GQ: What do successful students have in common?

How would you define “successful” student?

When asked to define a ‘successful student’ the participants were a bit hesitant being that there were only two students initially. After a moment the first participant described a successful student as someone who “attends school every day and has all their work done.”

The second participant, who was a graduate student, added to that by saying a “successful student is defined s growth, growth as a person.” He went on to say that this is “someone who leaves SF State feeling more prepared to do whatever they want and hopefully having the skills to navigate their everyday life better.” He believed GE was important in a student becoming well rounded, which led to success.

The first participant agreed with some of what the second participant said in that success does not depend solely on whether a student graduates. A successful student was also someone who “after they graduate, they know what to do in life and also how to pursue their goals.” Both participants saw success as including success in life and achieving goals after attending San Francisco State.

Do you see yourself as a successful student?

Both students agreed they are successful students. The first participant is trying to get into the nursing program and become a nurse. For her this defines personal success because she is doing what she wants to do. The second participant also agrees he is a successful student and uses his definition mentioned previously to describe himself. He started at SF State when he was 19 and is now graduating with a Master’s degree at 25. He has seen a lot of personal growth over those years – that to him is success.

Why, Why not?

Personal factors

Prompts: work/school balance– being college ready in mathematics – being college ready in written English – personal study skills and habits (e.g., time management, note taking).

They were then prompted by the moderator to think about what factors contributed to them being successful or not. Factors that were mentioned included work/school balance, being college ready in mathematics and in written English, and also personal study skills and habits. Balancing work and school was an issue for both participants.

One participant mentioned there was a time when he had to work 7 days a week between two jobs and was not able to achieve a steady balance between work and school. He said, “it’s hard to think about school when all you think about is need to get up and go to work the next day.”

The other participant agreed, “Sometimes I have to do a lot of homework and I have to go to work and I don’t have enough time to do my schoolwork, but I try to do it after I come back from work at 11 pm and I still have my work done because I want to balance my time doing my school work and my job.” Both agreed they were working towards achieving a good balance between school and work but it is definitely a struggle.
Were you college ready? Math and English?

In regards to being college ready in mathematics and written English, one participant said he was prepared in math but not in written English: “Writing and English was something I always struggled with. I was one of those students that became good at making sure they slip through the cracks and I’m not going to lie, I did that all the way through 214 English.” He mentioned two English courses he took at community college where the professor stopped showing up halfway through the class so he ended up getting a good grade. He said, “I think according to the academic records, yes I was English-ready but if you actually go back and read any assignments I wrote for any classes they were horrible.” The second participant had an opposite situation. She was more prepared for English even though it’s her second language.

Do you ever ask for Faculty support/academic advising/peer support?

When asked if they ever used faculty support, academic advising, or peer support, one participant used their professor’s office hours during his undergraduate studies and the other participant had never used any advising or support. The participant who used his professor’s office hours did not think advising could steer him towards being successful. He said, “as far as picking classes and things it’s easy to open the bulletin and go online and know what classes to pick.” The issue he had with getting in the way of his success went back to the balance between work and school. He said you can only do so much between the two: “If I don’t turn in an assignment, nothing happens. If I don’t pay my rent, I don’t have anywhere to live. So for now that’s the one I gotta choose, unfortunately, until I find that better balance.”

What are your study habits? Are you happy with your study skills? Do you know where you would go on campus to get help with your study skills?

Next, the moderator asked the participants about their study habits. One participant said in order to do well on a test she goes to class and pays attention. She doesn’t actually sit down and study. The other participant said he does best by going to class and listening to the professor then goes back and reads the textbook and takes notes to study more thoroughly for a test. He said being a graduate student is a lot more reading than studying, so he finds time to read anywhere he can – at the gym, on the train, etc.

Both participants agree they are doing well and are happy with their study skills. When asked if they know where on campus they can go to get help, one works for a tutoring program on campus and is therefore familiar with that, and the other gets tutoring for English once a week, but is not sure where to go on campus if she needs help for math.

Do you participate in any extracurricular activities? (e.g., clubs, sports)

Do you think this contributes to your success?

They were then asked if they participated in any extracurricular activities and whether or not this contributes to their success. One participant is on San Francisco State’s rugby team. “When I first started we were a self formed group, it’s actually more of a formal team now. Did it help with school? No. I think it took away from school, but I know later on when I think about college, I’m gonna think about all the people I know and met through rugby.”

The other participant is not doing any extracurricular activities through the university, but does play on a soccer team outside of school. “I think it’s healthy to relax and get out of the stress of school and work.”
While both participants find their activities taking away from study time, they believe being involved in a physical activity helps them focus better in school by allowing them to separate from academia for a period of time and de-stress.

**GQ: What could we do to ensure that more students are successful?**

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

The participants had a lot to say when asked what San Francisco State could do to ensure more students are successful. The first participant asserted that many students come into the university unprepared - himself being an example. He mentioned earlier how he managed to slip through the cracks in his English classes, and while on paper he looked prepared, in reality he was not. He goes on to commend the university in their efforts for getting information out, “They have sneak peak, they have orientation when you come in, but the problem is the students who need those resources are usually the ones who aren’t capitalizing on them.” He personally missed out on many resources when he first transferred here but blames himself rather than the university: “I think a lot of the barriers are ones students impose on themselves…I think personal responsibility is underemphasized a lot of times; class size or a number of things can get brushed off as being the reason, but I feel if you need extra help it’s your responsibility to go get it and I don’t think that’s been emphasized to students.”

He went on to talk about his own struggles of finding the motivation to do well, especially when you are unsure of what major you want to pursue. He thought the university could help the students figure out why they are here by exposing them to work in different fields and more opportunities. “It’s really a personal thing of someone needing to find out what they are doing, why they are here, a reason to put value on themselves.”

The other participant felt money was the ultimate barrier to success. She does not qualify fully for financial aid because of her father’s income, however, she does not live with him and she is the one responsible to pay for her tuition. “I think sometimes it puts you on hold because you want to go to school more and focus more on what you want to do further on in your life, but the responsibility to work and make some money to pay for your school, you can’t do that.”

**Did available financial aid opportunities provide you with enough support? – If not, what would have been beneficial?**

This led into the next question of whether or not available financial aid opportunities provided them with enough support. One participant, whom earlier said money was the ultimate barrier to success, has two student loans in order to pay for the other half of her tuition and to buy books. Still she views the loans as a barrier because in the end she must pay the money back and the interest is constantly accruing.

The other participant said books are one of the biggest issues. He said he has tried using the book reserve room but three-fourths of the classes you take there’s no book supplied in the book reserve room. The other participant strongly agreed. The participant said he has gone to teachers with this issue but a lot of times they just say “Sorry, I don’t have a book for you.” He doesn’t want to have to take out loans but says it’s getting harder and harder each semester.
Does the university provide support in the classroom?

They didn’t have much to say when asked if the university provides support in the classroom. One participant finally spoke up and said they have been happy with their professors and felt they were “‘real open and as helpful as they could be.” Both participants however, agreed that the university did not aid them in their goals towards graduation. They both thought it was difficult to take the classes they needed due to all the requirements and prerequisites.

One participant said, “I don’t think someone can graduate in 4 years if so many classes have their own prerequisites and it’s hard to get into those classes, they just offer 1 or 2 sections with 26 seats.” The other participant added to that comment, “You have to say I will not graduate unless I have this class, short of that a lot of time you can’t get these classes.”

Does the university aid students in their goal towards their graduation? If not, what would help?

The moderator then probed the participants further to discuss the areas where the university may or may not aid a student towards graduation. These areas included admission requirements, graduation requirements, course requirements, and class schedules.

Only one participant had an opinion regarding this and he thought admissions were straight forward but actually filing for graduation was more difficult. Being that it was his first time filling out the graduation form, he thought there could have been more support from advisors. When he did go to seek help the advisors were only able to spend a minute or two with him because they had so many students to help.

Availability of required classes?

The moderator went on further to ask if the availability of required classes was an issue. One participant has only been at the university for a year so is not sure yet, the other had to crash many classes but did not have difficulty with this, and the third participant, who entered the focus group late, is having problems getting into classes due to health problems. She was forced to miss classes because of her health issues and as a result was put on academic probation. She tried explaining this problem to the university and they tried working with her by first, requiring an A in two classes and next, sending her to extended learning.

This participant got the required A’s and did not want to sacrifice her education, so she tried proving this to the university. She explained her trials further: “It took about a month over vacation to get all the processes done and stressing. My mom had to come with me, help me, and so she did and they had me almost going like a ping pong from student services to advisors from my department of my major. In one day I was going all around campus from 10 to closing…I had to be pushy in order to get the papers going, they tell me ‘oh, maybe tomorrow.’ I come tomorrow; papers aren’t done, maybe tomorrow. I had to be pushy - I don’t like to be pushy but I want these papers done. I want to come back - I want to finish my education.” She believed the university could work on communicating between departments and advisors. There was agreement from the entire group on this issue.

Have a lot of your friends or people you know experienced meaningful barriers to success?

The moderator then asked if the participants had friends that experienced meaningful barriers to success. One participant did not have any friends who faced barriers to success, another student said she had just one friend who couldn’t get into a class because of a prerequisite (an issue mentioned earlier by other
participants), and the other said their friend faced barriers due to health issues also. The participant said, “My friend had a very similar problem (referring to the other participants previous story of her personal barriers she faced because her health) he had health issues, he had to end up getting surgery. It made him ineligible and the getting back in school process was so difficult for him became so unmotivated he never came back, and that was a couple of years ago.”

**If you have been able to overcome these barriers, what did you need to know in order to do so and where did you get that knowledge? Do you know a lot more information than other students? If so, how can we expose that to students a little more?**

They were asked how, if at all, they overcame these barriers. The participants agreed that asking advisors helped but that the Internet was the primary source for information. The moderator asked if they know a lot more information compared to other students, and if so how can the university expose that to students more.

One participant said he was very knowledgeable because he worked on campus. Another participant suggested that fellow students were a good source of information. By talking with your classmates and asking what they know she was able to learn things she did not previously know.

**How long did you expect it would take for you to graduate?**

When the participants were asked how long the expected it would take to graduate, they all responded over four years. They agreed it would take 5-6 years because of all the required classes and prerequisites to those classes.

One participant mentioned looking into other programs outside of San Francisco State that she was considering transferring because she felt the programs were more hands on, had a larger class offering, and that she would be able to complete the program in a shorter amount of time. Another participant agreed: “I was thinking of doing my first 3 years here and then transferring to another school - maybe City - they have the same program. They shorten time to graduate and they help you more. My brother is at City and he’s in the nursing program and he has advisors helping him choose his classes and telling him what to do in order to graduate on time. Where here, I don’t have an advisor or a counselor because I don’t know where to find it. Actually that’s why I was thinking to transfer.”

**GQ: Are our remediation efforts successful?**

**Do you think these courses were effective in preparing you for your required courses?**

The participants were then asked about SF State’s remediation efforts. They were asked if these courses were effective in preparing them for their required courses. (At this time, a third participant entered late.) This participant felt his remedial algebra class worked effectively as a review tool. Another participant agreed with him that it does help but that it takes away from another GE classes – the previous participant agreed.

A third student thought it was a waste of time. He asserted: “I understood it, I memorized it, I finished and fell asleep during the class. When I understand something, I like to be challenged and so when I know something and everyone doesn’t know it and you know it you fall behind and so you want something new, you want to work on something new and everybody’s still working on the thing, so it’s okay, what
do I do, so I would rather go ahead to the next level and not sit around doing thought it was more a waste of time and waste of semester.”

**Do you feel more prepared or ahead after taking these courses? Were these courses you were required to take too easy or redundant (e.g., felt like a repeat of high school)? If so, what do you think would have been more beneficial?**

When the students were asked if these courses they were required to take were too easy or redundant, one participant said that some things were too easy - but they were more helpful than redundant. When asked could they have been more beneficial, nearly every participant had something to say about the Wiley program.

According to the participants, Wiley is an online program that goes along with your math classes. They all agreed through experience, or through other students’ experiences, “it’s a really stupid program” and “even if you get the right answer, it tells you the answer is wrong.” The participant who worked in tutoring on campus said he was helping a friend and knew he was doing it correctly but the “format has to be exact to the format the computer wants you to do or the computer says its wrong and it will lock you from being able to do the problem.”

**GQ: What are the technological, economic, environmental, political changes that have shaped the University?**

**Consider a typical day when you are at SF State. How do you spend your time on campus, outside of the classroom? How do you feel about the general environment?**

Prompts – study space – meeting space – food – accessibility – parking – place to relax – aesthetics

Next, the students were asked how they felt about the general environment of the campus - for example study space, meeting space, food, parking, aesthetics, etc. Immediately parking was brought up. One participant said it’s hard to find free parking so he has to pay 5 dollars a day. This same participant then complemented the school for having many good spots to meet up and for being a nice place to study and a place to get away from his home in Oakland.

Another participant likes the campus aesthetically but had many complaints about the availability of seating: “I used to use the main library a lot, there were a lot of features in there they don’t have in the annex. There were a lot of group study rooms and because they lost so many seats that the library could hold they did their best to distribute them throughout the university but you still see the impact.” He says he enjoys the campus less, “Like I said, I’ve been here for a long time and now walking by construction everyday and no seating, it’s really degraded the quality of the experience I have on campus.”

The participant who initially said there were lots of good places to meet with groups on campus quickly changed his mind about the seating that is available. He said, “If there were more seats in the cafeteria or a sign or something, because whenever I’m trying to eat lunch I can’t find any seats at all in the cafeteria and there are some people sitting down that aren’t even eating – they’re just sitting there and just talking or are on YouTube.” The group agreed that more seating is necessary.
GQ: Have students’ educational goals changed?

Do you think your educational goals are different from the goals of your parents?

The students were asked to compare their educational goals with the goals of their parents. Three of the participants had similar family situations in that their parents did not go to college but encouraged them to. There was a big push from their parents to go to college so they can succeed and have a career. They all mentioned that they were encouraged to go to college to make money and to ensure stability. One participant said, “I think parents are more focused on the money and stability and sometimes there are students that would pick a major because of that. Then there’s other students that don’t care, they just want to have a career that makes them happy.”

Another added by saying: “I understand the value of education but I think for our generation we weren’t sold on going to better yourself, we were just told to go to college and get a job… it’s a lot more about further developing yourself or if you want that top, top job you need to go to college that’s what got sold to us.”

The students have similar feelings that their goal is different from previous generations in that they want to go to college to find a career that makes them happy- it’s not just about the money – and that attending college alone does not guarantee stability. In reference to students who are pressured to come to college to make money, one participant said, “They’re going to find out that just because you got this paper that allegedly says you know these things does not guarantee you all the stability in life you’ve been promised.”

Have your educational/career goals changed since you came to SF State? If so, how?

The moderator then asked if the students’ educational or career goals have changed since they came to SF State and how. The first participant came to SF State to study Industrial Design but switched to Business. He mentioned being exposed to more opportunities in San Francisco helped him decide a major that is a better fit. He said, “I think that coming to San Francisco really helped me hone exactly what I want to do better.” Another participant is undeclared and taking General Education classes to help decide her major.

A third participant commented that he went from Business Administration to Accounting but is technically undeclared. In regards to his situation he mentioned: “I was really just doing it for the money and now I’m thinking about what I want to do to make me happy. I’m going in between having a hard time deciding because I want to be financially stable but I don’t want a job that makes me hecka money but I’m not enjoying what I do. I’m just trying to find a balance between those two.”

A participant commented about the idea of thinking things over: “That was something that was easier to do in the past when classes didn’t cost so much and weren’t so impacted. You did have the opportunity to maybe take a class or two from a different major and really see how you feel about those classes, but now a lot of the time if they find out you’re trying to take a course that’s not your major there’s no way they will let you in that class because they are so impacted they need to reserve all the space for the students who are declared in that major.”
Is your goal after you graduate to go straight into getting a job or do you want to go to further education? Has your motivation for education changed since you arrived at SF State? If so, how and why?

When asked if their goal was to get a job after graduation or go on to further education, it was a consensus that they would get a job and then go back to school for further education. When asked if their motivation for education has changed since they arrived at SF State, all participants came here to better themselves and because they were motivated to get out of their hometowns.

The common themes were leaving their home town, being different from the people they grew up with, and to come here because they want a future. One participant said: “my friend started going to community college and isn’t really as motivated as I am. Some friends actually dropped out already, they’re working at Jack-in-the-Box or McDonald’s and they’re not going to school anymore. I try to encourage them to go, but they’re just tired because they wanted something different. I’m glad I’m here, I’m gonna do whatever it takes to stay here.” Or “I didn’t want to be that person. I didn’t want to stay in that town, grow old, have children, be stuck there. I wanted something new. I wanted to experiment, I wanted to do something different. I want to leave that. I was my motivation to leave that town. I didn’t want to be like everyone else.”

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

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

The next topic was on the use of electronic communication such as Facebook and Twitter and how it affects how they study and learn.

Only one participant had an opinion. He said it doesn’t bother him - he thinks they are great tools when used correctly. His experience at SF State is that many professors do not take advantage of technology by using it in an effective manner. For example, posting links to forums - there’s no end goal or real involvement. He said: “Most of the time I see professors attempting to incorporate these technologies into their classes but not knowing how to do it effectively. I think that technologies aren’t a distraction and if anything they’re underutilized a lot in this school.”

Have you ever taken an on-line course? If so, why and if not, why not?

Only one participant took an online course, and it wasn’t by choice but because that was the only way the course was offered. The participants had little to say other than they preferred in-class courses because they felt they get more out of their courses when they attend class.

They also felt that they wouldn’t be able to get the help they needed from the professor if the course was online. Only one participant said she would like to take online courses because she enjoys working independently.
Have any technologies in the classroom enhanced your learning experience? What could the University do to encourage you to work collaboratively with other students? Prompts – clubs – student organizations-

The participants did not have much of an opinion on what technologies in the classroom enhanced their learning experience. The only thing that was mentioned was PowerPoint, which they preferred.

Next they were asked what the university could do to encourage working collaboratively with other students; examples included clubs or student organizations. Only one student is part of a club, the IEC Study Abroad Program, she felt this was a good way to work with other students. Two other participants mentioned they do group projects in class.

Could college do more to join extracurricular activities?

In response to this question, the two men in the group responded. They felt sports were underemphasized and that they can be a huge part of college, but the university does not focus enough on them. The first participant said he really wished SF State had a football team.

The next participant had a lot to say about how the university has made more of an effort to create the feeling of “college life” by having on campus housing but they could still do more. He stated: “If you just talk about the teams we do have, about basketball, about baseball, soccer- we have some good teams really. Why do you see nothing promoting it more than a sandwich board in front of the gym? That’s the way I even know about most of this stuff, by using the school gym, otherwise I wouldn’t have any exposure to it.” He then referred to his own experience of being on the rugby team: “I think for our rugby club because we were so self organized our big rival school was USF and at our last game we had 60-80 fans out for our side, that’s more than I’ve ever seen for the school and why can a small group of students who work and go to school do a better job of promoting when you have departments here who are in charge of that. You have all kinds of opportunities to promote these programs and really develop a community. I’m not just talking about sports I’m just using that as an example but I think there’s a lot more that can be done.”

The other participant agreed: “I think that’s a good example because sports are a big thing in college. That’s why I said I was disappointed we don’t have a football team. I think if the school were to focus more on the sports program and got more people involved and had more big games like where people actually go and people pay more attention to sports, there would be more school spirit and more motivation for the students as a school.”

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

Is the University prepared to support all students?

The next question asked to what degree the university is prepared to support all students. They didn’t have anything to say other than they felt that the university supports all students and there is no population the university fails to support.
GQ: What are the economic changes that have shaped the university?

Has the budget cuts affected your experience at SF State? Affected by furloughs? Has anything positive come from the budget cuts?

The last topic was about the economic changes that have shaped the university. The students were asked if the budget cuts affected their experience at SF State. Immediately, there were two obvious complaints: tuition increasing and the difficulty of getting into classes.

One participant’s major concern was about tuition, “I’m thinking about what the tuition is going to be by the time it’s time for me to graduate, how high will it go up to?” Another participant commented on how difficult it is to get into classes: “it’s just really hard to get classes. The ones I wanted I couldn’t get and so I had to go to my next resort - the ones I didn’t want.”

Another mentioned: “I’m hoping to get classes I need - don’t want to go part time. Some of my friends are going part time here and part time at community college. My plan is to go full time all my semesters - it would suck if only could pick 2-3 classes next year and have to take the rest of my classes at a community college because that’s more money on my part between books and transportation and stuff.” One student said they felt they were “begging for classes.”

Another participant summed it up for the group: “there’s no aspect about being here that hasn’t been affected by the budget cuts, everything - tuition, class size, number of classes available… there’s nothing the budget cuts have improved.” They all agreed that furloughs affected them negatively because they had less class time but were still expected to know the same amount of material. The general consensus was that nothing positive has come from the budget cuts.