Introduction

On April 9, 2010, the WASC reaccreditation committee asked four staff members to sit down and discuss what makes a San Francisco State University student successful and what we can do to further the success of the students, and the student body in general. Over the course of two hours, the focus group participants responded to various questions, grouped in a series of topics, in order to explore the successes and barriers faced by students at San Francisco State, and how the university can assist in the success of students in the years to come.

As the participants discussed each question, four key themes came up:

1) Successful students are those who are mature, self motivated, and full of initiative, which is something that the modern student is lacking.
2) Many students coming into San Francisco State are not college ready, costing the student and the university valuable time.
3) Communication within the university must be developed to make sure all students are getting the correct information.
4) Budget cuts are not only taking their toll within the physical aspects of the university, but are having a huge emotional impact on the staff, faculty, and students of San Francisco State University.

These themes came up throughout conversation, and helped define what does or does not make a San Francisco State University student successful.

How would you define a “successful” student?

Although the staff admitted that their time spent with students at the university was minimal, all agreed that successful students shared the common traits of self motivation and initiative. As the group talked about this, all but one seemed to think that there was a particularly clear line between what made a student successful and what didn’t. As one member put it:

Although it was not shared until later, one member hinted that maturity was a factor:

“For myself, coming from a nursing department, I see students that are coming in very motivated. We don’t have very many of the fresh out of high school and out of the first couple years of junior college. We have very motivated older students. Late twenties and mid thirties. Some as old as me. Very strong level of incoming motivation in the students that I see.”

The group members suggested that the faculty played an important role in the success of students. Two participants stated that the push of the faculty for their student’s success at SF State was above and beyond, and both felt that, that directly correlated to the students’ success. As one member put it:

“I think the faculty have a very big role in helping to foster and nurture the students and it’s been twenty, thirty years since I’ve been in college, but for some reason this campus has some really good faculty members that are very committed to what they are doing and take the students interests to heart.”

Overall, the group defined successful students as mature and highly motivated students with initiative, who also were getting a lot of great support from faculty.
What do you think SF State do to help students succeed? What doesn't SF State do?

The theory that faculty play an important role in the success of students was made very strongly during this part of the discussion. Faculty training programs such as the Center for Teaching and Faculty Development were mentioned as ways in which the university is truly striving to have faculty make the best connections with their students. As one participant explained:

“Its role is to assist in the orientation of new faculty to provide workshops and basically a sounding board for instructors and they are a very active - small but active group. The faculty that has taken advantage of them seems to be more attuned to the students and seem to get more from the students.”

Therefore it was stressed again that the training and education of faculty and their ability to maintain relationships with students was seen as the best step that San Francisco State University was taking to help its students.

What do you think are the greatest obstacles for students in meeting their expected graduation date?

During this discussion topic, two main things were said to be barriers to successful students. One barrier is a lack of motivation and maturity. One member said:

“There are several levels of focus and maturity. There are some folks here, regardless of age, I should say, who are here for the experience and some for education - which leads to better experiences hopefully.”

The second major barrier was the ability for students to get classes. Three different participants stated that it was probably the biggest concern most students had. As an example, one participant stated:

“I have a Twitter account and a monitor the key string SFSU and that is probably 35-40% of the commentary about the school. You leave off all the stuff that has to do with rooms for rent, just the school, I’d say 30-35% is what it costs them to go to school and the difficulty of getting classes and being pleased they got into the class they’ve been trying to get into for the past two semesters. It is an issue, definitely.”

One participant, who works with students with disabilities, said that for the most part the faculty is great. However, there are times that the students’ needs are not met. The idea of “two types of students” showed its face again as one participant mentioned:

“I don’t know if this is just a bad apple in the faculty that I’ve heard before. And I don’t know if it’s the deficiencies that are taking place in this faculty members role but I overheard a couple faculty members from the MBA program who, this is so bad, they talk about how there were only a few students who were actually going to succeed and those were the students who they would concentrate on…which is a problem for us too with students with disabilities because we need time to recognize problems in them. Instead of saying, ‘Oh you can’t bring your laptop to class because it ruins it for everyone else.’ Well this student needs a laptop to access the material electronically. There is a certain validity that, I don’t know, I thought that was… He may not be represented to the students or faculty. Some of the faculty are not looking at the group as a whole.”

This opinion made it apparent that although faculty may be very helpful to one population, it could be missing other opportunities to develop more successful students. So, although the group agreed that
faculty were important in developing successes, it is possible that these faculty are missing certain populations, which would be discussed later.

Therefore, student initiative, course offerings, and staff support were the main concerns of these particular participants.

If you could change something the university does to deal with these problems we’ve just discussed – I think of them as barriers to student success – what would it be?

One participant started this topic by speaking about the unpreparedness of students coming from high school:

“Not really being an academic platform, but it’s sort of like how much more can you fill in a glass that’s has a one gallon limit. The students are coming in unprepared with remedial skills. There are only a certain amount of classes that can be absorbed with teaching them basic grammar, writing, remedial math, what you should basically be getting your junior or sophomore year of high school or first couple years at City College. If SFSU has to embrace them in order to speed up the first year or two, it is two more years that will be added to the length of their graduation. I don’t know what the criteria we put in the admissions process to change that but I think it is deeper than just State. I think it goes all the way down to elementary school. It’s a very, very big ball of action. But I will say that I think at State that I know someone who transferred here from Cal for their masters because of its practical applications. I mean at Cal you go and research in theory. At State you get a practical education that will send you out there to do something specific. That’s where the two UC [campuses] have their issues.”

The focus group concurred that the majority of students coming into the university were very much in need of remediation, and the efforts to catch these students up to a collegiate level was not only slowing down the graduation process, but also taking away vital time to give to more departmental coursework. This means that the group agreed that to change this, you had to start from the roots of education and fix things at the bottom. One participant even mentioned that because of these remedial issues, such as a lack of English, grade inflation was being used to help students graduate, rather than getting them to the skill level they need to be in. As another participant pointed out:

“If the school starts being directed as a business, with our product being our students, and if the tuition becomes more paramount then making sure the students come out with a good education then we will be like the previous school I worked in. It’s competitive. Students will pay upfront and stay there because they have nowhere else to go.”

Therefore, it seemed as though the consensus of the group was that the university needed to somehow stop accepting remedial students, or if they do accept them, help them get to the level they need to leave at. These ideas were discussed more in the next topic as well.

When you think about the students you have contact with, do you think they are ready for university life?

The overall consensus of the group seemed to be that there were many students who were not ready for university life. The same concepts that were discussed in the previous topic of discussion were merely reiterated again once more, with participants stating:
“There is plenty of evidence in the literature that indicates when you have students who start out, and when I say students that start out back in pre-school, kids that spend two years in pre-school at the end of eighth grade have a better standing and are more mature and more capable and have a better academic standing. Students who have gone through head start programs and when they get into upper elementary school their standings are better. Does that mean they can all complete an English sentence? That is not necessarily true. But they are better able to deal with the social situations and when you are able to deal with social situations you are able to deal with academic requirements at that state.”

The group agreed that many of the students coming into the university lack basic English and math skills. One participant added: “I acquire a handful of student assistants on a yearly basis. Whenever I put out a posting I am rather appalled with the English that comes in with the applications.” This seemed to be a critical drawback to the university’s success. Since we are given the idea that all students must graduate in four years, it becomes apparent that remedial work might be subject to grade inflation so as to get certain students out faster. As the first participant mentioned:

“That’s something that I see, not just here, but in the entire California educational system is that people shake their heads and are afraid of what is going out into the marketplace. Some of it is budget and some of it is a sense that we have a mill going, almost an industrial process. The log comes in one end and we have to make so many 2 by 4s coming out the other end. It doesn’t matter how many knots are in them, just as long as they are 2 by 4s. That’s a scary thing. I kind of hope that as part of this process we look at ways to make sure that we have good 2 by 4s coming out.”

This topic concluded with all participants in agreement; that many students are certainly not ready for university life - both on an academic level, and on a level of social maturity. According to the group this was certainly causing many deficits to the university life of all students.

**What changes in the last 10 years have you observed in the expectations of students? – What about 5 or fewer years?**

By their definition of successful student from above, the staff group found students from the past to be more successful. They shared that students from the past were more self motivated, more serious, and worked hard for what they wanted. As one participant explained:

“It seems like back in the late 90s, it was very hard for students to get classes and stuff so they were very highly motivated and go-getters. And it seems like to me it still is hard, but there is a different type of student, and I can’t put my finger on it…It just seems like they were a lot more serious then. And I think that a part of the observation was because I feel really bad for the students, some of them feel lost and hopeless because it is so difficult to get their classes and stuff."

This participant also said that the student body on average was generally older than it is today, pointing out again that mature students are more apt to be successful. Participants also agreed that the new generation of students have more of a sense of entitlement. Although one participant compared this idea to his 15-year-old son, all participants felt that this was an adequate measure of the modern student.

“I have a 15-year-old son and I watch him and his friends and they have a certain expectation that thing will just be given to him. And when they don’t get what they want it it’s like ‘What do you mean.’ And he just stops and looks like, ‘Dad. Stop. This does not compute. What is this? I did not get what I want?’ They don’t understand the work force.”
This perceived sense of entitlement, according to the group could be a result of many things, such as short attention span and the new uses of technology. Specifically, however, the participants concurred that this sense of entitlement is the main difference between past students and the less motivated students of today. Furthermore, the group agreed that modern student is less likely to take go out and get things done.

“It’s curious in a sense that the time frame before the dot-com bubble burst. When people thought they would graduate with their Master’s Degree and get $75,000 at entry level. Whereas perhaps now they are thinking ‘I’m going to graduate with a Master’s Degree and probably working at this coffee shop for a few more years.’

According to the staff, students from the past seemed to have more of the qualities that define a successful student, whereas modern students are often times lazy, unmotivated, and a little spoiled.

*Is the university prepared to support all students?*

To this question, the group reiterated that success begins with the student. The university cannot support students who cannot support themselves. One participant said, “How do we reach in and look for something special in students lacking drive and motivation?” Another participant added:

“If the student has no intention of investing themselves into the course and shows no motivation or enthusiasm or initiative or anything then as a professor, I would be turned off to teaching them as well. I taught high school for 4 years and I taught from freshmen to seniors. It was very difficult teaching those who were unmotivated and lacked initiative and trying to get them to understand the importance of why they are sitting in a classroom.”

All of the participants agreed, yet all participants decided that this should not be a problem at the collegiate level. They further concurred that something had to be done to help these students become more motivated, but again, it must start from within:

“From what I’ve seen and heard, San Francisco [State] has really good resources but it has to come from the student and self identifying, understanding, looking, and not being afraid to ask the question. That starts from kindergarten all the way through.”

However, even with self advocacy, all participants explained that the counseling services are disjointed and hard to access. Furthermore, the group thought that communication to students was cluttered, and sometimes even wrong. As one participant shared:

“[From] what I’m hearing in my own department is that students aren’t always given the same information, and that’s a problem that we encounter because, just a simple one, a student comes in to register for a given class, ‘well, you have to take this one before you can take that one,’ and they say ‘well I’ve talked to Doctor So and So, and they said that I could do it,’ they are sitting here with the situation of saying ‘well, guess what, Doctor So and So was wrong.’ And that’s not a nice message to send to students; that the person that they were given as an advisor is giving them the wrong information.”

All the participants agreed that this was a campus-wide problem, and that much of this had to do with the rapidity of changes in the past few years, especially since chairs of departments change so often. As one staff member stated:

“When you do get a newcomer who wants to come in and piss on the corners, the way to disseminate information about what is going to be changed is really important, so that everybody does get the same
information. I don’t know how the university would want to try to centralize that method, or even if it could be offered.”

They all agreed that there needed to be a better form of communication that branched over all departments. The participants certainly felt that not all students were being supported, particularly ones not defined as successful. The group suggested that the university develop ways motivate these students, and to build better lines of communication for students and faculty.

**When you think about your job and the physical environment in which you specifically work, does anything come to mind that hinders your ability to perform your job?**

Each participant mentioned funding as the largest hindrance to perform their job to its full and most helpful extent. Things such as training, short staffing, and professional development were mentioned as key elements missing from each of their programs. To start off the conversation, on participant stated:

“Well for me personally, in my job, one of the major impediments is a sense of continuity of funding. We get money in buckets that comes from federal funding, lottery money, and the general fund, and you have these buckets of money that come in and they usually have a tag on them that says ‘you can buy equipment with this, or you can buy books with this, or this is for computer, it’s for IT, but you can’t do XYZ with it.’ And this makes it extremely difficult to develop continuity of the education and the facilities to give the same thing to the same group of students as they march through because I don’t have the basic annual budget to do the things that I need to do. I will get a bucket of money that has to be spent by May 31st or it goes back to Sacramento. So I am spending a whole lot of time creating requisitions and justifying this and doing all this other stuff, and when that money is gone I will have nothing to maintain the stuff that I’ve purchased. We have a defibrillator that no longer works, I have nothing in the budget to buy a new one and I have nothing in the budget to maintain the one I’ve got. We have to go scraping around for it. That kind of financial… very, very difficult to work with when trying to develop the continuity of a program.”

The “use it or lose it” funding, as they defined it, is very detrimental to any department. As the participant explained, not only could they be spending money on things they may not need, but these funds were costing him time to define his purchases under the state or board’s terms.

Besides finances, nothing else was mentioned as hindrances or barriers to their careers.

**How have the budget cuts affected your ability to do your job?**

The three main topics that came up in this discussion were job insecurity, heavy workloads, and pay cuts. Job security was certainly the main issue, as all the staff agreed that it hindered some staff and faculty members’ ability to do their jobs. As one participant mentioned,

“The effectiveness of staff that are insecure and the effectiveness of faculty who are insecure have to be brought into question. Maybe there’s nothing that can be done to fix it, maybe it’s outside of anyone in this university to alter. The volcano has erupted and the lava’s coming down the mountain, and there’s nobody to stop it and that’s kind of the way it is. It’s a natural disaster kind of a thing. Ok, but that doesn’t make it any easier to provide an education to the students. So yeah, there’s a – budget cuts are an issue, it’s how secure are you in what you’re doing, and will you being doing it in twelve to twenty four months.”

All agreed that this took a great toll on staff morale, and much of staff time was spent worrying, which, in the end, effects the morale of students.
Furlough days and pay cuts from these days were also a very passionate topic, and the discussion brought up many key points: “The big issue I have, the problem I have, we’re furloughed so we only work 90% of the time, but we have 100% of the work to do.” Another participant chimed in:

“If not 110% and we’re all in a certain strata of staff, you think about groundskeepers and the locksmiths and you think about our custodial staff, specifically the custodial staff and the branch of it that covers per call, that I had eleven part time positions that simply disappeared over the two week period, they were cut. And so all of a sudden there’s a great deal more being requested of fewer people and you sit back and think ‘the wastebasket hasn’t been emptied.’ Well did you get the memo that if you want your waste basket emptied, you put it outside? Because they don’t come into the offices every night anymore they don’t have time.”

And another said, “The impact that furloughs [have] on couples that work for the state and the university they didn’t just get a ten percent pay cut, their house took a twenty percent pay cut.”

The staff members had obviously thought about this outside of the focus group, and it became immediately apparent that this was a huge barrier to both the physical and mental well being of the staff members. One participant also mentioned how it affected the physical environment of the university, saying the cuts in custodial staff showed:

“…physically by things just not being done, not getting repaired, that becomes visible to the students, to the outside public and go “damn the lights haven’t been changed in here in how long? Why is the classroom so dim? Why are the windows all…any number of things like that?’

Although one participant who had been here for many years said that the budget had always been a problem, it seemed to be a new issue of worry to those participating in the focus group, especially since all of them seemed concerned about their own jobs.

**Conclusion**

The perceived lack of success in the modern student was seen to be a problem with the remediation level of incoming students. The writing and math skills of incoming students were seen to be disturbingly low, and all participants agreed that this was a serious problem. According to the group, students need be more prepared for college; they need to be schooled well from a very early age, so that social and educational capabilities were developed.

The budget was also painted as a huge detriment to the success of faculty, and therefore the success of students. Sufficient training was not being offered in some areas, and the constant stress of job security seemed to take the largest toll on staff and faculty. Although participants mentioned that there was not much the university could do, the participants still felt it necessary to express that the budget cuts were a looming issue.