



MJC STUDENT EXPERIENCE FOCUS GROUPS

MARCH 2019



Prepared by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness

Tuesday, March 19, 2019

Table of Contents

Executive Summary:	3
Methodology	3
Participant Demographics	4
Question #1: What three words or phrases describe your experience at MJC?	4
Question #2: How many units are you enrolled in this semester?	4
Question #3: Why do you think students drop out of school?	5
Wait Lists	5
Failed Grades	5
Stopping Out	6
Question #4: How do you find out about processes and support services?	6
Faculty as Information-Providers	6
Special Programs	6
Communication	6
Pathways Centers and Chat	7
Office Hours	7
Tutoring	7
Question #5: What are the biggest barriers to reaching your educational goal?	8
Textbooks	8
Schedules	8
Communication	8
Personal Outreach	8
Question 6: What is the one thing you think MJC could improve?	9
Appendix A:	10
Informed Consent – Students’ opinions	10
Appendix B: Student Focus Group Questions	11

MJC Student Experience Focus Groups March 2019

Purpose:

The purpose of the student focus groups was to understand student experiences at MJC in order to help College constituents set meaningful institutional goals.

Executive Summary:

All focus group participants said the campus was friendly and everyone was helpful. This was re-stated multiple times throughout all three discussions. Every participant used positive terms when asked for three words to describe their experience. Key findings include:

- Waitlists are the greatest challenge to most students. Many students cannot get into any of the classes they need, and some ultimately drop out.
- Students in special programs (EOPS, Bridge, and others) are more likely to carry a full-time load. They are clear about their ultimate goals and time to completion. Other students are enrolled part-time and do not have clear goals or timelines.
- Many students drop out after receiving a failing grade. Participants thought there might be ways to help them come back from a failure.
- Some students 'stop out' for a semester to work and then return to school.
- There is no consistent way that students learn about processes and services. Most of their information is by word-of-mouth. They look to their professors as a source of knowledge about the college.
- Office Hours are overwhelming for many students. They do not know what questions to ask and are uncomfortable going to a one-on-one meeting.
- Students use tutoring inconsistently. Many students will try to figure things out on their own, rather than admitting they need help.
- Textbook costs and required software are huge barriers for students.
- Students respond better to instructors who show a personal interest in their success.
- Students who have help setting goals are more likely to succeed.

Methodology

Three, 90-minute focus groups were held on March 13th and 14th, 2019, on East Campus. Each session was recorded and transcribed. A note-taker also made written notes of each session. Participants received and signed a consent form that explained participant rights and the purpose and process of the focus group (see Appendix A). The discussions were guided by six open-ended questions designed to understand students' experience at MJC (see Appendix B). Responses from all three focus groups were categorized according to the questions. Sub-categories were developed in areas where multiple students discussed additional, specific topics.

Participants were current students who were selected by members of the ASMJC Senate after a presentation of baseline data related to the MJC Vision Goals. The intent was to identify students from a variety of backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, and levels of engagement. A limitation of this group is that most of the students were either highly engaged in student activities or belonged to a special program, such as Umoja, EOPS, or Bridge. We did not hear from students who don't have a formal support structure at the College or who feel disengaged. Most of the participants shared impressions and stories about friends who were less involved than they were.

Participant Demographics

Eighteen students participated in one of three focus groups. They ranged in age from 18 to 55. The table below displays the gender and ethnicity of the participants. Participants were representative of the overall MJC student ethnicity with the exception of an underrepresented number of white students. The group was overrepresented by males.

Gender	Hispanic	African American	Asian	White	Other	TOTAL
Female	2	3	0	2	0	7
Male	6	0	1	2	2	11

All eighteen of the students had declared program majors and most understood their program goals. Half of the participants were involved in either student government or special programs, such as Bridge, EOPS, or DSPS.

Discussion Results

Question #1: What three words or phrases describe your experience at MJC?

Students were asked to provide three words or short phrases that describe their experience at MJC. They were asked the same question at the end of the discussion. Most students gave similar responses both times. Some gave only one word. Responses are displayed in the table below. All participants had positive things to say, particularly about being able to ask anyone on campus for help and receiving assistance.

Helpful/ Supportive/ Caring	Friendly/ Nice	Motivating/ encouraging	Challenging /interesting	Intense	Open- minded	Crowded	Efficient
12	5	3	4	1	1	1	2

Question #2: How many units are you enrolled in this semester? Why that number of units?

Nine of the eighteen students consistently enroll in 9+ units each semester. All of these students belong to a special program (EOPS, Bridge, Umoja, DSPS). They talked about frequent meetings with counselors to check on progress (3x each semester). Each of these students had a clear goal for when they would finish and what the next step was (transfer or career). One student is carrying 18 units, including a course at another college:

"The class I needed to transfer wasn't offered here this semester at the time I needed it, so I had to take an online class at another college."

The other nine students consistently enroll in 5 or 6 units each semester. These students talked about taking a load they felt they could manage. A few commented that students who take mostly general education courses are not sure what they want to do or when they would finish. One student limited enrollment to an English class this semester to be able to focus on a subject that was difficult. Several talked about not wanting to be overwhelmed:

"I'm trying to ramp up and see how many I can handle before I get overwhelmed. I just take what I know I can manage and will work it out when I get there."

Question #3: Why do you think students drop out of school?

Wait Lists. All eighteen participants said the biggest reason students drop is because they can't get the classes they need. Problems with waitlists had the highest level of agreement across all three groups:

"When you sign up and don't get any of your classes, you just don't want to come back."

"I didn't get into any of my classes. Not one. It's hard if you don't know who to talk to."
(student who dropped out several years ago and is now re-enrolled)

"My friend just paid \$20 to send his transcript to Merced. Here, the waitlists are insanely long."

"Some people think of MJC as 'I'll go here while I decide what to do with my life'. When they don't get into a class, they leave."

"Sometimes the classes are only in the mornings and if you work, you can't come back."

Failed Grades. Another reason that participants thought students drop out was because of failing grades. They don't know where to go for help. The participants thought it would help if someone talked to students when they get a 'W' or an 'F'.

"The first failing grade can cause a student to believe they aren't smart enough. Failing a class is embarrassing and leads them to feel like a failure. They don't come back. It would help if someone reached out to them."

"My Dad was going here [at the same time as the participant]. He failed a math class and dropped out."

"Somebody gets that first 'fail', like in their first semester and it just kind of kills it for them."

"Maybe reaching out after somebody fails a class and letting them know it's not a big deal – everyone fails sometimes."

Students who have strong connections are able to overcome a failed grade. One participant said he went to see his counselor when he failed a class. Because they had a good working relationship, the counselor was able to talk him through the failure and he continued his classes. Others said that counselors and peers in the Bridge program kept them going.

Stopping Out. Several of the participants talked about taking semesters off to work and then returning. Almost all of them had stopped out or knew someone who had. Others are not sure what they want.

"Lots of students take a break from school and then come back. That's okay."

"Modesto can be seen as, like, ghetto, so you don't really want to come here."

Question #4: How do you find out about processes and support services?

Word of Mouth. Most of the participants said students don't know about services or simple processes (financial aid, petitions, challenging courses, BOG Fee Waiver, etc.). They find out by talking to other students – friends and word of mouth. Most don't check their email unless they are looking for something. All of them said it was very hard to find things on the website. None of the participants knew that every student has a counselor assigned to them.

"Do counselors send emails out to tell us who they are?"

Faculty as Information-Providers. Many agreed that the change coming from high school is big. They said it would help if instructors could tell them how to access services. A common theme in all the discussions was that students either look to their counselor (if they know them) or to their instructors to help them find out critical information. Many feel overwhelmed with the amount of information they need to know:

"I wish there was a way for teachers to give students a sense of the important information, because there is a lot of information. We need a way to prioritize the most important information."

Special Programs. Half the students are enrolled in special programs. All of them talked about how helpful the program personnel are. One student said she was nervous about next fall because this is her last semester in Bridge. She was worried about not knowing how to navigate on her own, but relieved to hear she would be assigned to a program counselor. She said:

"I didn't know that after Bridge I would still have a person."

Transition from High School. Participants agreed that the time between applying and the first day of class was confusing. They felt the transition was impersonal and said they needed more assistance to understand all the steps. They receive an email telling them to make an appointment with their counselor to find out what to do next, but didn't know how to proceed:

"I didn't know who my counselor was or how to find out where they were, so I just went to work and didn't continue to college after that."

Communication. Other participants talked about the various ways they learn about processes and services:

"I didn't know about services until I went to EOPS."

"Everyone breezes through the online orientation and then forgets it. They might need another briefing, down the road."

"Somebody didn't know there was a pre-requisite challenge. We were talking and I told them to just fill out the form. A lot of times, it's word of mouth."

"I learned about things from my co-workers, after I had dropped out. I came back, and now I tell my co-workers how to do things like the BOG Fee Waiver."

"There are a lot of services here and I just don't know where to go to access them. When I do figure it out, I don't know who to talk to. When I do talk to someone, I sometimes get different answers. It's important for everyone to be on the same page."

Pathways Centers and Chat. Several students were familiar with the Pathways Centers as a place to get answers. Others did not know where the Centers were on each campus. All the students were enthusiastic when asked if they would use a Chat feature, if it were available.

Office Hours. Many of the participants talked about high anxiety related to office hours. A widespread problem is that students don't know what questions to ask in a one-on-one setting. They are more comfortable struggling with questions on their own than asking for help. The participants said that most students don't use office hours much.

"If you have a specific question, that's one thing, but a lot of time your problem is kind of intangible, like, 'I just don't understand any of it'."

"I don't like talking to a lot of people. I don't like asking questions to authorities or teachers, so if there is a way to find it out on my own, that would be easier."

"After going to Office Hours, I thought afterward, 'Wow, that was very scary.'"

"You don't want to say, 'Hey, I don't understand anything you are teaching me.'"

A few students talked about group Office Hours. Other participants agreed that they would probably go if they knew it was a group.

"I had an anatomy teacher who had group Office Hours. She would go over the chapters and we could all ask questions. I liked that."

"Going up and telling something to someone one-on-one is much more intimidating than if there are a whole lot of people discussing things."

Tutoring. About half the students have used tutoring. The other half said they probably never would. Several said we should offer tutoring in the evening.

"People won't use tutoring because they think they can push themselves to just do it and then maybe they just break down."

"My English teacher required us to take drafts of our papers to the Writing Center. I wouldn't have gone, but now I use it all the time."

A few of the students talked about positive experiences with supplemental instruction (SI):

"People think that if they go to SI sessions they are inferior or something. Maybe if they were explained more, they would go. I think they are underrated."

Question #5: What are the biggest barriers to reaching your educational goal?

Textbook costs. In addition to waitlists, which were mentioned again, participants talked about the cost of books and required software licenses. They want to know how much their books will cost before they register, but they can't see the books listed on Pirates Net.

"It doesn't say on the MJC website whether they are going to use such and such kind of text book."

"I hate Pearson. It's like \$300 for a semester's subscription. I just don't get why you want to force it on students. You have to take the tests on their site, you have to have the subscription to take the quizzes."

"Most of the time, you have to go to the bookstore and see what books are required. You can pre-order them, but you have to know what you need first."

Schedules. Many of the participants talked about the difficulty scheduling classes to fit their lives. They had examples of friends who work and can't get the classes they need in the evenings. Some classes are several hours apart, which doesn't work for students with jobs. Many students have to skip class to work.

Communication. All the students acknowledge there are a lot of services, but they didn't know about them.

"A lot of students don't read emails or messages about processes so they won't know. You might have to send texts. If you don't put information in their face, they're not going to look at it."

Personal Interaction. Several students talked about professors who encourage them. Three of the participants spoke specifically about learning the difference between Growth Mindset and fixed mindset. They had written papers about it. Participants said it is easier to ask for help if they feel a connection with instructors. All the participants said they routinely check *Rate My Professor* before registering for a class. They each mentioned teachers who were interested in them, personally, but many said they wished it was more common. Most of the students agreed it was important to feel like they belonged.

"I had a math teacher who would walk around and see who was struggling with a problem and talk to them for a few minutes."

"Some teachers ask questions and say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' Other professors are more separated. You can pick up on the feeling of a professor very well. They have a vibe."

"Students are coming in from different walks of life with a story to tell. It helps if teachers are sensitive to that."

They feel that some students don't succeed because they don't have a goal.

"It's easy to feel productive when you have an actual goal and are reaching towards it. For people who are feeling fatigue in this environment, I would say it has something to do with a lack of direction."

Question 6: What is the one thing you think MJC could improve?

The overwhelming consensus of all three focus groups was that wait lists are the biggest problem. Other issues they thought we should improve were addressed in the discussions above, but included:

- Help students get a clearer picture of what they want to do
- Help students understand that they can come back from failing a class
- Provide more help with the transition between high school and college - students don't know what questions to ask
- Students will respond to instructors who show an interest in them
- Textbook costs are often prohibitive
- Students come to the college wondering if they are going to fail and wondering if the stress is worth it. They want to feel like they can succeed.
- Students need help setting goals and understanding the length of time it will take to finish
- Students wish there were more activities in the quad

Appendix A:
Informed Consent – Students’ opinions

Principal Investigator: Jenni Abbott

Phone: 209-575-7795

Purpose

This study investigates the students’ opinions on their MJC experience. As part of this study you will be asked to participate in a focus group and answer structured and open-ended questions. This study will take approximately 90 minutes.

Please do not share other people’s identities or responses from the focus group with others to maintain the anonymity of the participants outside of the focus group.

Participants’ Rights

I understand that my responses will be kept in the strictest of confidence and will be available only to the researcher. No one will be able to identify me when the results are reported and my name will not appear anywhere in the written report. I also understand that I may skip any questions or tasks that I do not wish to answer or complete. I understand that the consent form will be kept separate from the data records to ensure confidentiality. I may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time during the study without penalty. I agree to have my verbal responses tape-recorded and transcribed for further analysis with the understanding that my responses will not be linked to me personally in any way. After the transcription is completed, the tape recordings will be destroyed.

I understand that upon completion, I will be given full explanation of the study. If I am uncomfortable with any part of this study, I may contact Florida Arias, Interim Vice President of Student Services, 209-575-6060.

I understand that I am participating in a study of my own free will.

Consent to Participate

I acknowledge that I am at least eighteen years old, and that I understand my rights as a research participant as outlined above. I acknowledge that my participation is fully voluntary.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

**Appendix B:
Student Focus Group Questions
Setting MJC Vision Goals
90 minute activity**

Purpose of Focus Group (5 minutes)

- 1. Icebreaker (10 minutes, timed):** In ninety seconds, please introduce yourself and tell us three words or short phrases that describe your experience at MJC.

Ground Rules (5 minutes)

- Everyone encouraged to speak
- One person at a time
- All opinions will be respected
- All discussion is confidential
- Summary at end
- Facilitator and note-taker

Questions (45 minutes):

2. How many courses are you enrolled in this semester? Can you talk about why you chose that number of units?

(How long will it take to complete your program at MJC?)

3. Why do you think students drop out of school?

(Almost 1/3 of students do not persist from fall to spring).

4. How do you find out about support resources?

5. What are the biggest barriers to reaching your educational goal? (personal barriers/College barriers)

6. What is the one thing you think MJC could improve?

7. What three words or phrases would you use to describe your experience at MJC? (They can be the same words you used at the beginning).

Summary. Opportunity to see the finished report. Questions. (5 minutes).