Five senior faculty members from San Francisco State University were asked to attend a focus group for the WASC reaccreditation. The purpose of this focus group was to find out how these faculty members felt about the students here at the university and what the university does and doesn’t do to help them succeed. During this focus group we also wanted to find out their general feelings on different obstacles the students face in terms of college readiness and ability, as well as their own personal obstacles as faculty members who are dealing with the current budget crisis. This analysis will provide the university with a better understanding of the current situations faculty face and with more ideas on what students need in order to be successful here at San Francisco State.

**GQ What do successful students have in common?**

The discussion started off with defining what a successful student is. One general agreement among this group was that a successful student is, “Somebody who has an interest in being at the university. So someone with motivation, enthusiasm; ideally has some idea of where they are going at some point at least within the first three years and has the capacity to succeed in their classes, take notes, read books, answer exam questions - those are basics for survival.”

After this idea was shared by one faculty member everybody nodded in agreement but one faculty member spoke up and said that his idea of a successful student was broader than that. His idea of a successful student is: “One who becomes a really good active critical participant in democratic society. A successful student is one that can think through issues and find answers for themselves. Not necessarily feel that knowledge is finite and that it is evolving.” He said that student should be “a critical consumer of that should have an interest in taking notes and the ability to take notes and test successfully.”

The idea of students finding answers for themselves was one that every faculty member seemed to find a characteristic of a successful student. One faculty member said, “We understand that students should be able to construct arguments, persuasive arguments.” Other than determining the success of a student by their ability to form complex arguments, one faculty member emphasized that teachers are training the students for the world beyond the walls of the university. As one participant commented, “Simply getting a job can determine that.” This professor also pointed out that many students do not want to get jobs right after they want to go to master programs so getting into a good graduate program is another definition of success.

The basic ideas that were discussed during this portion of the group was that in order to be a successful student one needs to have the motivation and desire to succeed. This includes, taking notes and taking exams successfully. Also, finding answers for one’s self as is a big factor that determines success because that is what these professors seem to be looking for. They want their students to take charge through critical thinking and to be able to construct arguments themselves. Students who take charge of their education in an enthusiastic manner are the students who these professors consider to be successful.

After sharing their feelings on what makes a successful student, the group was asked about what the university does and doesn’t do to help student succeed. The faculty had a lot to say about this.
What does SF State do to help students succeed? What doesn’t SF State do?

One faculty member emphasized how great the global diversity is at SF State is and felt that the university did this better than any other university. This faculty member said that: “There are certain things that we do extraordinarily well - better than almost any university that I have seen, even the most prestigious, it’s the other students. We throw at our students a cornucopia of global diversity which in my subject matters a lot.” So we have this extraordinarily interesting student body which many other good colleges don’t have.” Other than SF State being globally diverse, another thing that the entire faculty felt proud of was how good the faculty actually is at SF state. One faculty member said that the faculty was “surprisingly good” here and when he said that all the faculty members in the group were in agreement. His reasoning for saying surprisingly good was because he said that given what we don’t have here at this university, faculty still comes here. This faculty member said that the Bay Area is a big reason faculty comes to SF State. He remarked: “I think the Bay Area is a big draw and we are great beneficiaries of the richness of the bay area, and I mean mainly the non economic sense. So we do provide a good faculty in my discipline we provide and there are not half a billion people anywhere that we don’t have a course about and that is not true of Berkeley or Stanford because you could easily find half a billion people they don’t really teach about.” The faculty and the diversity of the student body was something the faculty members were all very proud of.

What we are talking about right now is what we do to help students succeed and what don’t we do.

One specific area where the faculty thought the university could improve on was advising. One faculty member said that professional development is a struggle for some students on campus so stronger advising would help. Clarity of requirements and clarity of possibilities are two things that the faculty thought could be stronger at SF State because a lot of students have trouble navigating the system.

What factors are the most relevant when students do not do well in your classes (program and/or major)?

When asked about what factors were most relevant when students don’t do well in classes, many faculty members discussed the lack of motivation in some students. For some students the goal is to get the degree without doing the work required for the degree. One faculty member said that, “One of the things I think is a problem in the university, and it relates to advising, is that they see the degree as the outcome, not the job after the degree as the outcome. And a degree without a job is not a positive outcome.” Everybody in the group agreed with this statement. The general consensus was that some students are so eager to get their degree that they don’t see the whole picture. The faculty members found it troubling that some students don’t understand true purpose of an education. According to the group, a successful student uses his/her education to contribute to society – failing to do so defeats the purpose of the degree. The faculty felt that part of the reason some students don’t understand this is because in a lot of areas, such as communications, this idea is very abstract.

Another professor attributed culture as a main reason of why students don’t do well in classes. This faculty member said: “I think some of it is culture. It’s coming from families who don’t have parents or siblings who have college degrees. So growing up they don’t have that exposure to what’s required to succeed university and so it’s a shock to come from high school to this environment so as a consequence they don’t succeed and they don’t stay here. So I think some of the new initiatives on campus to facilitate writing and provide first year experiences are very helpful to building those deficiencies that students have.” Working is also another factor that played into why students don’t do as well in classes. One faculty member brought up work as an issue and the other faculty members agreed as well.
Does SF State provide support for different learning styles? – If yes, in what ways? – If no, what’s missing?

When it came to disability, the faculty had a wide range of answers. Students can range from visual to kinetic learners and the faculty expressed difficulty defining a student’s learning style. One professor shared his feeling on what the university doesn’t do regarding disability by saying: “My ongoing struggle is we are in a system that privileges a specific form of learning so how do you incorporate different forms of learning to measure the success of the student. Since we are still in a system that privileges linear thinking and specific types of argument making that is very western and very linguistic and if you are talking to a student who comes from a different background which he or she learns from movement or through visual cues then I don’t feel personally I can assess their work in the same way and so I give students options in different assignments but still I feel I am privileging a certain type of learning and I do wish the university would provide us with more resources for that because we talked about embracing students with different learning styles but we keep on going through one style and a lot of us train from a tradition from that certain style so we don’t how to develop assignments or teach in that way or how to access.” Everybody agreed with this statement.

Continuing on with general thoughts about disability, one professor said: “Certainly with disability, I’m sure we all have the experience when students tell us they have certain disabilities and we are rightly required to make adjustment and I don’t know anybody who doesn’t enthusiastically do that and so a certain basic level of addressing disabilities the university does. However, there are more, the problems do not present themselves quite that simply and the complexity of motives and abilities of human beings is very complicated and I’ve certainly run across cases of students who have disabilities and I can’t say easily what their truly unable to do because of their disability.” Another faculty member commented that the university did exceptionally well in the assessment of learning disabilities once the student is identified.

GQ: In what ways are our students not ready for college or specific majors?

The next area of the focus group went on to discuss the ways in which students are not ready for college or specific majors. One professor said: “A lot of students come here and don’t know what to expect in a university and they don’t know what it’s for and they don’t know how to take advantage of many resources we have. Often they don’t understand the university is run by big bureaucracy and as young adults they need not be passive and take an active interest to be active and negotiate the pathways of the big bureaucracy. That’s part of getting a degree, learning how to potentially stand in line, ask the right questions and navigate. I find students can be very impatient and ask why secretary didn’t tell them this or that and I say this is a big state university and those people who work in those offices have a lot of work and you need to be as nice to them as you can.”

It was apparent from the discussion that some student’s lack the maturity to be successful. According to one faculty member, some students are not ready for college or specific majors because they are unable to take the responsibility to find things out for themselves. They come into a university without knowing what to expect, which in-turn, makes them unprepared. Another participant stated that when students come to him for general education advising he routinely has to take out the copy of the bulletin and students have no idea what it is. This faculty member said that a lot of the reason they don’t know is because the university doesn’t offer a simple menu for general class requirements. One participant remarked, “Many students have difficulty understanding they need to navigate this big bureaucracy they are going to have to learn how to pay taxes and work the system they are in.” The other faculty members agreed that organizational sophistication is something that many students have trouble with because they don’t know how to do certain things.
What about things like oral communication, written communication, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, emotional maturity, subject content knowledge, study skills, English language proficiency

Although this seems to be a topic that is widely talked about in the university, the majority of the discussion was lead by one professor who said: “There are obvious barriers with written and English communication skills. They are very poor and low and need to improve.” The main issue that the faculty had with students here was that students feel better communicating orally than they do in a written way. They also have trouble differentiating between the two and as one faculty member said, “they have difficulty that oral and written communication are two different registers.”

GQ What are the changes in student expectations in the last 10 years?

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

When asked about what changes the faculty had seen in student expectations in the last 10 years, one faculty member went back to what another faculty member said earlier, “[It is] more true of the students that they expect to get a degree but all the things they have to but all those things to get that degree are not high on their agenda.” The general agreement among the faculty was that students need to do certain things to reach a degree but the process is not their top priority. The group asserted that a lot of students fail to focus on the things that build up to the degree – these are the things that will ultimately make them successful. Another faculty member said: “I am feeling like the students come in and I don’t know if its generational and I don’t know if it is the way it is now because of technology, but I get a sense of entitlement from people, to the point when it’s not professional and I see it increasing over the past 10 years." Another faculty member stepped in by saying: “I think that it can be attributed to this whole idea of education and the process of education as a consumer kind of model which we are sellers and I noticed that the sense of entitlement so I mean that’s how I see that happening increasingly.” The whole faculty group agree with this statement.

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

Students now use more electronic communication (Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc.) than ever before. Does this affect how they study and learn?

The next area of questions had to do with technology and students. More specifically how electronic communication such as Facebook and twitter are affecting how students study and learn. One of the most interesting answers to this question was a faculty member saying that students are used to sound bites. He answered the question by saying: “Absolutely yes. One of the things that I find is that students are used to sound bites so if I am delivering a lecture they really want the 15, 30 second sound bite version rather than the complexity of ideas and what we teach is more complete than the sound bite.” Another common issue the faculty members had was that because of the internet, many students don’t understand the difference between a Wikipedia quote and a quote from a leading researcher. Students want to find things fast and easy. Because electronic communication is a daily part of every student’s life, they go where they can find it fastest without looking at the quality of the source.

What are your experiences using classroom technologies in general?

The faculty members had a wide variety of answers when they discussed their experiences with classroom technologies. One professor said she didn’t really use much technology in the classroom because in the nursing department they do simulation-based learning. Many of the teachers didn’t
really find PowerPoint useful either and said that they felt that teachers who use PowerPoint “hid” behind the PowerPoint. Many of the faculty members also talked about how they use fewer textbooks now since everything is online. Although most of these faculty members used technology, there were some who had a different view about it. One faculty member said: “I have a somewhat traditional view. There is a relationship between a teacher and a student which will never change. Might geographically change, but there is a lot to be said for using the biological technology of talking and listening and writing on the board that performance is instructive but they are not thinking any faster because you are flashing it.” Everyone agreed with this statement. According to this group of professors, the act of writing on the board allows them to establish a certain relationship with the student; and that is what they feel teaching is all about.

One faculty member stated that he preferred one-to-one email over iLearn because he felt that he was much more in control of what he was able to say. He put it this way: “I use email and have been since when students got computers. There are some advantages for iLearn instead of email which is fewer keystrokes. The thing I like about emailing is that it is one-to-one and you are much more in control of what you are saying to whom and all this social media - which is what I learn is - is that you have to do a lot more work to focus your message. Email is one-to-one by default and you have to do work to make it not one-to-one. Social media is less restricted because you have to get your message to everyone. None the less, I am a bit of a technophobe because there is a lot to be said for the ancient old fashioned original human way.”

**Did you seek help with using new technology? If so, how was your experience? Did you have difficulty finding help with new technology?**

The faculty members all had something different to say about their experiences with seeking help with new technology. One faculty member said that he wanted to try PowerPoint and he made an appointment with the Improvement Center for training. The Improvement Center said that since they could only train groups. So this faculty member did not a pleasant experience when trying to get help with new technology. When it came to getting help with iLearn, one faculty member thought it was horrible. Another participant spoke of a good iLearn experience - he had an issue with iLearn and IT was very quick to respond over email.

**GQ How has the hiring of new faculty changed faculty experiences?**

Over 50% of SF State faculty has been hired since 2000. We know that in some departments and Colleges this has resulted in a change in the balance among assistant, associate, full professors and lecturers. Have you observed such a change in your department?

Since 50% of the faculty have been hired since 2000, there has been a change in the balance among assistant, associate, full professors and lecturers. When asked about whether they have observed a change, one professor immediately said, “Oh yes, with a vengeance.” Many faculty members nodded when he said this and but one said this was not true of their department. One faculty member denied that 50 percent of his department was new and another said he did not feel that was true of his department because they only had about 20 tenured track faculty members.

**If so ... Has the change in the balance of assistant, associate, full professor, and lecturers affected your work? Has this change affected your research? – Your teaching?**

The change in the balance of professors has affected the faculty members across the board. Each member had something different to say and they have all felt an impact on their research or teaching in one way or another. One faculty member said about the change: “It’s affected our programs, we have lost all our
lecturers. Four people. It has significantly impacted our curriculum because we offer half the courses we used to so that’s had a big impact and it seems like there is more work.”

Because of this change, faculty members also said that their classes are getting bigger and they are adding more students to their classes. In terms of this affecting their research, one faculty member said that it always has affected research and that it was nothing new because as he put it: “There is too much work to do. The operations of department always supersedes that type of work I’d like to be a full professor but I sit on everyone’s committee and the operations of being in a department is what takes time.”

Sitting on all of these committees seemed to be an issue for faculty members because it didn’t allow them time to do their own research and publications that were required of them.

The faculty members also attributed junior faculty to be another reason they don’t have as much time for research. One faculty member said that “I’ve noticed the junior faculty has different mindset, they are unwilling to contribute or help run the department.”

After this was said another faculty member jumped in and said “Yea, I mean I have to say this and I feel bad to say this and some of them I know very well which have been my own students but I just did what I did what I was told without complaining but not now it’s not like that. If I choose to live somewhere I pay the price not the university. I had 90-minute commutes and now people say they won’t do things because of that.” So it seems that there is a cultural change in terms of faculty these days and it’s hard for faculty members to take care of what needs to get done because of the simple fact that the ideals of teachers have changed.

Has this affected your faculty participation in service (shared governance) to the university?

Other than affecting their research and teaching, it has also affected their faculty participation in service to the university. Most of the faculty members felt that the situation is making them work harder in teaching which in some cases takes a toll on their ability to do service.

One faculty member said it doesn’t affect just teaching, just the day-to-day operations of the department. The faculty members focused a lot on how this has affected their relationships with newer faculty. There was an unspoken resentment here because they felt that some faculty members weren’t doing their part and it has affected their relationships with them.

GQ What changes have faculty seen in attitudes toward teaching, professional achievement, service?

How does your department define “professional achievement and growth”?

Professional growth and achievement was mostly defined by the number of publications needed. One faculty member said that publications on paper were paramount for him and the others said that their departments mainly focused on pure publications. Most of the faculty members said that the guidelines for publications are about one to two per year. Another faculty member said that his was either two journal articles or a book over 6 years.

Do you think the RTP process in your department, college and university is consistent?

When the faculty members were asked this question only one member had a response: “You don’t get whipped around from one level to the next in terms of what their looking for.” After this we quickly
moved into the next question which discussed the emphasis the university puts on the importance of teaching.

**Do you think the university places an emphasis on the importance of teaching?**

The faculty felt that the university places the most emphasis on teaching in their review process and when it comes to scores. The faculty had a lot to say about scores and really stressed the importance of finding alternative ways to assess good teaching other than scores.

One faculty member said: “There is too much emphasis on scores because they don’t measure what they report to measure and I’ve tried to make that point in chair meetings. It’s different with what you’re looking for in each department. It’s worthwhile to find other ways to assess good teaching.”

Another faculty member said that they felt that the RTP committee only cared to look at teaching effectiveness scores. Another faculty member suggested that the RTP committee is stuck in their ways.

The faculty wants the university to come up with other things to assess teaching. One faculty member specifically requested to “see his formal institution a report of the GPA of the class and then the teaching effectiveness scores because one thing I find is that the instructor where everyone gets A’s is that the instructor gets more favorable scores and I would like to see this”

**Are you getting the support you need to meet the changes in University RTP expectations?**

The faculty had mixed responses when asked if they were given the support they need to meet the changes in university RTP expectations. One faculty member said that he is working on getting the support but could not give a response at the moment. Another participant felt that they did have support and one member said that they only felt support at the departmental level.

Overall this is not a good response from the faculty because in some way or another they did not get support. Whether it was at their department or university level, they did not feel that they got both. They either got one or the other, and since some had no answer, or said they couldn’t respond at that present time, it seemed that they are not getting the support they need to meet the change in RTP expectations.

**GQ What are the economic trends that have shaped the University?**

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

Discussing the effect of budget cuts on education at SF State was a sensitive topic for the faculty members. Every single one of them had something to say and most statements were very strong. The general feeling that everyone had about them was that they were demoralizing. One faculty member said, “I think those furloughs and budget cuts are demoralizing. And how do you keep up a front of not feeling like that when you’re in a classroom of students and show their not a part of that but work beyond that and have a positive perspective on it.”

Another faculty member thought it was demoralizing to start the semester with no supplies or paper and that purchasing their own to go to a class that is over capacity is demoralizing. One faculty member said that he has cut down his courses to the “meat and potatoes” due to furloughs and said that cutting it down is “hard to digest.”
Although these furloughs have significantly impacted many faculty members they all agreed that their teaching effectiveness has not gone down. One faculty member said: “Yes, all of us at faculty have a certain pride in what we do. We won’t allow ourselves to teach below a certain level.”

When asked about how they deal and work around/with furloughs, the faculty members had varied responses. One faculty member said that they have worked every furlough. Another expressed that he has to respect the terms of his employment contract which means that he does not show up or teach on furlough days because his contract says not too.

Another faculty member expressed his disappointment in how furloughs are hurting the student’s education and that students should realize this, but they don’t. He said that his, “initial inclination was to take furlough days on non-teaching days and I thought better of it since their education is being hurt so I decided to take two more days on furlough days.” The reason he did this was to show the students that it was hurting their own education so they need to get politically involved. The faculty members felt that if the students don’t feel anything about the furloughs, then they have not done their job.

**Has the ongoing scarcity of resources affected your: Professional achievement and growth? Service to the campus and community?**

**Do you think the campus would benefit from a faculty club/center? In what ways?**

When asked how about the ongoing scarcity of resources has affected their growth and service to the community only two faculty members responded and talked about how they were traveling less. One faculty member specifically pointed out that it has affected his national service.

The faculty club was something the faculty members seemed to really like and something they wished was still open. They felt the campus would benefit from a faculty club/center and that having food there was important.

**Q Memorable Moment**

**What is an especially memorable or exciting teaching experience you have had at SF State?**

Since there was time at the end of the focus group we asked each member if they had an especially memorable or exciting teaching experience. Each faculty member had their own unique experiences to share. One faculty member felt that the new class he is teaching is exciting because he likes the feeling of trying to get students to understand the content when it’s obvious to them the class is not where it should be. The relationships with graduate students were something that the faculty members found very memorable. One professor said that his relationships with his grad students are lifelong relationships and that is the most memorable thing.

Another faculty member talked about how intrigued he was by a student who comes to his office hours every time they are offered. He said that he hasn’t seen a student with this type of motivation in a long time. This student is so interested and asks him questions for two hours and it seems to have made a big impact on his teaching experiences. Another faculty member said, “A great teaching experience is when he doesn’t necessarily see it but when he sees moments when light bulb comes on and people look inside it and they go back to a comment I once said.”
Conclusions

In conclusion, it is evident that these faculty members are struggling with many ongoing issues that revolve around the budget crisis. This seemed to be the biggest issue for them as well as the most sensitive because they feel helpless. There is nothing they can do about the situation, but they would like to see changes. Other than the current struggles that these faculty members are facing with budget cuts, furloughs and relationships with other faculty, their ideals and morals on teaching remain strong. They know exactly what it is that students need help with at the university and want students to be active consumers in society, as well as to be able to take charge of their own education. They want students to see past the goal of just obtaining a degree and look at it as a process that requires steps to be made along the way. Steps should be taken here at SF State to help students learn that the degree is not the only outcome - it’s the job after the degree which is the outcome. The faculty members made it clear that a degree without a job is not very successful outcome, so through advising, the university should make this point clearer to students.

According to these faculty members, another area in need of improvement at the university is advising. Many of these faculty members felt that the students need stronger advising, but at the same time the students need to do their part to familiarize themselves with the system. The university needs to make steps in order to help these students know what path they need to take to fulfill certain requirements. The group concurred that students need help being steered in the right direction.