do you think SF State prepares undergraduate students to pursue higher education? Do you think SF State prepares students to compete in the workplace?

When asked if students feel prepared to achieve their academic and career goals once they graduate, one lecturer responded with an immediate “yes.” The lecturer said: “I think they are. I think that the students that graduate from our department are extremely successful in whatever it is that they go on to do. And they go on to do a lot of different things. They go to graduate school. They go to nursing school. They go to medical school [and dental school]. They become veterinarians and they become teachers.”
In this discussion there seemed to be a difference based on department and the students’ major. Another lecturer said, “I do think that a lot of our students go on to pursue graduate degrees.” There was mostly optimism in the responses of these lecturers when talking about the future of students in their departments. However, one lecturer said: “My take is less optimistic than my colleagues here. I am not sure that the BECA undergraduates are prepared for graduate study. I think they’d be prepared for graduate study in broadcasting but in terms of the written skills and their overall knowledge base, and their capacity to read critically. I’m not convinced that the undergraduates I’ve taught here are indeed prepared for further studies.”

When asked if the lecturer expected any of his students to move on to graduate school, he responded with, “I’ve never heard any of the undergraduates that I’ve taught at this university express any interest in graduate study.” Some lecturers feel the students are prepared well enough to achieve their academic and career goals upon leaving SF State, while others do not at all.

**GQ: To what degree is the university prepared to support all students?**

**Is the university prepared to support all students?**

One lecturer said: “we’re not really serving low-income students of color. I mean generally. I think we’re seeing the university shift, we’re seeing pocket books get tighter and we’re seeing the budget cuts seriously affect our populations and I think what’s happening, is the destruction of support services like in the biology program, those things are affecting those that are most vulnerable in a much greater way than students that come from more privileges backgrounds.”

Another lecturer completely agreed: “It’s very easy for someone to go through the program who’s coming from a good high school, or a good and privileged background as opposed to someone who hasn’t got the background knowledge that they need to study in the discipline based on what we think somebody graduated from high school knows and even beyond that just the study skills that we were talking about earlier. I think that the study skills - I mean if I had to say number one - that would probably be the number one thing, that they’re unprepared and if we take away those services then like you said, the people who are the most vulnerable are the ones who are going to be at a disadvantage. So the people who are not serving are really the ones who need it the most, in terms of I would say just I guess, economic disadvantage or I would call it background preparation more kind of high school preparation they had before coming here.”

**GQ: What are the current learning styles and preferences of the students?**

**Students now use more electronic communication than ever before. How does this affect how they study and learn?**

The lecturers concurred that technology has an effect on students and how they learn, now more than ever. One lecturer said, “[Students] enter the education process with a discourse and a mental capacity which is fundamentally shaped by large amounts of information in short packages.”

Another participant spoke of not having the skills to connect with students in ways they connect to one another, “I think as an instructor I really lack certain skills to connect with students in the way they connect with one another, and I wish I had more training or more opportunities to figure out how one another and embed that into my curriculum [and] embed that into the courses.”
What are your experiences using classroom technologies in general? Did you seek help with using new technology? If so, how was your experience?

A couple of the lecturers had attended an iLearn workshop, yet did not find it resourceful or helpful. One lecturer suggested, “It would be great if, if maybe departments had, I mean I know we have these resources [and] we can go to them whenever we can or whenever we need to, but it might be nice to have sort of an integrated thing within a department where they say okay, here’s how to Facebook with your students, Twitter with your [students], or here’s how to do an online discussion board.”

In this instance there is a distinct difference in departments and the integrative use of technology between students and instructors. One lecturer said: “I think that we’re talking about faculty development here. Realistically if you have a faculty as this university does that has quite a number in their 50’s [and] 60’s and may even 70’s, these communities of faculty will need systematic retraining...” In order for instructors to keep up with the learning styles of their students, there needs to be some sort of updated tutorial on technology.

GQ: What are changes in student expectations?

What changes in the last 10 years have you observed in the expectations of students?

There wasn’t much discussion on this topic because the group agreed that there hasn’t been any significant changes in the last 10 years. One lecturer said: “I would have to say, I haven’t noticed any dramatic changes. I mean I think they are, if anything, more focused than before because they know they want to go get accepted to nursing school or med school or whatever and they’re very, I mean, they are extremely motivated for the most part. As far as their expectations of me as a teacher, I don’t think that has changed. I haven’t noticed among students anything different.” The other lecturers agreed.

GQ: What are the economic trends that have shaped the university?

How have the budget cuts affected your teaching at SF State?

When discussing the budget cuts, there were very strong thoughts and opinions on how the budget has affected instructors’ abilities to teach. One lecturer said “I mean just [the] number of sections, number of students, number of courses being cut, number of support services. People, faculty, or staff retired...they don’t get replaced and we’re expected to make do with that. We’re expected to do the same job with fewer resources, fewer class sections, fewer support staff, old equipment, not replacing things when they break or not being able to fix things. I could go on. I could go on because I have been here for awhile and I have seen that change.”

One lecturer seemed to speak for the entire group when he spoke of the budget crisis in terms of teaching effectiveness and quality of education. The lecturer said: “My take on [SF] State is that there’s a fundamental contradiction here. It is a teaching institution that wants to be a research institution, and has added to the burden of the faculty members’ research responsibilities, equivalent to a university where I teach at, which is a research one institution. So for me it’s a choice of short changing my courses and fully indulging my research agenda. It’s a question of a mentoring my colleagues, versus supplying for research funds, external research funds, which takes a phenomenal amount of time if you do it right and do it successfully. This contradiction is heightened by the cuts that have recently arrived. So that in the department where I’m currently teaching, almost all lecturers have been fired. The significance of that is that there are fewer classes at the lower level, of fewer sections of fewer classes at the lower level, and the significant of that for the upper and graduate level is that students are pole vaulting into the more advanced courses without the fundamental skills that they need at the lower level, because nobody’s
teaching that, we’re not being given any more. The professors can’t teach more. The lecturers aren’t there to do that. And yet we’re encouraged to write grants. We’re encouraged to publish articles. We’re encouraged, in my case, to produce and to produce nationally and have materials reviewed nationally. And I think it’s a fundamental contradiction that reminds me a little of the emperor having no clothes, because I simply can’t see how these sets of demands can be matched, and I haven’t decided about accepting a position here and this is probably the biggest reason why that I’ve been offered one. I simply cannot see how I can be the person that the department wants me to be.”

When wrapping up the discussion one lecturer made a very significant point in relation to the focus group as a whole. The lecturer said “I think the question that is coming up again here is the possibility of increases in department faculty development. This could take many forms. It could take the form of forums such as [my colleague] just mentioned. It could take the form of the development of a packet of materials, pedagogical, best practices, which could be given to new faculty. It could take the form of a lectureship training opportunity just as in new faculty are brought together so new lecturers could be brought together. They could also share in this pedagogical orientation that each department might choose to make simply by getting a folder of some kind and having people suggest materials, digital or in print. These are things which would build upon the core at the same time, as they would spread the advisement capacity around. At the same time as they would share best practices among new and old faculty.”