In this focus group, we are analyzing results from two senior students who are graduating at San Francisco State University. These students are more than just typical students.

GQ: What do successful students have in common?

How would you define a “successful” student?

Students are successful if they are able to handle a good amount of work, such as full-time classes, maintaining their social life, and working either part-time or full-time.

Do you see yourself as a successful student? Why or why not?

As time has gone by, these students see themselves as successful because they are becoming better students, and finally graduating. Even though it took these students more than four years each to graduate, the fact that they are graduating deems them successful.

If so, why do you think you’re successful? Why not?

Being able to balance time for school, work, friends and family is very important. Students have many activities that go on in their lives and being able to maintain time for each aspect is an example of a successful student.

One of the students believes that having quality writing skills is essential to being successful.

Did you get advising here?

The students think that One Stop does not give good advising. The students feel like they are being rushed because often times there are long lines at One Stop. To them, going to see the advisors at One Stop feels like they are visiting the doctor - they go in and come out quickly because the advisors are trying to see everyone that they can. Students believe that the advisors do not help enough if questions are not prepared beforehand. On the other hand, when the students come prepared with questions, they get more feedback, but still feel like the advisors are not helping much.

The students stated that they have gotten better advising elsewhere. For example, they claim the best advising they’ve received came from their department professors. Unfortunately, however, some professors go on sabbatical or they’re gone and it’s hard for the students to find someone with the same qualities.

One of the students stated, “I think advising is a joke on campus.”

The other said, “It’s hard to develop a relationship with anyone that sees you through college. “

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

Both of the students study late at night.
One student uses flashcards to help memorize the necessary material. The student calls this form of studying, an “old-school studying” technique picked up in elementary school. Another studying technique used by both students is to copy notes over and over repeatedly to help understand the content.

**Are you happy with your study skills?**

The students are happy with their study skills, but wish they had more time to do it. The student’s lives are currently packed with many activities such as school, work, family and friends. They both agreed that it’s always hard to find time to study.

**Do you know where you would go on campus to get help with your study skills?**

One student said that she thought there was something at One Stop to help with her study skills, but she wasn’t entirely sure, as she hadn’t utilized it to date.

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

One student participates in intra-mural soccer and two student associations, while the other student is a part of the PTA at her child’s school.

**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 students concurred that studying places are very limited at SF State. The annex is available, but it’s too far and it’s usually hard to find parking there if you don’t live close by. There are other areas of school where you can study, but it’s usually loud, cluttered and unclean.

Money, work balance is a challenge in this area. Getting classes are also another barrier to success. Furthermore, if a student is unable to get a certain class during a certain semester, they might not be able to register for that class until the following year.

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

In general, the students suggested that financial aid has helped them. Both students have received some form of financial aid – grants and/or loans.

**Does the university provide support in the classroom?**

The students in this group both agreed that the university provides support in the classroom. One student explained how he/she had to sit on the class floor for an entire semester because the class was overcrowded.

The other student stated that classes in trailers have horrible glares on the boards, which no matter what angle or how close you sit, you are unable to see the board.
The students discussed the fact that because of these things, teachers are stressed and demoralized. The teachers want to be able to teach more, but their equipment isn’t working properly.

One of the students stated: “Teachers are frustrated and demoralized. They’re furloughed; you can tell that they are stressed. Not less of a workload and you can feel the stress put on you.”

**Does the university aid students in their goal towards their graduation?**

**Admission Requirements**

The students also agreed that transferring/incoming students should be able to go to the school of their choice, whether or not they need to take remedial courses or not.

**Schedules/availability of required classes/course requirements**

One student came to SF State to work for housing because she knew that there would be benefits for her. Therefore, she is able to graduate on time due to the fact that she can register for her classes early and doesn’t have to be on the wait-list.

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

The students didn’t have much to say about this question except that they agreed that their friends also have barriers to their success.

**If you have been able to overcome these barriers, what did you do to overcome these barriers?**

One student was able to overcome the barrier of deciding what classes to take. Her major requires her to have a planning worksheet, where the student plans which classes to take per semester. The reason for this exercise is to keep the students on track with their classes and graduating schedules.

**What could the University do to minimize the barriers to student success?**

The students stated that it would be nice if the university had more flexible classes, so that students could schedule other things in their lives more easily. Another thing that the students mentioned is to have teachers put their lectures and notes online, that way during class time, the student isn’t entirely focused on taking notes for the whole class period.

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

One student expected to graduate within 4 years, but it has taken her 7 years.

When incoming freshmen enter the school for the first time, they are already assigned a class year, in which the school hopes the freshmen will graduate by. However, students are taking longer in school, assigning a class year to students seems unnecessary.
GQ: In what ways are our students not ready for college or specific majors?

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

The students did have some challenges during their first year at SF State, for example, one student wanted to take all the courses she could take. The schedule became overwhelming for her but she didn’t want to admit the fact that took on too much. She later learned to pace herself with her school schedule.

How could you have been better prepared for classes in your major?

The students said that learning how to efficiently manage their time would’ve been helpful skill to have.

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

Did you have expectations and hopes coming into SFSU?

The students did not expect to ever sit on the floor of their college and expected more study spaces. Although there is the Annex, they expected there to be a proper library.

What type of extracurricular activities did you hope would be available?

The students did not have much to say about this question. However, one mentioned that they know that a majority of the students spend their time off campus or working.

What about the classroom environment, what did you expect or hope for?

The classroom environment is only good if the teacher makes the environment good. When that happens, the students will often have good expectations for future teachers.

Teaching/learning styles are different.

What about technology, what did you expect or hope would be available or used at SF State?

Teachers have been using iLearn and distributing their own reading material from the web and it’s been easier for students to access it. However, some teachers don’t use iLearn, which makes it more difficult to access class information.

GQ: Upon leaving SFSU, how prepared do students feel they are to be able to achieve their academic, career and/or life goals?

When you leave SF State will you feel prepared to pursue a post-graduation education (e.g., credential, MA/MS/MBA, professional school)?

One student wishes that the preparation process would have started sooner. For example, some students are learning about the research programs that the school is subscribed to during their senior year.

One student believes that she’s ready for her masters, but not ready for her PhD. She’s majoring in health education, the classes are sequenced, and she feels that it really prepares her for her MPH.
What are the sources of that preparation here at SF State?

The students feel that you get the knowledge and concept in class, but it’s not until the student gets into their internship or real world that they apply what they’ve learned in school.

What about your ability to compete in the workplace?

At your future career, whatever you’ve learned in class will be clarified, where you can see what you learned in real-time. The few projects that you have during school time helps you project what’s going to happen at your job in the future.

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

Is the University prepared to support all students?

The students agreed that the school doesn’t support the students enough financially. If money wasn’t an issue, students would have more time to study, and therefore receive higher grades.

GQ: What are the technological, economic, environmental and 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?

If school is not in session, the students tend to go to their internships or club meetings.

How do you feel about the general environment?

One student complained that the parking situation at SF State was unsatisfactory.

The students concurred that food was good at school - the campus has a variety of foods that other schools don’t offer.

Places to relax?

The school doesn’t have enough places where students can go to relax. The student union has places to relax, but it’s often loud and dirty because people leave their food behind. The same goes for the various lounges around campus. One student recommended that the university invest in more clean and quiet places around campus where students can relax.

Aesthetics?

One of the students said that there are a lot of nice purple and yellow flowers campus, as well as many nice trees.

GQ: Have students’ educational goals changed?

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

Both students’ mothers went back to school, while their fathers worked.
What resources have you used to further/achieve your educational goals?

The students stated that they have used the following resources: Mentors at jobs, major advisors, Help Desk, and the library chat.

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?

Both students agreed that electronic communications are huge distractions. For example, when you walk into the library, students are on their Facebook, or they’re texting their friends. According to the students, electronic communications can also distract students from their course work.

They also agreed, however, that there is a beneficial side to having electronic devices. For example, when your cell-phone is linked to your email and a teacher or the school sends out emergency emails, the student’s cell-phone will reach the student right away. Overall, electronic devices are hard to avoid because they are always there and have become a part of everyday use.

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

According to the students, online classes are only good if the teacher engages the class. Some teachers have online courses and all they do is post multiple choice tests, without much feedback. Some teachers have forums and essays where they reply to comments and encourage the students to be engaged in the subject. However, for the most part, the students agreed that online classes produce a lot of procrastination.

One student said lack the teacher-student connection that one gets from a physical classroom.

One student advised that engineering and math classes shouldn’t be taken online.

Have any technologies in the classroom enhanced your learning experience?

The students agreed that including real world media into the classroom helps engage students - visual aids always help compliment the instruction.

They also agreed that Power points are good when used properly. However, when teachers read off of slides to teach their class it is not helpful.

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

Has the budget cuts affected your experience at SF State?

The students said that they had some classes cut, but they can feel most of the stress coming from the teachers because the teachers are trying to push more material into less class time. Graduation requirements have been less strict, and it’s now easier to graduate. The students explained that they feel like they were rushed out of school rather than having accomplished something good. Since tuition is more expensive, the students stated that they just want to get their money’s worth.
Is there anything positive that has come from the budget cuts?

There is nothing positive that the students can say about the budget cuts.

Q: Memorable moments.

One memorable moment for one student is that she turned in her graduation application. For her major, health education, she’s been with the same people for five years. However, she’s graduating a little bit earlier than the rest of them because of her early registration for working from housing.

One student, who is a mother of three, has her daughter and day care and everyone has been very nice and supportive of her. She goes to clubs to relax even though she’s not a part of it and everyone is still welcoming, nice and supportive.