How would you define “successful” student?

The first group of questions that were asked attempted to answer the general question, “what do successful students have in common?” When asked to define what a successful student is, the group came up with a list that included: completing course work, doing course reading, attending class, passing classes, graduating, being engaged, and being involved in student organizations.

The group agreed that while graduating is one degree of success, what defines a successful student is someone that stands out above the crowd and gives more than the “minimum effort” to graduate. One student said, “To get ahead and separate yourself you have to really be engaged and put in more than what is just required.”

Do you see yourself as a successful student? Why, Why not?

If so, why do you think you are successful? Why not? – work/school balance

The students were then asked if they considered themselves successful students, to which one student seemed to answer for the group with a “yes,” while the other students nodded in agreement. Two students used their involvement in organizations outside of class and attendance in class as key descriptors that defined their success. The majority of the group stated that they worked, one student said she worked “25-30 hours a week,” while another said she worked “a couple of jobs.”

One student who was not currently working stated: “I know that that puts me at a huge advantage over students who do work. I’m so amazed sometimes when I see student who are working 30 hours and week and carrying a 15 units schedule and they still seem to be doing ok. I don’t know if I could do that well under that much pressure.” They agreed that working is stressful for students, can be tiring, and often forces students to compromise having a social life.

Being college ready in mathematics, being college ready in written English?

When asked if they felt college ready in terms of Math and English skills, the group overall felt “proficient.” Interestingly enough, four students voiced their frustration with group work due to the inability of fellow classmates to communicate effectively at college level English.

Whether it be writing emails to groupmates, or writing collaborative papers, the group agreed that they were disappointed in the number of classmates unable to perform at college level English. One student recalled his experience in an English 214 course at San Francisco State, “I did English 214 when I transferred here and half of the kids failed that class because they could not write an essay at an upper division level.”

What are your study habits? How did you develop them?

Are you happy with your study skills?

When the students were asked about their study habits they agreed that the habits and techniques they used were acquired through trial and error and were happy with their study skills. The study habits they
use include: taking lecture notes by hand, taking notes by hand of assigned readings, following the syllabi provided by their teachers, utilizing PowerPoint slides, and studying in the annex (temporary Library/Study Space). One student remarked, “I think the more ways you study or expose yourself to the material, that’s something that contributes to being successful.”

The group stressed taking notes by hand because they found it too distracting to use their computers at school, “For me writing is a kinesthetic approach to learning,” admitted one student. While the group did agree that PowerPoint slides are a useful study tool, they are also described as a “double edged sword.” The students concurred that it is necessary to attend class to know what the professor is focusing on, understand the material, and take notes along with the PowerPoint slides provided by the professor.

**Think about the advisors on campus: Did you get any advising here?**

The group was composed of all transfer students, and most of the group said they received transfer orientation at San Francisco State. They found the orientation to be helpful in terms of information on courses, “I felt like they did a pretty good job of that, because I didn’t know what classes I needed to take.” Unfortunately, they didn’t feel like they received advising past registration information and felt that they needed “to be on top of administration” to avoid complications when registering.

**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?**

When the group was asked to identify barriers to success, one student described time constraints coming into SF State as an international student, “I have to be out of here in a certain time.” Another barrier for this student is a lack of clarity with regard to elective courses, “I didn’t know there was focused areas.” He continued: “It has been difficult with fewer classes. My schedule is all over the places, it’s totally inconvenient.” For other students Segment 3 was listed as a barrier because “they don’t even offer ¾ of those classes it seems,” said a student.

**External factors Prompt  money/work?**

When prompted to speak of external barriers to success, one student anticipated not being able to pay for school, “I don’t really have that much money saved, so I will probably have to take out a loan.” Most of the group spoke of helpful course information sheets, and advisor contact sheets they received.

Most of the group found the information helpful and were able to “take an independent path,” but others found the information to be confusing at times. And others still, needed to seek out additional advising, and felt though misinformation was given due to constant changes in courses and requirements.

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

When asked if financial aid provided enough support, one student spoke of her experience and an employee at SF State, “I work on campus. I run the pool. The career center is a great tool for a lot of students.”

While the student enjoyed her job and said that it was the “highest paying job on campus,” she also felt that there should be more incentives for students looking for work on campus; students should be able to work more than part time and have the opportunity to receive higher pay.
Have a lot of your friends or people you know experienced meaningful barriers to success?

The group was then asked if fellow students or friends have experienced barriers to success. Opinions differed greatly on this subject. On one hand, some of the group members spoke of friends “who have been 1 or 2 units short of enough units for financial aid because all the classes are so impacted.”

On the other hand, other group members felt that registering problems were a result of lack of planning on the students’ part. One student explained, “Obviously some people who are on top of things aren’t really having a problem registering. So I wonder if they’re not registering on time.” “I’ve had problems where I’ve had to take the inconvenient time instead of the convenient time…or I guess I’ll have to put this off one semester. But never had a problem getting 15, and so far every semester I’ve taken 18 units.”

The group did reach a middle ground and agree that priority registration is a barrier to success and can affect a student’s ability to register for courses. The final barrier discussed was unsuccessful attempts at crashing courses. On this topic a participant said, “I firmly believe that if you just keep going you will get in.” While he stressed the need for students to be persistent, he also recognized that due to budget cuts and classroom capacity some professors have been less willing to add more students.

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

Did you feel like you were ready for upper division work when you transferred?

The group was asked if they felt ready in terms of upper division coursework when they transferred. Two students who previously attended community college had conflicting responses. One student said, “I know I did not” in terms of course load and writing skills, while the other said, “I felt prepared from my community college. A lot of my professors prepared me.”

Did you experience any challenges during your first year at SF State?

When asked to recall exceptionally difficult challenges from their first semester, one student laughed and said, “It sounds like we may not be that representative.” The other students laughed and agreed that their first semester was not that difficult. One student did say that the times offered for core and concentration courses often conflicted during her first semester.

The other students were unable to identify any exceptionally difficult challenges, but acknowledged that as transfer students they had a learning curve advantage over freshman and sophomore that were unfamiliar with things such as the registration process. “I learned as a freshman at a different school that if you don’t register the moment that your registration opens then you don’t get the class,” said one student.

GQ: What are students’ expectations/ hopes coming into the institution and are they being met?

What expectations did you have about SF State? Are they being met?

The group was asked what their expectations were coming into SF State. Expectations of more study space was voiced, “For the longest time it was frustrating to me going to other schools and seeing how many different resources they have…Even in the business department our study room can [only] fit 10-15 people.”
-Extracurricular?

When asked about expectations of extracurricular activities the students agreed that there are lots of student groups, “I feel like there’s a lot available” but they are not always run well by students, so one has to be “persistent” when joining and being involved, to which another student said “I agree,” but “as for me being in there as an officer, I’ve had a really good time.”

One student involved in the UNICEF group also agreed that is can be “a nice bonding experience for everybody.”

-Faculty?

When asked about faculty expectations the group perked up, and rather than speaking of expectations, they recalled several good experiences within their department and identified the faculty as an “advantage” of attending SF State. One participant proclaimed, “All my professors I’ve taken, they’re brilliant, really intelligent. The lectures have been so amazing.” Another said, “The professors are very available, and their TA’s always reach out to the students.” And yet another student positively commented on his relationship with his professors, “I know all my professors personally and I’m essentially friends with a couple of them and that’s hugely beneficial,” and, “The caliber of pretty much all the professors that I’ve encountered has been pretty high level.”

-Engaging? –Classroom?–Technology?

When probed further students continued to describe experiences rather than previous expectations, but still had positive experiences to share. Only one student had anything negative to say, “you can tell that some teachers cater to the lowest common denominator” but that it’s the “exception to the rule.” Overall, the students mostly agreed that the professors’ ability to utilize video consoles, projectors, and internet access was satisfactory. One student added, “The technology that they have is helpful.”

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

When students were asked to recall memorable or exciting learning experiences, the group overwhelmingly agreed that “the most exciting things have been learning from peoples experiences.” The group valued “practical application versus theory,” teachers that share their “knowledge and experience,” and the wide array of courses at SF State that can make you have an “eye opening experience.”

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

A typical day in the shoes of one of our focus group students included attending organization events, career center workshops, and studying in the annex. When the students were asked about the campus atmosphere they mentioned the plethora of activities available on campus, “I think people are more inclined to come to school if you have all the tents set up with the BBQ, and the music, just the atmosphere of it” or “I swim” said one student.

The reasonable food prices in the student center were discussed, and while one student voiced his distaste for the “no smoking on campus initiative” the rest of the group liked it and seemed to find it beneficial.
GQ: Have students’ educational goals changed?

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

The group was then asked if their educational goals were different from their parents. The group was pretty evenly split with one half of the group being the first in the family to pursue a bachelors degree, and the other half having parents with either an Associate’s Degree or Diploma.

The students with parents with higher education were influenced by their parents to attend college, “It used to resonate really strong with me.” A student commented, “In my situation, my parents had a huge influence.” “My parents always focused on education. It’s just something we do,” said the other.

The students first to pursue Bachelor’s Degrees in their family had parents that motivated them to pursue a their degree. One student explained that it was never forced “[It wasn’t like] they want me to go and get my bachelor’s and they want me to get my masters too.” “They don’t even really push me, if anything I do more than what they expect” said the other student.

Overall the group members found areas that interested them rather than were chosen by their parents. One student reflected on the variation of educational goals, “I think it’s a change in society, and culture, and generation to be more exact, because right now not there’s not much to do if you don’t get an Associate’s degree or a Bachelor’s Degree.” The student went on to say, “It’s becoming a necessity between generations.”

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

The group was then asked if they had changed their educational or career goals while at State. As transfer students, the group said that they were “pretty much on track” to attaining their degree of choice due to taking courses at previous schools and deciding on their major before they reached SF State, but also that SF State makes “it hard to change majors now, at least for transfer students.”

What resources have you used to further/achieve your educational goals?

When asked if they used any additional resources to achieve their educational goals, one student mentioned her departmental resources saying, “I know every semester they offer guests speakers… and job opportunities…We always receive emails about potential internship positions”

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. How do you think this affects how you study and learn?

When asked how technology influences the way they study, the group felt that the emphasis on social networking in the job market today makes students feel the need to be online and very familiar with social networking tools like Facebook. Recognizing that technology can be a “double edged sword” everyone emphasized using technology as a tool without getting distracted.

One student mentioned that electronic journals were a useful tool, and another student felt that Oasis, should be on a per person basis as some students already know how to use electronic journals and other library tools.
Have you ever taken an on-line course? If so, why and if not, why not?

Following the subject of technology students were asked if they had taken online courses. Most of the students had had online courses, and overall the students felt that online courses were convenient. One student said, “To be able to go home and watch a lecture on my own time was fantastic.” Online courses enable more students to be admitted, and they are a “way to save money” for the university.

The group recognized the benefits of online courses, but mostly preferred the traditional classroom experience saying, “It depends on the class,” and felt that online courses give you less education for the same price. Moreover, the students agreed that online classes were less stimulating.

One student voiced her frustration with online courses, “[The university] is switching to an online format to add more courses so students don’t get upset, but then the level of education is dropping.” One student disagreed saying, “You still have ilearn to communicate with the teachers,” or you can “go to their office hours.” “I had a really good experience and would take more of them if I could,” said one student.

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

Is the University prepared to support all students?

The students were asked if the university is prepared to support all students. The group laughed and answered that the university supports “too many populations,” and the people “who are there to be stimulated aren’t being stimulated” in the classrooms as a result of lax admittance.

They also felt that admission needs “to be addressed for the times” due to the budget crisis, whether it means being “stricter about who they let in” or re-evaluating the cost to attend state. “Our tuition in no way covers the resources we’re being provided with,” said one student.

GQ: What are the economic changes that have shaped the University?

Have the budget cuts affected your experience at SF State?

The talk of the budget crisis led to the final questions regarding budget cuts. The group was asked how budget cuts have affected their experience at SF State. One student stated: “Everybody’s suffering in a different way. Every major is having reduced classes and every teacher is having reduced wages.” Another student said, “Almost every semester my tuition has increased.”

Aside from the monetary aspect, one student also mentioned a “Protest in the Business building” over fee hikes that affected her classes in the building for the day. Overall the group seemed to have a logical rather than an emotional stance regarding the budget cuts and felt that the California needs to work harder to close the budget gaps, “I think they are doing good job. It’s not necessarily their fault. It’s the state’s budget.” However, the students suggested that SF State become more “proactive instead of responsive.”

Has anything positive come from the budget cuts?

Lastly the group was asked if anything positive came from the budget cuts. The group hesitated for a moment. “People are re-evaluating the system,” and people are “trying to be more active in legislation,” said one student.
A few students also expressed their appreciation for their professor’s commitment to education by refraining from taking furlough days during class times, “they genuinely care about education.”

The group ended on a positive note with one student saying: “You’re going to get out of it what you put in. It’s too bad about the 10% tuition increase, but with 10% less time you can still get the same amount out of it if you want to.”

**Additional Analysis**

Three members of group were unaccounted for until roughly 6 minutes into the focus group. The questions were restated once most new students entered the room, but some were unable to answer since the group had already moved past the initial questions. Overall the group seemed very informed, provided both sides of scenarios, and still provided a collective answer to many questions.

The students had trouble differentiating between expectations of the university before attending, and their current experiences. All group members were transfer students and seemed happy in their majors. The group members are also active in student organizations or internships or are working in their chosen field. The group was composed of a wide range of majors including: Urban studies, Science, Marketing, and International Relations.