Student Success and Diversity Implementation Teams

Student Focus Group Results
Fall 2014

Prepared For:
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities

Prepared By:
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The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system is the largest single provider of higher education in the state of Minnesota and the fifth largest system of colleges and universities in the United States. The system includes 31 institutions (24 technical and community colleges and seven state universities) spanning 54 campuses across 47 Minnesota communities serving more than 410,000 students annually.
The Organizational Effectiveness Research Group (OERG) is a consulting service housed within the nationally recognized Industrial/Organizational Psychology Graduate program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. The OERG provides contract research and HR consulting services to national and international clients. The OERG offers a wide range of services including survey design and analysis, organizational culture analysis, employee selection strategies, employee training and development, and more.
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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2014, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities partnered with the Organizational Effectiveness Research Group (OERG) at Minnesota State University, Mankato to collect and analyze feedback from colleges and universities regarding MnSCU’s Charting the Future for a Prosperous Minnesota effort.

One of the tasks assigned to the OERG involved the analysis of student feedback. The Student Success and Diversity Implementation Teams conducted focus groups at 16 colleges and universities with 195 student participants in conjunction with Charting the Future Gallery Walks in October and November of 2014. The results of these focus groups are presented in this report.

Some of the important trends that were observed are as follows:

- Participants commonly defined student success in terms of campus support and accomplishing goals over academic achievements.
- The most common goals for participants were achieving good grades and finding jobs after they complete their degree.
- Participants described many great resources available to students on campus, however they worry the resources are under-advertised and underutilized.
- There were very mixed feelings about the quality of advising between campuses.
- Participants didn’t feel campuses were doing enough to integrate diversity across the curriculum and campus.
- Participants generally found that technology and policies complicated their learning.
- Participants mentioned that students often lose credits and are required to retake classes because of transfers, even between MnSCU schools.
- Despite negative trends identified in the focus groups, participants overwhelmingly believed that all students have the capability to achieve success.

The results from these focus groups will be used to guide the work of the Student Success and Diversity Implementation Teams as they continue their work.
Focus Group Locations

1. Alexandria Technical & Community College
2. Anoka Technical College
3. Bemidji State University
4. Central Lakes College
5. Fond Du Lac Tribal & Community College
6. Inver Hills Community College
7. Metropolitan State University
8. Minneapolis Community & Technical College
9. Minnesota State College - Southeast Technical
10. Minnesota State University Moorhead
11. Minnesota State University, Mankato
12. Minnesota State Community and Technical College
13. North Hennepin Community College
15. Southwest Minnesota State University
16. Winona State University
Methodology
Methodology

Questions
An initial set of questions were developed by the Student Success Org Cap team, and reviewed by the Student Success Team at a scheduled meeting. The language of the questions was changed for some questions, and additional questions were added, leaving room for selection of the questions determined to be the most useful. The question list was distributed to the Diversity Team for feedback, and revisions made where appropriate. The final list of questions can be seen in Appendix A.

Campuses
The number of focus groups was set initially at 15. This being an additional project added to the already broad scope of the Gallery Walks, it was determined that it would be unfeasible to hold a focus group in conjunction with every Gallery Walk. The focus group lead created a list of campuses that would be representative of: 2 and 4-year campuses, geographic region, metro and out-state campuses, and within the 2-year campuses, a mix of technical and community colleges. There were also the logistics of distance and dates of Gallery Walks to consider. The list was reviewed by the core team and shared with the Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO) on a call. As a result of that call, an additional campus was added, bringing the total to 16. A map showing where focus groups were held can be seen in Appendix B.

Recruitment
To recruit student participants in the focus groups, a letter was sent to the Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) at each campus participating. The letter outlined the process and asked for their help in recruiting participants for the groups and securing a room, recording equipment, a note-taker in some cases, and if they wished, refreshments. The letter was attached to an email sent by the Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs in mid-October. The letter can be seen in Appendix C.

Focus Group Personnel
The project lead, once the schedule for the focus group was set, reached out to team members on the Student Success and Diversity teams asking for volunteers to facilitate or take notes in the groups. The project lead provided multiple training sessions for those volunteers in facilitating and note taking, along with a note-taking template (Appendix D).

Process
The project lead coordinated efforts with the CSAO and/or their delegate on campuses, and with team members who were participating. Each facilitator/note taker received electronically prior to each group, copies of the questions (Appendix A), copies of the
consent form (Appendix E), an introductory script (Appendix F) and the note-taking template (Appendix D). Campuses were asked to provide name tents for participants to write down their first names. These were collected after the group and discarded off-site. The groups were recorded in addition to having a note-taker on site. In one case, the recording failed and it was necessary to use the notes from the group. Where the notes were used vs. transcriptions to provide reference in the report, it will be noted. The recordings were transcribed by an outside agent. The recordings, if occurring on-site, were held until the recording had been transcribed, then deleted. If the group was recorded by the facilitator, the recording was deleted following the transcription.

**Analysis**

In order to identify important themes, a script sample (that included two college scripts and two university scripts) was selected. Each question in the sample was reviewed to establish a coding mechanism. Then, a coding book was developed and used for remaining scripts. The code book was modified along the way with new themes that emerged and all responses were coded using the same mechanism.

Next, the frequency of theme mentions was recorded into a spreadsheet. Values were used to compare patterns and trends between answers and types of campuses. Questions were counted toward the theme frequency every time a participant mentioned the theme in the question.
Themes
Themes

Following are the common themes, subthemes, and examples obtained from the focus groups held at the sixteen colleges and universities. The information is organized as follows:

**Category:** Responses were grouped into the following categories:
- Student Success
- Goals
- Campus Support
- Obstacles
- Influential People
- Advising, Diversity
- Technology
- Transfers
- Policies

**Q:** This is the question to which participants responded within the category

**Observed Themes:** Any unified or dominant response set within identified category

**Trends in Responses:** Prevailing response tendencies as well as commonality or distinctiveness for college and university responses within the category

**Student Experiences:** Stories and experiences from participants related to how existing operations either support or pose barriers to their higher education experience
**Student Success**

*Q: What defines student success for you?*

**Observed Themes**

- **Academic Success** – Students want to achieve the grades and degrees they desire.

- **Getting the Full College Experience** – They want to have a positive and fun experience in addition to academics.

- **Finding your Place** – Students want to discover themselves and find where they belong, which can include discovering their major or finding a place in campus organizations.

- **Campus Support** – Students need support from advisors, faculty, campus programs, and organizations to help them become successful.

- **Involvement** – It is important to students to be involved in campus groups, to volunteer, and to practice the skills they are learning in a group setting.

- **Developing Skills** – Students want to learn skills in college that they can use in future careers.

- **Goal Setting and Achievement** – Setting personal goals and finding ways to accomplish these goals contributes to a student’s success.

- **Social** – Students value making connections, both social and professional, as a positive influence to their success.

- **Effort** – Putting in the time and working hard are seen as important to achieving success in college.

**Trends in Responses**

*Receiving support from the college/university and creating and accomplishing goals* were mentioned most often in response to this question in both two-year and four-year groups. These themes could have been influenced by the participants’ knowledge of
how the information from focus groups was going to be used and who was going to be reviewing their responses.

Both the two-year and four-year participants mentioned getting a degree or doing well in their classes as an indicator of student success, but this was not mentioned nearly as often as responses related to goals and campus support. The theme of social interaction was mentioned less frequently than the other themes but appeared in both college and university groups.

University participants were more likely to talk about making sure to get the full college experience outside of just taking classes, which wasn’t a theme that appeared as frequently in college student responses. Involvement in campus organizations was mentioned in both college and university groups, however the trend appeared more frequently with university student groups. College participants were alone in mentioning the importance of large amounts of effort and hard work to achieve success.

**Student Experiences**

Participants had different ideas of what student success meant to them personally. Many participants mentioned the importance of making and achieving goals as being one of the most important parts of a student’s success. Information about the types of goals that the participants had are presented in a later portion of this report.

“Success would be achieving my goals and achieving them better than, you know, I want to, so setting a goal for myself and going above it.”

The most frequently identified theme was getting support from the campuses, with participants wanting campuses to provide access to the resources they need to succeed.

“The resources available to us are the keys that give us the ability to excel and put us where we want to be.”

The campus support theme extends beyond the idea of simply providing the material resources that the student needs to succeed. Participants also outlined the importance of staff and faculty support and how communication between students and these individuals affects how successful the students can be.
“A lot of communication... like just being able to communicate with your professors and your advisors and having them help you with what you need. Without having communication, a lot of times you can kind of fall by the wayside.”

Fewer participants commented on the importance of academic performance but some mentioned their performance was important to their success.

“My parents weren’t able to go to college, so for me just being here is already success. So, just coming here and getting good grades and knowing that I can graduate, to me that’s success.”

University participants stressed the importance of having fun and making sure that they get the full college experience. Some believed that it was important to get involved so that they could get a wide range of experiences through campus groups. Getting involved also provided time in the hectic world of classes, work, and exams to enjoy themselves.

“Student success for me is having more positive memories than negative when I leave.”

Other participants stressed the importance of both using higher education as a method for finding their place and discovering what they wanted to do with their life. In addition, they also felt it meant staying true to your own personal beliefs and values.

“Student success for me would be being yourself. In today’s society nobody really wants to be themselves, so being who you want to be is success for me.”

Involvement was mentioned frequently by a limited number of participants and the stories of involvement seemed to go hand in hand with the idea of developing skills and creating social connections. Some participants spoke of these social connections as creating friends and mentors that can act as part of a support system.

“I define student success as having a support system and somebody there to have your back and encourage you to do better. Also, being involved because the more you’re involved the more you’re aware, and the more acceptable you are to doing things.”

Others mentioned the importance of meeting people through involvement so that they might network, providing more opportunities in the future.
“I think involvement is the main key to success whether it’s in the classroom or outside of the classroom. You are going to network and meet people and excel just by being involved.”

Q: Is success achievable by all students?

Observed Themes

Students’ Responsibility

Motivation – Students have to want to succeed. They need to want to learn the skills to create a successful future. If the student is not intrinsically motivated, they may be less likely to succeed.

Hard work – The concept of hard work commonly accompanied motivation. If students want to succeed they must understand that they need to put in a lot of hard work and be able to manage that work, so they can do everything they need to succeed.

College/University Responsibility

Proper opportunities – Students need available classes and professional opportunities in order to help them succeed both in their academic program and further down the line.

Available resources – Students can only succeed if they have the resources necessary to succeed. If these resources are not available then the student cannot succeed even with the motivation to do so.

Support – One of the resources mentioned is people. The people involved in the students’ academic life have to be motivated to help the students succeed and not be an obstacle to success.

Trends in Responses

Overwhelmingly, the response to this question was “yes”, participants believed that success is achievable by all students. Participants mentioned certain factors that must be present, distinguishing between those factors that come from the students
themselves and those provided by the colleges and universities. A few participants talked about success being situational and how certain uncontrollable factors keep students from being successful, but this was mentioned far less frequently than the positive response.

This question was the final question asked, and often there was limited time remaining in the group, which limited the length of response in some cases.

The most common theme for whether success is achievable for all students was motivation. Participants talked about how, to succeed, students must really want it. If they are not intrinsically motivated, then they will have a much harder time succeeding. After motivation, the next most-mentioned theme by both college and university participants was the importance of the campus providing the proper resources students need to succeed.

One of the themes that was more commonly mentioned at university campuses in comparison to the college campuses was hard work. This idea is separate from the concept of motivation because it’s the actual work that happens, not just the desire to succeed. A theme that was more commonly mentioned at college campuses was support from people on the campus.

Student Experiences

Student motivation was mentioned and discussed at length by nearly all groups. Both two-year and four-year participants believe that in order to achieve their goals they must have the passion, drive and interest to keep moving forward.

“And so success is there for everyone, but then you have to take that initiative. You have to be motivated. And in order to be successful you have to have passion. You have to be passionate towards reaching your goals, making goals first and then making it a priority, and then figuring out, how am I going to get there? How am I going to get it?”

Another participant touched on this idea of motivation as necessary to overcome the obstacles that might come between a student and their success.

“I agree with that. I think, at the end of the day, it just comes down to the individual and how much they really want to succeed. I mean, personally, I’ve had to jump over several
barriers and look where I’m at right now, you know. I’m doing exactly what I came here to be doing. Was it easy? No. But that’s one of the things that I kind of look forward to is a challenge.”

In addition to motivation, participants mentioned the importance of hard work to help them work towards achieving success.

“I think success is achievable to every single person. It’s just the amount of work you want to put into it and how much you want to better yourself.”

Other participants stressed the importance of being involved and having the support from the people on the campus in order to succeed. Support from peers, advisors, and faculty can help to fuel motivation.

“Every one of us has some motivation, shaped with the right people, the right groups, and the right clubs… it grows. Success is achievable for everybody.”

Some participants did state that they do not think that success is achievable by all students. They brought up how some people have barriers that are just simply impossible to overcome.

“It’s one thing to want to achieve it on your own but if you constantly have to face adversity every day to do so, not many people can get past that. If you’re constantly being told the wrong thing or different things it’s just that perfect storm of things going on in your life when nothing is working out. It can be discouraging for a lot of people. So I think quite a few people just give up.”

However, participants more commonly responded that all students do have the ability to succeed. They understand that everyone has different challenges to overcome before they can succeed, but as long as they work hard, have motivation and support they can achieve all their goals.

“I believe success is possible. I think the hurdles and barriers and struggles are different from person to person. And it might not be easy, but you can definitely do it despite any odds that you might face.”
Goals

Q: What are your goals as a student, either short or long-term? Have your goals changed since you started school here?

Observed Themes

Grades and Degree – Students want to complete their classes, get good grades, and earn the degree they are seeking.

Involvement – Students get involved in organizations, groups, and activities in order to develop themselves.

Developing Skills and Gaining Knowledge – Students want to use the college experience to gain a competitive edge in the job market, to find a job and/or to enhance their career.

Future Career – Post graduation, students want to get a job that interests them and that they will enjoy.

Making a Difference – Students want to make a difference within their campus community and in society in general.

Higher Education – Students have goals to further their education by going on to pursue masters and doctoral programs (two and four year campuses) or to continue on to complete their bachelor’s degree (two-year campuses).

Changing Major – Participants talked about how their goals changed since they came to college. Initially, they had an idea of the type of study they were interested in, or were undecided. That interest typically changes while going to college.

Finding Oneself – Similar to changing majors, students have the goal of finding their direction in life and discovering traits about themselves that they never knew before through the college experience.
**Trends in Responses**

In contrast to the student success question, when the participants were asked about their goals, there was a strong focus on academics. Primary goals included *getting good grades and earning a degree* at every single campus. This contrasts with student success question responses where participants didn’t place a high degree of importance on academics.

A large majority of the participants have long-term goals of *using the knowledge gained to find a job and enhance their future career*. Finding a job after college was an important goal mentioned at all but one of the campuses.

Many participants from both types of campuses are interested in *continuing education past the point of the degree they were currently completing*. Four-year participants want to get into graduate programs and two-year participants more commonly want to transfer credits to a four-year to earn a bachelor’s degree.

University participants focus more than college participants on *involvement and skill development*, while both college and university participants equally want to *make a difference* in their campus community and in society.

When asked how their goals have changed since beginning college, most participants cited changing their major. Many students want to *find their path and choose a career* through their college experience.

**Student Experiences**

Participants are interested in getting good grades and completing their degree. Many participants also have ambitions of continuing on to complete higher levels of education.

> “Long term goals overall? To get a degree and then beyond that hopefully a master’s. But you never know where the world will take you.”

Participants also were concerned about what they are going to do after they graduate. They hope to use the degree that they earn in their future career.
“Short-term is graduate the nursing program in May. Long-term is to become an ER trauma and possibly life flight RN in this community and to just get my degree and be able to go out and be a contributing member of society and pay the bills.”

It is important to stand out in the crowd of applicants. One participant’s short-term goal is to gain skills to be more marketable when he or she is trying to complete long-term career goals.

“I think my goal is actually being able to compete in the workforce. There’s a large pool of people going for jobs, and I want to be able to have something when I’m done here that will set me apart and actually give me a chance in a group of 40 people.”

Some participants have the goal of making a difference by being a role model.

“One of my goals is to set an example and be recognized by my peers, particularly within my program, as a leader and someone that they can feel comfortable asking questions, assistance, things like that, and also completing my program, obviously.”

Others want to take what they have learned out into the real world in order to start fighting inequality. Their main goal is making a difference in society using the knowledge they obtain.

“My goals would be to create those opportunities so we can fight against these inequalities in life. My path and my journey haven’t changed. I’ve been the same way since I was born. I realized that things weren’t right in this society, and I think outside of that experience I’m a pioneer and a voice for people who don’t want to speak up and who kind of are afraid to speak up.”

Other participants find that getting involved in groups and activities on campus helps with completing, redefining, and discovering new goals.

“I guess my goal coming here at first was definitely to get my degree. But then within the first semester, I realized that there are so many more opportunities. There is the involvement piece with student organizations and all those other things that add to your experience. These things might change or add to your goals to make your experience your own.”
Campus Support

Q: What is our college/university doing well right now that is helping you be successful as a student? Are there programs/services provided by this college/university that have helped you achieve your goals as a student? What are they?

Observed Themes

**Strong Curriculum** – Students are able to become more well-rounded because they can take classes that they never would have taken if not part of their degree program.

**Involvement** – Student organizations and activities allow students to gain skills they will need in the future and make connections.

**Advisors and Faculty** – Students feel they can go to their faculty and advisors when they have questions because they are open, understanding, and willing to help. Small class sizes and faculty interaction contribute to this theme.

**Community** – Students get advice and grow their knowledge base through other students in their classes and in student organizations/activities.

**Tutoring** – Tutoring helps students get through the classes that they struggle to complete and is a rewarding experience for the peer tutor as well.

**Technology** – Access to computers on campus and online program options are important to students with regard to achieving their goals.

**Student Government** – Students are able to influence policy makers of the college/university through student government, which helps to connect student opinion and policy.

**TRiO** – Mentioned by many participants, the TRiO program provides valuable advising. TRiO advisors are often considered the most influential person in a college student’s academic journey.

**Resources** – Students want resources available when they need them, with easy access to help them meet their goals.
Trends in Responses

The two most frequently identified themes for this question have to do with resources and involvement. Involvement, or being involved in student organizations to gain skills, is important to all of the four-year groups and most of the two-year groups. Having access to various resources on campus was mentioned in all the two-year campuses and most of the four-year campuses. Another theme that was fairly common among both colleges and universities was the support of advisors and faculty.

Both college and university participants find interaction with faculty and the tutoring services that their campus provides is instrumental to their success. Student government is important to participants because it creates connections between students and the administration, allowing for the student voice to be heard in institutional decision-making. The theme of community goes hand-in-hand with involvement, but differs in that it is more about the support that students receive from the other students in these groups than about connection to administration.

Four-year participants cite curriculum as something that the universities were doing right to help them succeed. They stress the importance of quality classes from which they can gain career and life skills.

Technology is important specifically to college participants (not mentioned by university participants). Two-year participants point to technology as something that their colleges are doing well. The TRiO program is also important to two-year participants, while not important to four-year participants.

Student Experiences

Having faculty who take an interest in the student’s success is important to all MnSCU participants.

“They kind of just push you to do your best. I love all my professors and I’m very comfortable with them in school. I can ask them any question that I need to ask them. They want to see all the students succeed. I don’t know a professor here that doesn’t care about a student.”
Participants feel students have an easier time connecting with their faculty in smaller classes where the faculty can get to know the student by name and face.

“I especially like the small class size because it’s that one-on-one attention that a lot of other students at other colleges just don’t get. And I think it’s extremely nice to go to your professor’s office and have them know your name and say ‘hey, how’re you doing? I didn’t see you in class today, how’s it going, are you okay?’”

In addition to their faculty, students are also able to find support in the tutoring services that the campuses provide.

“Working in the tutoring office, I see a lot of people come in and ask for help. It’s nice that tutors know some students on a first-name basis, and it’s just knowing that they’re really friendly and they pay attention and stuff.”

In addition to the human resources that the campus provides there are additional physical resources that are available for students to use in order to be successful. A participant discussed how they are able to obtain the materials for their organization to be successful.

“We utilize campus resources quite a bit. We’ve never had a problem with anything. Everything’s been on time. The campus is usually very timely about getting resources to us and is usually timely about letting us use tables, and never like not scheduled or things like that happen. They’re very professional.”

One of the themes that was mentioned less frequently was the importance of student government to act as a bridge between the students and faculty. One participant talked about how student government is a strength for their campus.

“Last year our student senate focused on building a unified community … with all students and all faculty united together to make a difference.”

Obstacles

Q: What obstacles do you face as a student? Are there things at our campus that could be done to help you become more successful? What are they?
Observed Themes

**Financial Hardship** – College is very expensive and students are having a hard time paying for their education and completing coursework at the same time.

**Lack of Diversity** – Minority students find it difficult to talk to predominantly white staff because they don’t believe that the staff can relate to the problems they are having.

**Lack of Influence** – Students believe that they are the bottom rung of the ladder and that their opinions do not matter. They find this unfair because it is their money that funds the colleges and universities.

**Great Resources Underutilized** – Students do not access resources they need in order to succeed, due to lack of availability or lack of awareness.

**Class Availability / Timing** – Participants feel that there are not many options for those who need to take certain classes with personal time constraints.

**Work-Life-Education Balance** – Students have to manage education, family, and work all within the same time period.

**Policies** – Students struggle with various campus policies perceived as hurdles they have to overcome to be successful.

**Inexperienced/Unmotivated Faculty** – When faculty haven’t taught a class before, their inexperience is frustrating to students. Also, when faculty don’t offer assistance because they are not paid to do so, it hinders students’ ability to succeed.

Trends in Responses

Responses to this question are not as common between groups as they are in other questions, as a wide array of obstacles were discussed. Therefore, there is not one overarching theme to obstacles, but rather many themes.

Participants from colleges and universities mentioned *financial hardship* as an obstacle to success. Students struggle to pay for school and find the whole financial aid process to be confusing. They were *unable to find/use resources* they needed to
succeed because they were either unaware of the resources or found the processes around accessing them confusing. Faculty are sometimes not particularly helpful to the students. Students complain that some faculty are undertrained, inexperienced, or difficult to talk to.

A lack of diversity is an obstacle for university participants. At some university campuses this became a large topic of discussion. In addition, university policies are seen as confusing and difficult to follow.

Class availability is an obstacle for college students. Students need flexible class schedules to accommodate their schedules. They also experience difficulty with education, family and work life balance. Most focus group participants interviewed are required to work while going to college because they have financial hardship. Two-year participants are more likely to have families to support, which makes it harder to succeed in college with their own limited time for classes and the college’s limited availability of offerings.

Student Experiences

The most common theme that appeared with the obstacles question is that many students are struggling to afford their education.

“It is my biggest struggle right now and I don’t know if there’s a way to fix it… balancing classwork, multiple jobs, meetings, activities. I do not qualify for financial aid, so I need to work those jobs, so that’s my biggest struggle within college right now is time management between working multiple hours and having a full-time class schedule.”

Other participants find the whole process of financial aid to be confusing and aren’t aware of many resources for getting help to understand it.

“I think there’s a lot of unknown things about financial aid where I guess I don’t know the process. It just kind of shows up there. I think the Financial Aid Office could do a little bit more with showing students what the process is and maybe sending out an email about what goes on, when, and the breakdown of financial aid.”
Many students have to work while enrolled in classes due to financial hardships. This makes it difficult to find a balance between the different aspects of their lives and still manage good grades.

“Trying to balance everything along with work, life, school… but at the same time make an impact and make a difference in the things that I do.”

This becomes even more difficult when you add in the responsibility of a family and children, especially when students have a hard time connecting with the classmates that are younger and do not have the same life experiences.

“I’m a non-finished law student and I already have kids. Coming here has been really hard because I don’t really know anybody or anything and they really don’t have any programs for people like that and so, it’s kind of like you’re all by yourself and it’s just for younger people, so it’s really hard.”

Other struggles that participants discussed include the lack of diversity on the campuses. Some students feel like they struggle to fit in at their campus and that the staff could not possibly understand their struggles so they do not seek help.

“I’m on a predominantly white campus, so I kind of struggle with that a lot by myself, because I don’t walk into classrooms and see people that look like me, see professors that look like me. That’s partially why I didn’t go talk to my professor before, because I felt like they couldn’t relate to me because they didn’t look like me.”

Resources are perceived to either not exist or not be available to students. Many focus group participants were unaware of resources and technologies that the MnSCU system provides.

“I think one obstacle we face as students is there are a lot of really great resources we have on campus but they’re not utilized to the extent they could be because they’re not as well-known or advertised as well as they could be.”

Influential People

Q: Regarding your success as a student, who has been the most influential person in your college experience?
Observed Themes

**Family** – Family provides support and motivation to students while they are in college.

**Advisors/TRiO Advisors** – Advisors make sure that the students are on the right track and taking the right classes.

**Faculty** – When faculty are engaged in teaching their students, they can be one of the best resources for students. Students should go in and talk to their faculty member when they are struggling.

**Staff** – People who work for the college or university, but are not the students’ direct advisors or faculty (such as financial aid or human resources staff) are influential.

**Other Students/Student Community** – Students find it helpful to get support from other students who are going through the same things or have already completed what the student is currently working on.

**Campus Organizations** – Upperclassmen in student organizations serve as mentors to underclassmen.

Trends in Responses

*Faculty and advisors* were listed most frequently as being influential by both college participants and university participants. University students more commonly mention advisors as influential and college participants more commonly mention faculty as influential, but the difference is slight.

Both college participants and university participants also mention *other students*, *staff, and advisors* as important to their success. A smaller number of participants say that their *family or members of campus organizations* are the most influential.
Student Experiences

Participants regularly mention college and university faculty and staff with whom they have developed a special bond because the person took interest in their success as a student.

“She was an advisor or a tutor there helping students with financial aid for college and making sure we’ll all just there to get our education. But ever since I met her she’s been on my back making sure I get the right classes, making sure I pick the correct major that fits me, suits me. And I don’t know, I can’t thank her enough for that.”

These people go out of their way to make sure that the students they are working with are on track to graduate and work with each of the students on a personal basis.

“She’s my advisor. She’s also my professor of many of my classes, but she doesn’t mind it when you think big. You know how sometimes professors are like, oh, well let’s start down here. She doesn’t mind starting at the top, and reversing the plan, and figuring out how to get there, that kind of thing. So she’s flexible, and I think that’s really important because not everybody thinks the same way.”

This sometimes extends beyond the staff of the campus. Many participants talked about the support they receive from their families. In addition, participants mentioned how other students became a sort of campus family for them.

“When I first got here, they [fraternity brothers] were just so inclusive. They involved me. In the first week or two, I just fell in love with them. They’re very helpful. If I am having trouble in school, there are a couple guys that sit down and talk to me about it. If I’m sick, they always check on me. I was in the hospital a couple days ago. One of them took me to the hospital to go get checked out. Just little small things like that make me feel welcomed here, you know? That I have that, someone to depend on from home. They’re like my family away from home, and I really love that about them.”
Advising

Q: What role has advising played in your experiences as a student? What could be changed to help you succeed as a student?

Notes on Advising in the MnSCU System

To understand the wide variety of responses in this section and throughout the report when advising is discussed, it is important to understand the way advising is administered across the MnSCU System (Appendix G). In brief, at the four-year universities, most often the advisor is an assigned faculty member. In many of the comprehensive two-year colleges, advising is offered via an advising center. However, in the case of specific career/technical programs at the two-year colleges, students may be assigned a faculty member in their program as an advisor.

Observed Themes

Positive

Helpful with Scheduling – Good advisors are those who go out of their way to help them plan their schedules and make sure credits transfer.

Personal Relationship – Good advisors are the people with whom the students have a personal connection. They are also those who are interested in the students’ personal success.

Faculty as Advisors – Students have a more positive experience if the advisor is a faculty member, because they have more major-specific knowledge and the student appreciates having a personal connection with someone in their field.

Negative

Lack of Major Specific Knowledge – General advisors are unable to answer questions that relate to major-specific problems or they give incorrect answers.
**Person Not a Major** – Advisors see students as what they are majoring in and give them solutions general to their major rather than looking at individual personal problems.

**Changing Advisors** – Students are unaware that they can change advisors or are unsure about the process to do so.

**Advisor to Student Ratio** – Too many students are assigned to one advisor making it hard to get personal and find time for appointments.

**Availability** – It can take multiple weeks to get an appointment with an advisor, which means problem solving is a slow process.

**Trends in Responses**

Participants find that advisors with whom they really enjoyed working took the time to get to know them on a more personal level. They talk about these advisors as a sort of campus family for them; people who care about more than just the classes that they are taking.

One of the things that frustrates the participants the most is advisors’ lack of knowledge. Students get misinformation from the advisor, the advisor does not know how to answer the question, or how to find the answer. When faculty serve as advisors, they may lack knowledge about the advising process. When non-teaching advisors provide counsel, they may lack knowledge about individual majors.

Sometimes, advisors see students as their major instead of as individuals. They deploy one-size-fits-all solutions for students. Difficulties exist with changing advisors, having access to advisors, and having a large advisor to student ratio.

**Student Experiences**

Participants speak highly of advising. They talk about how advisors are helping them to pick out their classes and help with graduation.

“My advisor helped me pick my classes from freshman all the way to when I am going to graduate and so. It was amazing that she was able to do that for me.”
There was a lot of positive feedback for the universities that have faculty serving as advisors. Students feel like the faculty know more about their field of interest and know the students on a more personal level because they may have had them in class.

“So, that’s been really nice because I can get different perspectives from different professors, and because I have all those professors as teachers they kind of know me well and we have these deep conversations about where I want to go with my life and planning out my classes, so that’s been beneficial to me.”

Students prefer to get personalized attention and not one-size-fits-all solutions.

“I was able to go in to her and actually talk to her more with ease. It wasn’t so forced like ‘come in at this date so we can setup your schedule for the next four years’ kind of thing. It was more casual. I can walk in whenever now and it’s like oh, whatever. She’s usually like that with everyone too.”

Participants mentioned that they have difficulty accessing advisors because they have such a high student to advisor ratio and it can be difficult to get time with the advisors.

“I know there are many departments where the freshman advisor will have over 100 advisees. I know for me as a freshman, I wasn’t able to meet with my advisor as much as I wanted to. I had to go to other people to get that information.”

When faculty are advisors, the participants sometimes feel the faculty are too busy with their other tasks to find time to meet with them.

“I feel like he just had so much other stuff going on... he’s a professor. So I just felt like I was taking up too much of his time because he’s got too much on his plate.”

Some participants stated they have a hard time because their advisors do not know the answers to the questions they need answered and they have to go through many offices in order to get answers.

“I think just making sure that the advisor knows the basics sometimes. I have a really good relationship with my advisor but half the time I go to speak to her about certain classes it’s like I think this may do this but you need to talk to records. She was only able to answer half my question.”
The participants sometimes feel like they are being treated as their major, rather than a person with different aspirations and goals than other students.

“I guess my problem was that I’m a person outside of being a <PROGRAM> major and I don’t think my first advisor took that into account, that I wasn’t just trying to get a degree. I was trying to gain skills.”

Diversity

Q: How well has this campus done in providing you with opportunities to better understand diversity and to learn about various underrepresented student groups and the challenges/barriers they may encounter?

Observed Themes

Positive

Coursework – Classes that are provided by the campus that help students to understand other cultures that might be present around campus.

Diversity events – Many of the campuses have diversity events that the students could attend, which teach the students about the different cultures represented on campus.

Organizations – Most of the colleges have different clubs to celebrate diversity in general or clubs for different groups.

Negative

Lack of awareness – The events and organizations are not getting the proper advertising to make students aware of them.

Lack of student involvement – Students are not getting involved with diversity events even when they are aware of the events because there seems to be a barrier between races.

Lower Standards – Professors expect lower quality work from students from minority groups, even when the students have goals which require they perform at high levels.
**False Advertising** – Flyers and advertisements for the schools depict the school as diverse and very involved with diversity events, however when the students come to the school they find that to not be the case.

**Trends in Responses**

Participants talked a lot about their experiences with diversity on the campuses they attend – both in this section and in the obstacles section earlier. This section focuses on what the campuses are doing to help students learn about diversity.

Responses for this question were very mixed with both positive and negative feedback. Although diversity was only listed as an obstacle by university participants, college and university participants had similar opinions on how their campuses were handling the issue of diversity.

Positive things happening on campuses regarding diversity include courses that teach students about other cultures and organizations that people can join. Campuses and student organizations also host diversity events where people can learn about other cultures in different ways.

Unfortunately, students are not always aware that diversity events are happening because the colleges and universities are not advertising enough. The campuses are often falsely claiming that they are working towards promoting diversity but the students noted that the campuses were only paying lip service to the events. Additionally, even when students are aware of these events, they often choose not to attend. Sometimes only the group of students who are from the sponsoring organization show up.

**Student Experiences**

Focus group participants from diverse groups feel distant from the other students because they are different from them. They feel like what is being done now is not adequate to help to represent all the cultures present on the campuses.
“Of course, you look at me, you can tell I’m different. My hair’s different. The laptop is different. The way I dress is probably different. It’s just a lot of things that are different about me. A lot of people couldn’t understand that, and they weren’t too accepting of that at first, and I think just the university can do a better job of just putting on different types of seminars or workshops like that to help people get aware of different culture, different religions, different taboos, different things that cultures do. Just try to be more culturally aware, you know.”

Some participants feel like they are called out or treated differently because they are in the minority. They feel like they have to answer questions that should not be asked of them.

“I’ve had multiple classes where it would be a topic of race or a topic of gender or something and I’d have to speak out. And they’re like, so how does that work in the black community? I’m, “I don’t know. I grew up in the suburbs most of my life. This is how I see it from my point of view,” and then I had to make that clear.”

Some participants shared a disconnect between faculty and diverse student populations. Some faculty have said things that are offensive to people of those groups.

“One of my professors said something that really disturbed me. That person said, ‘because of the No Child Left Behind Act more stupid people are coming from high school.’ For me that was like ‘if you knew my life and the traumatic experiences that I had to go through, school is difficult, but that doesn’t mean that there’s no hope for them.’”

In addition, some of the things that are being taught to the students about other cultures are not properly researched and/or accurate.

‘In a class, I had a teacher say things that are completely untrue about some cultures. Such as there are no buildings in Africa…’ (Taken from notes)

Faculty and advisors are also expecting less from those from minority groups. Faculty were congratulating C grades from students of color, even when the students knew that would not be good enough to achieve their educational goals.

“And I feel like, because I had this discussion with three other people too. This is exaggerated by the fact that we’re black. I mean, when we get a C they think that’s good enough for us, when that’s not supposed to be the standard. The standard is set so low for
us. We know we can do better, and we are doing better. But it’s not being translated, so it’s frustrating. This is one of the reasons why I transferred; I switched my major to urban studies from chemistry, because no one was invested in my success. There was this academic program that’s supposed to help make you a better candidate for med school but they had the GPA standard set as 2.0. So what med school would accept a 2.0 student? And that specific program is geared towards Latino and black students. I mean, how is that even acceptable?”

This not only happens to students of color but also to students with disabilities.

“One of my daughters went to <SCHOOL> two years ago, and she has hearing loss, and she went into one class and the professor looked at her and said I’m not expecting anything out of you, you can’t hear, you know? She graduated with honors. She’s awesome, I mean, but would that want to make you stay? I mean, I’m hoping that’s not what’s happening here. I mean, I see interpreters. I see that. But not just hearing, but any of those types of things those people really need that extra assistance, you know?”

In addition, much of the diversity focus at the colleges and universities appears to be on race/ethnicity. However, there are many other underrepresented groups at the campuses that aren’t getting much attention. As shown above one of those groups are students with disabilities. Although there are supposed to be resources for these students, sometimes those resources are not being properly utilized.

“My biggest challenge is there’s a lot of times I’m stuck and I have to explain to the teacher to let me know a week or two in advance so they can find time. A lot of times it’s the last minute. Last week the social studies teacher says you can go to poetry for extra credit. They let me know that. I had to go and request for an interpreter. When I did show up to the poetry reading there was no interpreter there so that was really frustrating. That’s one…you know, not having full resources is hard with that. But also fighting for that and starting to get that, it just takes a lot of energy.”

Another one of those groups is non-traditional students. They feel like they have a disadvantage compared to their younger classmates.

“I know there’s not a lot my age, I’m close to 50, but that they come in and it’s hard for them to adjust? Or it’s hard for them… I ran into a few that don’t know much about computers, which I know there are some classes here, but is there some way to open that door a little bit more for the people?”
Students of different religions have difficulty finding the resources to practice their religion at some of the campuses.

“Another challenge is I think is to Muslim students, we have a really population of Muslim students at <CAMPUS NAME>, but we do not have a single room for prayer. We’re supposed to pray five times a day, and in which four times are usually during the class times, so if I come here at like 9:00 and I go home and take three classes or two classes, I go home at 6:00 or 7:00, there’re two or three or even four prayers in between that, and we do not have a specific room for that, so we can just go in and pray. So it’s really like, no one wants to pray in a hallway or somewhere, so if we can get a prayer room just like this size that’d be great.”

In addition, people of different sexualities feel like they aren’t given the proper resources to have a voice at their campuses.

“I’ll speak to the sexuality piece. I’m gay and I think our campus struggles with that specifically. I mean we have a <LOCATION>, which includes all sexualities, all gender identities but we’re over here where no one can see us. I mean how is that being effective? I feel like location has a lot to do with our visibility on campus.”

Participants in the LGBTQ community don’t feel like they have a safe place on campus to talk about their issues and it leads to dropping out.

“And echoing what these two speakers said, I know a lot of LGBTQI students are really in difficult positions, because sometimes they’re being financially supported by their parents who might not necessarily be okay, and withdraw their support, and leave those students high and dry in an institution if they came out to them, or there’s other situations where it’s really bad at home and they have to drop out of school. I’ve had friends who’ve had to drop out of school because they’re dealing with that coming out process, and it would be nice to have an advisor on campus that focused on LGBTQ issues, but the problem is you can’t really have an advisor if there’s not a population, if you can’t identify yourself as part of that community.”

Participants are aware that there are resources available but the campuses do not really push or advertise them. Students are not sure what they need to do to get involved.
“I feel like they have a very basic understanding of diversity with the centers and some of the resources, but they don’t really push us. They’re just like, okay, it’s there. Do what you want with it, but they don’t give us that next step of how to use those resources.”

Participants mention how many of the events are only utilized by the diverse students themselves. Since not all groups are in attendance for these events the events do not really help to remove the divide between the groups.

“Who’s in there? It’s always diverse students. It’s not utilized or even probably known by the rest of the campus. It’s always just the diverse people in there, and there’s a few European students in there, but beyond that, it’s always just...it’s awesome there, and nobody else really frequents it or even acknowledges that it’s there.”

Participants feel like the campuses need to do something to help push students out of their comfort zone. Colleges and universities should work to start the conversations that everyone has been avoiding.

“It’s just that we’re all so comfortable in our own zone. At the same time this campus promotes diversity, it does something that makes you uncomfortable. It should be putting up little signs, I don’t know, just something to take you out of that comfort zone to make you realize that. We’re in college, so we’re all knowledgeable. If you put up a poster people will be, oh, I didn’t know that. Maybe that poster will encourage you to go talk to somebody outside your ethnicity group.”

Participants felt that much of the work that being done was simply lip service, a way to make the campuses appear that they cared. They felt that currently, the push from the campuses was not in genuine interest of promoting diversity.

“The diversity at this school is not substantial. It seems like it’s just for show. I’m being very honest. There is no actual commitment to the white students who go to this college, two different views, two different realities, and pushing them to understand where we’re coming from. Because it is a challenge. I see the strain. It’s really challenging to go into a room when you’re the only person.”

However, the campuses are depicting to incoming students the idea of diversity at their campuses. This is causing students to come to the campuses with misinformed ideas about how the campuses actually look.
“So I moved first year. I moved out of my house, high school senior, and when they’re sending you the fliers and stuff there’s always at least three black people on every flier I got, I promise you that. There’s three black people, so I’m, “I’m going to have to go to <SCHOOL>, see all them black people. I’m going to be comfortable.” Because there was four black people at my high school my senior year, literally four. So coming here I’m like, “There’s going to be so many black people. I’m going to have so many connections.” Then you get here and it’s nothing.

Both the colleges and universities need to work towards diversity so that students can feel more comfortable with their choices to attend MnSCU campuses.

“That’s one of the first things they yell, “We have diversity here. We’re a diverse campus. Come here and you’ll be happy.” When we get here it’s not like that”

Technology

Q: How are current educational technologies (DARS, grad planner, online tutoring, online advising) contributing to student success? Would increased access to educational technology result in increased success? How? What students would benefit most from increased access to educational technology?

Observed Themes

Positive

Keeping on track – For students and faculty who actively use the resources such as D2L it can be much easier to track your progress and catch up after an absence.

Visual representation of progress – Students find the DARS software to be very beneficial because they could see a visual representation.

Negative

Faculty involvement with the technology – Faculty do not actively put grades up or utilize the technology as a proper learning tool.
Confusing – The technology is confusing and there are not clear instructions for helping students effectively use technology.

Training – Better training is needed for both students and faculty on how to properly use the technology.

Trends in Responses

Responses are fewer for this question because of the limited time allowed to complete the focus groups. This question was sometimes skipped in order for more in-depth discussion on other questions. There were also groups where there were fewer responses to the question. There is no significant difference in responses between college and university groups.

There is generally a negative attitude about the current technologies involving a lack of faculty involvement with the programs. In addition, the programs themselves are confusing for students to use with no clear way to obtain help with these technologies. There was some positive feedback stating that the technologies are helpful for keeping up in classes and being a good visual representation of their progress in their program.

Student Experiences

Students do not always know that some of these technology resources are available to them.

“I think it depends on people knowing what technology there is. I think that’s one thing that needs to be done more because a lot of the stuff that could be available, the way they market it may be an announcement in <STUDENT NEWSPAPER>, for example. There’s not really a concerted effort saying we have all of these awesome resources available for you. Come check this out. I think the technology is there it’s just getting people to know about it is more of the problem.”

Some students think that the colleges and universities are pushing the technology piece too hard and it is causing things to be more complicated when the goal of the technology itself is to make the lives of the students and faculty easier.
“The overuse of technology, that’s a problem. I get you guys want to be technology efficient and intelligent, but it’s just too much technology can be very destructive. I feel like we should make all of these websites simpler. Simpler to get in contact with your professors and stuff like that, you know?”

The participants also find that not many of the faculty are working with the technology. Students have a hard time accessing some faculty by email. Some faculty do not update their D2L site with the information that the students need to be able to track their grades.

“You have some teachers who, you go the whole semester, and they have nothing on there. They say, well, we’re going to put your grades up later, and you’re asking about it, and they still don’t. You have no way to know where you are in the class or where you need to get by the end of the semester. It’s just so frustrating because how are you supposed to know if you’re going to pass the class, or how are you supposed to have all those resources when they don’t even use D2L?”

Transfer

Q: For those of you who have transferred, how would you describe your transfer experience?

Observed Themes

Loss of credits – Credits do not properly transfer over to the classes that are required at the new institution, therefore making the student stay longer and spend more money.

Misinformation – Wrong information leads to students taking the wrong classes so that they either have to retake the classes at the new institution or they take classes not really necessary for the major they seek.

Consistency across MnSCU colleges and universities – Participants feel that since the colleges and universities are all under the same system, they should have the same classes and necessary courses to make the transfer process cleaner.
Lack of introduction – Transfer students and nontraditional students do not get the same sort of introduction (orientation) to the college or university as the traditional freshman does in their fall semester.

Trends in Responses

As one of the last questions asked, this question was sometimes skipped in order to fit within the time limits for the focus groups. Additionally, depending on the group, there were limited numbers of participants with transfer experience.

Within the four year campuses there were only a few participants who had transferred and their experiences trend positively. The experiences of college participants are more negative in nature.

The most common themes were the loss of credits between the institutions and the fact that the students were either misinformed or unaware about which credits would transfer and how the transfer process works. There was also a theme of frustration with the MnSCU system and how difficult it is to transfer between colleges and universities that are within the MnSCU system.

Student Experiences

Participants of the focus groups think it would be beneficial to have smoother transfer of credits between colleges and universities within MnSCU.

“So it would be nice if, especially within the MnSCU system...I’m not sure if that’s a problem with other institutions between four and two year colleges but it would be nice if they were able to hammer that stuff out so other people wouldn’t have to...originally I would have been graduating in the spring and going into my junior year and now I’m kind of stuck in another sophomore year.”

Students are being required to take and pay for courses that do not transfer or mean anything to other colleges or universities.

“I had to take a class that’s called <REQUIRED COURSE> It was a three credit course and it doesn’t transfer to the four year colleges so it’s really frustrating and it’s required
on the <PROGRAM> degree when it doesn’t transfer anywhere. It’s like a waste of how much one course costs that’s three credits. I think it’s ridiculous.”

Participants talked about how one of the disadvantages of transferring was that you do not get the same introduction to the campus as an incoming freshman receives. Transfer students are more likely to be thrown into the chaos of the college without much explanation.

“You don’t get the same amenities coming in during the spring semester that you would in the fall. As far as incoming freshmen you have <ORIENTATION EVENT>, you have pamphlets of information telling you this is how you get involved, here’s your Internet access code. I mean, I kind of walked in blindsided as far as here’s one day for you to get acquainted to this entire university”

One of the participants from a university described his or her positive experience with transferring between two MnSCU institutions.

“It really was not difficult at all, because I applied and then a couple weeks from there I was accepted, because they could automatically pull up my transcript from the system and see what my grades are. The transition was really great. “

Policies

Q: How many of you have been affected by policies such as drop for nonpayment, placement, satisfactory academic progress, or withdrawal? a. Do you have any recommendations on how these policies may be modified?

Observed Themes

Withdrawal policy – The time for withdrawal without affecting GPA and financial resources is too short. In the period of time provided, students are unable to determine if they will succeed in the class.

Academic probation – Academic probation creates a lot of hoops for the students to jump through and it can be hard to come back from it.


**Previous Academic Experience** – Many nontraditional students are having issues due to policies that penalized them for things they did many years ago. They find it hard to re-enroll because they do not get a clean slate.

**Trends in Responses**

Due to time constraints of the focus groups this question was answered by the fewest number of colleges and universities.

Participants who responded reported that the withdrawal and drop process is a problem. The academic probation process is also problematic, making it hard to recover after a bad semester or two.

Mistakes that a student made the first time that they attempted college are still following them to this day. Some of the mistakes mentioned were failing the class, dropping out of the class or a semester without going through standard drop procedure. For some of the participants these mistakes made 10-20 years ago were also impacting their financial aid status which adds another barrier.

**Student Experiences**

One of the most discussed policy topics was the withdrawal and drop process. Participants feel that the time they are given is too short to determine if a class is going to be something that they can handle. Most times the students have to decide before they get through the first week of actual classes, since the first class is usually reserved to going over the syllabus.

“I actually want to talk about the withdrawal policy for classes. I think this is kind of related to everybody in this room. I took 16 credits for the first time this semester and you don’t know what 16 credits feels like for a person who’s never taken it before. So, I feel like the add and withdraw dates should be extended by at least two weeks so you can at least get a feel for what that course load will be like.”
It is hard to make up for past mistakes when they are permanently recorded in the student records. Even after retaking the class students find difficulty clearing the slate.

“But if you took your class, say you have a math class and you don’t have anything else, then okay, your W is there because you withdrew. But if you say you went and you took your math class again to make up for it then you’ve got your B or an A or whatever then why do you need to keep your W if you have something to replace that? Then it just doesn’t make sense.”

Students get discouraged when they are required to withdraw from a course, even when it would not be possible to get the grade they need.

“Well, actually I withdrew from my first and hopefully my only class ever last year in the spring, yeah. And I’m not a quitter, so it was actually really hard and it still kind of…it hurts a little, but I just knew I could not get that grade up… It was a really weird experience, but it didn’t really affect like my success that much or anything, I mean, there’s just a W where that was. But like I said, it was just a weird situation I guess.”

Students get even more discouraged when they are put on academic probation.

“Well, I was put on academic probation and that was after I was forced to be off for a year because I had some personal issues going on. Because of it, I got put on academic probation but the person who put me on it, and I don’t know if it’s a part of it but she had said something that I didn’t think was... She had said that because of my personal issues I shouldn’t have been in school. What she didn’t understand at the time was because of what I was going through, school was the only thing that was keeping me going. When they basically told me I had to be out I fought and then when I got back in I fought even more and now it took me a year and I’m off. But to be put on it for what I was going through I don’t think was right.”

Once the students have made mistakes it becomes very difficult to remove them. Many nontraditional participants talked about the struggles they were having with recovering from mistakes they made the first time they were in college, and for some that was decades ago.

“I’ve seen students who applied, but because they weren’t successful at a four-year seven years ago, could not attempt to come back because of their experience, and it’s because
that carries with them, and so they just refused to try at that point because it’s an uphill battle, and they’re not going to get the GPA to graduate.”

Next Steps

This report will be shared on the Charting the Future blog and with the other Implementation Teams. The Student Success and Diversity Implementation teams will use this report to guide their continued work.
Appendix A: Focus Group Questions Final

BE SURE THE RECORDER IS ON.

Let’s begin by going around the room and introducing ourselves – please tell us your first name and *what defines student success for you.*

1. What are your goals as a student, either short or long-term?
   a. Have your goals changed since you started school here?
2. What is our campus doing well right now that is helping you be successful as a student?
   a. Are there programs/services provided by this campus that have helped you achieve your goals as a student? What are they?
3. What obstacles do you face as a student?
   a. Are there things at our campus that could be done to help you become more successful? What are they?
4. Regarding your success as a student, who has been the most influential person in your college experience?
   a. What role has this person played?
   b. What have they done to be of help?
5. What role has advising played in your experiences as a student?
   a. What could be changed to help you succeed as a student?
6. How well has this campus done in providing you with opportunities to better understand diversity and to learn about various underrepresented student groups and the challenges/barriers they may encounter?
7. How are current educational technologies (DARS, grad planner, online tutoring, online advising) contributing to student success?
   a. Would increased access to educational technology result in increased success? How?
   b. What students would benefit most from increased access to educational technology?
8. For those of you who have transferred, how would you describe your transfer experience?
9. How many of you have been affected by policies such as drop for nonpayment, placement, satisfactory academic progress, or withdrawal?
   a. Do you have any recommendations on how these policies may be modified?
10. Is success achievable by all students?
    a. Why/why not?
Appendix B: Map of Schools that Hosted Focus Groups

Campuses with student focus groups
Appendix C: Letter to Chief Student Affairs Officers

October 13, 2014

To: Chief Student Affairs Officers

From: Charting the Future, Student Success Team

Re: Student Focus Groups in conjunction with the upcoming Gallery Walks

In conjunction with the upcoming Gallery Walk at your campus, the Student Success Implementation Team in partnership with the Diversity Implementation Team are conducting student focus groups to gather additional information about the student experience along with policies, practices, and technology that aid in their success. We are conducting 16 of these groups in conjunction with the Gallery Walks, so this is another large undertaking that will need the help of people who are on the ground at the campus locations.

The recommendation guiding both teams focuses on increasing the success of all learners, “especially those in diverse populations traditionally underserved by higher education.” The teams have a strong desire to hear from a diverse student group and would appreciate your help in identifying students from a variety of programs and experiences (e.g. TRIO, student organizations, FYE programs, etc.).

We’re reaching out to you for your help in making these focus groups successful. Here are the areas where we are requesting your assistance:

A room located near the location of the gallery walk that has conference-style seating for about twelve people, available before, during, and after the gallery walk to allow some flexibility in scheduling (gallery walk schedule on pg. 3).

- Identifying and recruiting a group of students who will participate in the focus group. Historically, show rate at these events is about 50%, so we would be hoping to recruit about 20 students in hopes of having a group from 8-12 actually appear.

- Participants should be representatives of your entire campus and come from different types of contacts. It is important that all kinds of voices be at the table to be heard.

- It would be great if you would be able to offer participants some kind of refreshments as an incentive for participating.

- Recording equipment (audio only) that can download digital files on-site.

- We may need the help of someone to take notes on a laptop during the group – we will do our best to have both a facilitator and a note-taker, but again, may need help with this also.
We appreciate your assistance and support. Your primary contact will be: Wendy Marson, wmarson@inverhills.mnscu.edu or 651-450-3392. She will be in touch with specifics.

### Gallery Walk & Student Focus Group Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution/Division</th>
<th>Confirmed date</th>
<th>Confirmed session time</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota State University Moorhead</td>
<td>Tuesday, October 28</td>
<td>11am-2pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Hennepin Community College</td>
<td>Tuesday, October 28</td>
<td>10am - 1pm</td>
<td>Sue Appelquist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota State Community and Technical College - Detroit Lakes</td>
<td>Wednesday, October 29</td>
<td>10am - 12pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota State University, Mankato</td>
<td>Thursday, October 30</td>
<td>1 - 4pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Minnesota State University</td>
<td>Thursday, October 30</td>
<td>1pm - 4pm</td>
<td>Eric Runestad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical - Red Wing</td>
<td>Tuesday, November 04</td>
<td>9am-12pm</td>
<td>Dan Bernstrom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Lakes College</td>
<td>Tuesday, November 04</td>
<td>1pm - 3:30pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winona State University</td>
<td>Thursday, November 06</td>
<td>11am-2pm</td>
<td>Tracy Rahim, (Katie Rudolph), Barb Oertel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Cloud Technical and Community College</td>
<td>Friday, November 07</td>
<td>1 - 4pm</td>
<td>Barb Oertel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bemidji State University/Northwest Technical College</td>
<td>Friday, November 07</td>
<td>10am - 1pm</td>
<td>Barb Butler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan State University</td>
<td>Tuesday, November 11</td>
<td>2:30-5:30pm</td>
<td>Orinthia Montague, Robert Mokuia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College</td>
<td>Wednesday, November 12</td>
<td>1-3pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson, Keith Turner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inver Hills Community College</td>
<td>Thursday, November 13</td>
<td>1-4pm</td>
<td>Shelley Auldrich, Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria Technical and Community College</td>
<td>Friday, November 14</td>
<td>10am - 1pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis Community and Technical College</td>
<td>Thursday, November 20</td>
<td>2-5pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anoka Technical College</td>
<td>Friday, November 21</td>
<td>11am – 2pm</td>
<td>Wendy Marson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Student Success Team Note Taking Template

Campus Name:

Date of Focus Group:

Note-taker’s Name:

Instructions: The questions are listed in order below. Please capture as much of the conversation as you can, using a hard return (ENTER) when the speaker changes. When the facilitator is speaking, please enter “F:” so the research team can tell when that person is talking vs. the students. It is not necessary to identify the students by name in the notes, but we do need to know when a new student is speaking. Please use a hard return (enter) when a different student begins to speak.

Please begin taking notes when the facilitator has finished with the introduction and says to begin.

BE SURE THE RECORDER IS TURNED ON AND RECORDING

Let’s begin by going around the room and introducing ourselves – please tell us your first name and what defines student success for you.

1. What are your goals as a student, either short or long-term?
   a. Have your goals changed since you started school here?

2. What is our campus doing well right now that is helping you be successful as a student?
   a. Are there programs/services provided by this campus that have helped you achieve your goals as a student? What are they?

3. What obstacles do you face as a student?
   a. Are there things at our campus that could be done to help you become more successful? What are they?

4. Regarding your success as a student, who has been the most influential person in your college experience?
   a. What role has this person played?
   b. What have they done to be of help?
5. What role has advising played in your experiences as a student?
   a. What could be changed to help you succeed as a student?

6. How well has this campus done in providing you with opportunities to better understand diversity and to learn about various underrepresented student groups and the challenges/barriers they may encounter?

7. How are current educational technologies (DARS, grad planner, online tutoring, online advising) contributing to student success?
   a. Would increased access to educational technology result in increased success? How?
   b. What students would benefit most from increased access to educational technology?

8. For those of you who have transferred, how would you describe your transfer experience?

9. How many of you have been affected by policies such as drop for nonpayment, placement, satisfactory academic progress, or withdrawal?
   a. Do you have any recommendations on how these policies may be modified?

10. Is success achievable by all students?
    a. Why/why not?
Appendix E: Focus Group Consent Form

I hereby give Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and its successors and assignees, the right to use, reproduce and distribute an audio recording of this conversation for research, educational, publication or marketing purposes without any compensation to me.

I understand that Minnesota State Colleges and Universities shall have total and exclusive control over the use of this recording, and I waive any right to inspect or approve any proposed publication in any medium. I hereby release Minnesota State Colleges and Universities and its successors and assignees from any liability by virtue of this recording.

After the conclusion of this focus group, the recording will be sent to an independent transcriptionist who will create a document of our discussion. Names, campus names and other identifiers will be removed, and the completed transcriptions will be sent to the Organizational Effectiveness Research Group at MSU-Mankato to prepare a report for use by the Charting the Future implementation teams. **No one’s name will ever be linked in any report to what he/she said during the group.** Following the end of this project, all recordings will be deleted from where they are being securely stored. In addition, the transcriptions (with identifiers removed) will be available for review by the implementation team members.

I state that I am at least 18 years of age and am competent to contract in my name. (If not at least 18, must have the signature of a parent or guardian.) I have read and understand the above.

Name_____________________________________

Signature___________________________________

Address____________________________________

Phone_____________________________________

City_______________________________________

State_______________________________________

Zip______________________________

Date_______________________________________
Appendix F: Introductory Script for Focus Groups

Good morning/afternoon and welcome!

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to attend this focus group discussion. This focus group is conducted as a part of the work of Charting the Future, which is a MN State Colleges and University system-wide effort to improve public higher education for our students. We are interested in student input particularly about your experience as a student and what has helped you be successful. The focus groups are being held at 16 locations across the state.

My name is ________________ from (name of your campus) and I’ll be facilitating today’s group – this is (introduce note-taker), who will be taking notes about our discussion.

The information you share with us at this focus group will be used to inform the continuing work of the eight implementation teams as we continue to develop initiatives.

You have all received a consent form. (show the form) Please take a moment to read and sign it. If you’d like a copy to take along, we have extras, so please ask for one on your way out.

You’ll notice that we are recording this conversation. This is to ensure that we are accurately capturing everything that’s said.

After the focus group, the recording will be sent to an independent transcriptionist who will create a document of our discussion. Names and other identifiers will be removed, and the completed transcriptions will be sent the Organizational Effectiveness Research Group at MSU-Mankato to prepare a report for use by the Charting the Future implementation teams. **No one’s name will ever be linked in any report to what he/she said during the group.** Following the end of this project, all recordings will be deleted from where they are being securely stored.

We will be using first names only during the group, and we want to encourage you to speak openly and honestly about your experiences here as a student. After the group is completed, please respect each other by not sharing “who said what” with others.

You may not be able to answer all of the questions that we ask today, and that’s fine. Please be aware that I will be encouraging everyone to participate, and may ask you to respond. Please feel free to decline.

Are there any questions about what I’ve shared? If not, we’ll start the recording and begin the group.
Appendix G: Advising Models and Options

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU)

Advising Models and Options

The below advising models and options are generalizations of past and current models of advising within MnSCU institutions. The list is not exhaustive and does not assume to capture all local, individualized models and options at specific institutions.

Four-Year Universities

Most universities have advisors for all students. New students and new transfer students are assigned an advisor based on their intended and/or declared major. Most academic advisors are faculty members from the department of the students’ intended and/or declared major. Students may be required to or encouraged to meet with their advisors once or more per semester. Some schools have a policy in which current students who want to register for upcoming semesters may need to see their advisor to receive a registration access code before they can register for courses. Advisors help students to clarify educational goals, understand curriculum and program requirements, discuss major/minor options, assist with course selection, explain university policies and graduation requirements, provide referrals, and support students’ academic goals.

Most universities have an Advising Center that coordinates programs and provides academic advising for specific populations. The Center assists students in the selection of an academic major and/or minor, answers student questions about academic forms and policies, and work with students on academic probation and suspensions. It also may coordinate peer tutoring and peer advising opportunities for students. If students have a diagnosed disability, they help students identify and benefit from necessary accommodations. The Advising Center may offer appointments and walk-in hours.

Most universities have a Counseling Center that is staffed by mental health professionals who provide confidential, short-term counseling services to enrolled students. Counseling services include individual, couple, and/or group services, as well as screening for mental health.

All newly admitted first year students are required to attend an advising, registration, and/or orientation day. All newly admitted transfer students are required to attend the advising, registration, and/or orientation day or complete an online transfer advising program.
Many institutions have an *advising tool* for first year students which can be accessed through an online platform, such as Desire to Learn (D2L) or GPS LifePlan. The advising tools provide information such as inventories and surveys, fact sheets, polices, forms, and academic planning tools.

Many institutions have a *Career Services Center* that provides a comprehensive range of services to assist current students and graduates in achieving their employment goals and/or entrance into a graduate or professional program. The Career Center facilitates the process of bringing candidates and employers together by sponsoring special events and hosting on-campus interview opportunities. It also hosts graduate and professional schools.

Some universities have a *student management tool* that provides information to advisors about students’ academic progress. Through using parts of the tool such as an Early Alert program, advisors are able to connect with students and provide academic support, resources, or referrals. Through using the student management tool, advisors can provide proactive and intrusive advising to students that are experiencing academic difficulties.

**Two-Year Colleges: Community Colleges, Technical Colleges, and Comprehensive Two-Year Colleges**

Most two-year colleges provide *academic advising and personal counseling* through the Advising and/or Counseling Center. Students can make appointments or stop by walk-in hours to meet with academic advisors and/or counselors. Academic advisors work with currently enrolled and returning students in the areas of academic planning, career development, and transfer concerns. Counselors work with students with academic, career, and personal concerns. Some colleges require students to meet with advisors and counselors during the advising and registration period to plan their educational program and register for classes.

Most colleges have an *Advising Center* that coordinates programs and provides academic advising for specific populations. The Center assists students in the selection of an academic major or program, answers student questions about academic forms and policies, and work with students on academic probation and/or suspension. It also may coordinate peer tutoring and peer advising opportunities for students. If students have a diagnosed disability, they help students identify and benefit from necessary accommodations (some institutions have a Disability Services Center for these services).

Most colleges have a *Counseling Center* that is staffed by faculty counselors and/or mental health professionals who provide confidential, short-term counseling services to
enrolled students. Counseling services may include individual, couple, and/or group services, as well as screening for mental health.

All newly admitted first year students are required to attend an **advising, registration, and/or orientation day**. All newly admitted transfer students are required to attend the advising, registration, and/or orientation day or complete an online transfer advising program.

Many institutions have an **advising tool** for first year students which can be accessed through an online platform, such as Desire to Learn (D2L) or GPS LifePlan. The advising tools provide information such as inventories and surveys, fact sheets, Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC), polices, forms, and academic planning tools.

Many institutions have a **Career Services Center** that provides a comprehensive range of services to assist current students and graduates in achieving their employment goals and/or entrance into a four-year university. The Career Center facilitates the process of bringing candidates and employers together by sponsoring special events and hosting on-campus interview opportunities. The Career Center also hosts college fairs for transfer purposes and coordinates events focused on transfer information.

Many **technical colleges or technical programs in comprehensive two-year colleges provide academic advisors to students within technical programs**. Academic advisors in this model are typically faculty members teaching in the specific career or technical program. Advisors meet with students periodically outside of class and work with students in the areas of academic planning and career development.

Some colleges have an **academy model** where new students and new transfer students are assigned an academic advisor based on their intended and/or declared major, program, or area of interest. The academic advisor meets with students periodically and provides support for academic planning and career development.

Some colleges have a **first-year-experience program** in which advisors, counselors, and/or faculty members meet with students for advising purposes. In this model, the advisor meets with students periodically and provides support for academic planning and career development.

Some colleges have a **student management tool** that provides information to faculty, staff, and administrators about students’ academic progress. Through using parts of the tool such as an Early Alert program, academic advisors, counselors, and/or faculty members are able to connect with students and provide academic support, resources, or referrals. Through using the student management tool, counselors and advisors can provide proactive and intrusive advising to students that are experiencing academic difficulties.