

College of San Mateo Students Share Their Perspectives

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The following individuals from Career Ladders Project contributed to the writing of the report or facilitation of the student focus groups:

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The major themes for each of the sections of the focus groups are summarized below.

I. CHOOSING A MAJOR

- a) Getting hands-on experience with careers helped students choose a major.
- b) Career counseling and career assessment classes help students clarify and identify strengths and majors of interest
- c) Students are interested in connecting more with peers who have similar career goals and major areas of interest.

II. SELECTING COURSES

- a) Once students decided on their majors, they found it difficult to understand which courses were required.
- b) Students who work during the day frequently noted that many classes they needed were only offered during the daytime.
- c) Students said that when counselors created educational plans with them, choosing courses was easier.

III. SUPPORTS (INCLUDING COUNSELING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES)

- a. Students identified instructional and counseling faculty, career assessment, and counseling courses as existing resources that were helpful in choosing a major.
- b. Students found that counseling and instructional faculty were most helpful when they were familiar with a student's field or major of interest, course and transfer requirements, and a student's' career interests.
- c. Students experienced difficulty scheduling times to meet with their counselors and wanted more time with them.
- d. Students yearn for a sense of community and peer connection at their colleges. They also seek culturally relevant curricula and to experience diversity in all aspects of their education.
- e. Students wished that learning communities interacted with each other more, since many students have multiple identities and affinities.
- f. Adult school students who chose a major and successfully enrolled in CSM found that assistance from both an adult school teacher and CSM faculty is essential.

QUOTES ILLUSTRATING MAIN THEMES

I. CHOOSING A MAJOR

- a) Getting hands-on experience with careers helped students choose a major.

In choosing a major, some students experienced greater challenges than others. Students who were returning to school with prior work and college experience had an easier time choosing a major than students who were entering college straight out of high school or had not previously completed a college degree or worked in a field they enjoyed.

Students who told us they were returning to school with prior college degrees and work experience said they were working toward gaining credentials that would move them forward in their careers or help them change careers. In general these students seemed clear about their goals and many discussed how their previous work experience helped them determine what majors they wanted to pursue:

“I want to become a nurse. Right now, I'm a medical assistant at UCSF Medical Center. And I want to just pursue nursing because I'm around that every day, and I have a really big interest in that, so that's why I'm here.”

Students who had not worked in a field of interest before college, or were coming to CSM straight out of high school, did not have the same clarity and focus in choosing a major. Many wished they'd had more hands-on opportunities, such as internships and externships, early in their college careers. This was a theme repeated across several focus groups:

“I was thinking of having actual externships instead of waiting until you're done with your course to do it, like having specific majors and actually having maybe two weeks of an externship to actually see what people do.”

- b) Students want to understand more about required courses for each major.

For students unsure of what they wanted to major in, those who were able to take career assessment and counseling courses stated these helped them identify their interests and strengths, select a major, and learn how to manage their class schedules and create career pathways based on their chosen majors. Students felt it would be helpful for their peers if they were systematically encouraged to take advantage of such opportunities:

"I took a counseling class that really helped me understand how to read the catalog, and what I needed to do to choose my major. I already knew what I wanted to do, but it just helped me to understand everything that goes around that. What classes I had to take. Wait a minute, I have to take math? Why? But that really helped a lot, because I want a masters degree-- I want a PhD but what the hell does PhD stand for? Those are the questions that I had to ask and that was the right class to do it in. So, the counseling classes really help."

"This third time that I came back, I took the career assessment. I wish that I would have taken that the very first time because it would have set my path and maybe things wouldn't have been so out of reach. I don't regret what I did or my experiences. I think I did well, and I think that I'm here now because I'm of what my work is and what I know. But I really do think that the career assessment class is very helpful because at least you know what your likes and dislikes are. And you'd be surprised at what your strengths are and what is available under those categories. So I think that if they were to offer classes to students that are unsure, especially-- I mean, some students know exactly what they want, where they want to go, and how to get there, but then there's those that don't, or don't even know what their interests are, and I think that that's a really good, strong-- it's a good way to build a path for yourself."

"One of the classes that really helped figure out what my strengths and weaknesses and interests were was taking the Career Assessment class. I took that a few years back, and then I do work full-time, so I worked on my generals and then I started the business program. But I found that class to be extremely helpful in figuring out what it is that my strengths, my interests are, and kind of gear it towards a degree or certificate."

c) Students are interested in connecting more with peers who have similar career goals and major areas of interest.

Students expressed that connecting with other peers within a specific major would be desirable and helpful for them. One recommendation was to create learning communities centered on areas of interest:

"But something that I would find helpful is to have a club that's dedicated to a specific major. Maybe having a sociology club or a nursing club where you can kind of come together and share ideas and share different internships that you see that would help someone else, and to kind of have a friend that's going on the same path, so you guys can kind of balance out and then help each other, be like, 'Oh, you're taking that class? How was it? Should I take that class as well?' Stuff like that."

II. SELECTING COURSES

- a) Once students decided on their majors, they found it difficult to understand which courses were required.

Many students in the focus groups remained unsure about the course requirements for their majors, even after visiting with a counselor. Some students commented that they met with up to three counselors, and only one of the counselors knew the courses that fulfilled requirements in their majors of interest. Students also experienced difficulty finding courses that fit with their schedules and were often unable to take courses required for their majors during the times they were offered:

“Since I’ve been here, I’ve met three counselors. The first one’s probably the one that was the most helpful. The other two knew about as much as I did about the program. They went onto the website and looked up what needed to be done, and you could tell they were just-- I walked in there pretty much knowing the same thing I knew walking out. They told me, ‘Okay. Well, which one of these classes do you want to take?’ And all it’s showing me is the code and the class. I’m like, ‘Okay. Do I close my eyes and pick one, or...?’”

“So my wife is trying to do the CPA. She’s currently a student here. And I think for a long time she was just struggling to find out what are the actual requirements to get the CPA qualification. And if you look at the materials about the class, it’s not very clear which classes does she need to take if she’s actually going towards that goal. And I think something where it’s-- and I know she’s spent a lot of time trying to research, but she still doesn’t have a very clear answer. So maybe just something simple [inaudible]-- if you want to do the CPA exam, you should take these classes, and then that’ll get you the qualification to sit for the exam.”

“It takes like a semester to kind of realize what’s going on and helps to pick the best classes or how to pick your schedule. I think one of my biggest issues, aside from that, is that whole how to be classes tend to coincide with one another. So scheduling, if you’re only available in the mornings, it’s tough. And then it leads to the technique the class to fit everything in to graduate in two years.”

“It’s extremely difficult to get some classes. You just have to wait and take a general education class to fulfill another requirement in the mean time.”

b) Students who work during the day frequently noted that many classes they needed were only offered during the daytime:

In addition to daytime scheduling challenges, students who work during the day and take night classes frequently noted they had difficulty taking the courses they needed because many classes aren't offered in the evenings. Many students mentioned that the availability of online classes helped ameliorate scheduling challenges, but the lack of daytime classes still delayed students in their process:

“That’s what I planned, to come and get everything done in two years and then I’ll transfer out, but it’s kind of hard because when you’re working and trying to go to school, it’s not that easy when most of the classes you have to take are during the daytime, and then it’s like I’m working during daytime, and then night-time jobs are kind of hard to work on when, it’s just—that’s always a difficult thing.”

“I’ve gotten delayed in this process because there hasn’t been night classes and they fill up and when you really need one specific class and it’s full at all the schools around you, it’s just like, now I’ll just wait next semester and I’m wasting time and it’s frustrating. And with the advent of online classes have been helpful. I actually really wish there was more mixed format where it’s mostly online and one night a week or one optional one night a week because I like the face to face but there’s hardly any like that CSM.”

c) Students said that when counselors created educational plans with them, choosing courses was easier.

Many students commented that knowing which courses they need to take early on motivated them to continue on their paths to complete their majors and graduate quickly. As illustrated below, students found it extremely helpful when counselors broke down the required coursework they needed for their majors:

“So, I can’t afford to fall behind [in these] classes or else I’d have to wait a full other year. And so at least with my counselor, she’s been able to set my [schedule for] summer, fall, and spring. . . ‘Let’s mix [it] up with a heavy class and a light class.’ So, she’s been very helpful, and it just helps you stay motivated to continue.”

Students also noted that online course-selection sites, such as Degree Works, have been helpful in figuring out course requirements and filling in information gaps, but they wish counselors could have mentioned these sites as a resource, or filled in the missing information during appointments:

“...the most confusing part for me was every school has a different name for each class, like a class here that’s English 100 could be English 110 somewhere else. So

to find out which classes actually apply for a specific school, like a CSU or UC, because those requirements are often different as well, it's nice to have that Degree Works program or I can go online to search for UC and actually find out does my class apply towards a transfer credit versus am I just kind of taking it for an associate's degree. That would've been nice for a counselor to point that out because I had an education plan for the first two semesters I was here because I was still working full-time and I hadn't been back to school for like two or three semesters and I'd taken some time off. So I kind of eased into it and I only had two classes on each of those education plan semesters. So past that I didn't really know what I needed except major requirement and certain general eds like maths and English. But I think to point that out from a counselor's perspective, I don't know how everybody else experienced it, but for me I never heard about that until a friend pointed it out to me."

III. SUPPORTS (INCLUDING COUNSELING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES)

- a) Students identified instructional and counseling faculty, career assessment, and counseling courses as existing resources that were helpful in choosing a major.

One existing resource mentioned several times was the presence of instructional and counseling faculty with deep knowledge about specific areas and majors. As illustrated in the quote below, students found counselors to be helpful in choosing their majors, especially when the counselors were specialized in the students' fields of interest:

"There's one counselor I have that I've seen. She's the director of the nursing program—so she is a part of that program. For me, she's been very helpful in telling me, 'This is where you're at. To get into the program by this year, [these are] the classes you (must) have.' She's like, 'Let's start with these,' and then, I ask her, 'Well, what am I going to do with this remaining time?' She's like, 'Well, that's when you'll do your last class. It's like a fitness class, or something.'"

- b) Students found that counseling and instructional faculty were most helpful when they were familiar with a student's field or major of interest, course and transfer requirements, and a student's career interests.

Students frequently commented they wished more counselors could be specialized in particular areas. When counselors were knowledgeable about a major, students often received better assistance and information:

“She honestly has been the best counselor I've ever [spoken] to because . . . she explained everything step by step. She was like, ‘These are the classes you have to get done, and this is how much time you have if you want to graduate by this year. If you're working, you should probably go part time so you can get this class done, this and that.’ And then she's like, ‘You have available these classes, these are how many units you can do.’”

c) Students experienced difficulty scheduling times to meet with their counselors and wanted more time with them.

Students also found counselors without specialization in a specific field to be less knowledgeable about different majors, career trajectories, and course and transfer requirements:

“I met this person who actually gave me a answer, but it was after searching, searching, searching. There are so many counselors. You randomly pick someone for your counseling appointment because you want the closest date, but you don't know if those persons have the information that you want.”

Students also wished counseling faculty were available more hours or were able to answer quick questions without the need for an appointment:

“The counseling was great, the information they gave me and all that, but the time you have to talk to them is very limited. You barely get like 10, 15 minutes. And if you're late, you miss the time, and you have to wait for a week or two for the appointment.

“I'm trying to think how counselors can be more available. There's one day a week there's kind of a drop-in, another option or maybe some online communication that's open. And maybe because it's online it can be more efficient, because you can kind of just pop in, whoever's kind of there all day answering questions. You might need two or you might have to leave your question, and they can get back to you that day, but somebody who's kind of a floater who can just kind of fill in when things get a little too booked up. Especially towards the start of the semester when everybody's trying to cram it in.”

“...something that I think would work is instant chatting. So you won't have to go- especially students that work during the day. Most of the counselors, they're gone by 6:00. So yeah, that would be nice to have a system that where we could communicate right away and get an answer without going to the office.”

“I think, at least once or twice a week, there should be an open session. And the slot should be from 8:00 to 1:00, they're sending you to take your lunch, and then

from 3:00 to whatever. And there needs to be evening time because you have a lot of people there coming in at night.”

d) Students yearn for a sense of community and peer connection and their colleges. They also seek culturally relevant curricula and to experience diversity in all aspects of their education.

A theme repeated by many students was the importance of community at school, and how it contributes to their morale and sense of belonging. Conversely, other students said they felt a lack of community in their college experience and yearned for it. We did not ask students in the focus groups whether they felt a strong connection to their college communities and peers, but the subject emerged nonetheless.

Students expressed not only a longing for community, but also for a connection to other students to gain support and advice, and especially to peers with similar career interests or majors. Some students were interested in peer-to-peer mentoring, saying it would be inspiring and helpful to hear stories and get support from students ahead of them in college, and to have candid conversations with them about the college experience:

“I would really like to see like more enthusiasm overall, with both clubs and like different groups for minorities. I understand that-- I mean specifically from faculty, and I understand that even if they're not able to necessarily be at every meeting or even be at any meeting, it would be nice to hear about it at least. Or maybe a two-minute announcement about them because, kind of similar to what [student name] said, when I joined student government, I felt like I was surrounded by people who had similar goals and a similar drive, especially with regards to transferring, where we wanted to transfer, and just an overall sense of motivation. And I felt like I had these people to help me to figure out how to get to where I wanted to go, which was really beneficial but I didn't even know that we had a student government until last semester.”

“I feel like one of the biggest things that's missing is a celebration of culture. Not just ethnic culture, but, I mean, even within each major there's a certain kind of unity. If we're able to create those kind of spaces at events rather than just [in] offices, and have that kind of network and start building them o each other, I feel like that would promote education, in general, and [having] students stay on campus...”

Some students talked about their appreciation for belonging to learning communities, where they found helpful resources, mentoring, and culturally relevant curricula. But several mentioned that they wished this experience with culturally relevant curricula

and other resources could extend beyond their specific learning communities and be incorporated into all subject matter and their entire college experience:

“I remember the first day of my first English class I was going to sign up for. The teacher asked us, ‘Everyone write down on your paper like what do you want out of this class.’ I remember saying, ‘I want to read a book by an author of color because I never got to do that in high school,’ ...and then [I] saw our books were about some white guy climbing Mount Everest ...and then I went to the bookstore, and I saw that this one other teacher was teaching about mass incarceration... I changed to take that class..., but I wish that this had happened sooner, and I wish that it happens more often.”

e) Students wished that learning communities interacted with each other more, since many students have multiple identities and affinities.

While students who were in learning communities shared that these communities were extremely helpful in creating a sense of belonging and for receiving information and support, they made a number of recommendations to integrate and strengthen learning communities at CSM, including creating student groups by major within the different learning communities, having those communities come together more, and advertising these programs at college orientation so that students know about them sooner. The quote below illustrates some of the major themes that arose:

“...there's not a lot of intersectionality on campus. And even though there are a lot of communities for a diverse group of people, there isn't much communication between them, and it feels, not cliquish, but there are... I don't know. It's very well-defined, and it doesn't make it feel very fluid. [There] isn't enough focus on different communities.”

“What's burning inside of me to say that a point that you brought up I feel is we have groups Mona and Project Change and Umoja. And I feel like we have those because we have to or else it's not represented or not acknowledged or respected. So, I don't know. To me, I'm glad that there's these learning communities and they're like so supportive. But I feel like the whole school

should just be like a Mona or Umoja. You shouldn't have to have groups for these things. Do you have a normal group for normal people? It makes you feel like you're not normal. More like you're a special group. It makes me feel isolated in a way even though their support, it's like there's not much unity amongst these groups. It's like you are formally incarcerated so go to Project Change. You are Pacific Islanders so, that's how I feel about it.”

- f) Adult school students who chose a major and successfully enrolled in CSM found that assistance from both an adult school teacher and CSM faculty is essential.

Among the student focus groups, one included students from the (local) adult school. Many of the students were already enrolled at the College of San Mateo, but about half of them were still in adult school. Adult school students listed a number of barriers they faced, including limited access to on-campus opportunities at CSM, adult school teachers' lack of familiarity with CSM requirements for enrollment, and how exposure to college resources differs based on a student's English proficiency:

“So actually, recently, the adult school and [the] community college [have been] trying to connect [with] each other, maybe much, much more than before, I think. I am a very new student [at] adult school, so I don't know the past situation. But recently, for English class, I am in the high advanced class. And the teacher of [the] high advanced [class] of ESL at adult school and ESL teachers at community college [are] working together to [help students] transition from the [ESL] exit test for the adult school.”

Appendix A: Focus Group Protocols

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. We have been asked to include student voices and experiences in discussions with your college's leaders and faculty about how the college can better serve students. Would it be OK to record the conversation, so that we can capture your ideas as you present them? As we write this up, we will not be using your names. We want you to know that we think everything you have to say is important, and we are here to learn from you and your experiences here at College X. We would like to hear from everyone, whether your experiences are similar to or different from others.

Intros:

1. Let's go around, introduce yourself, and please just tell us a little bit about why you decided to go to college.

Choosing a major:

2. How many of you have chosen a major already? How many of you feel you have not made a decision about your choice of major yet? (Look for a show of hands, say the number out loud for the recorder)
3. Let's begin with those of you who have decided on a major already. How did you go about making that decision?

Probes:

- How long did it take you to choose a major?
 - Have you changed your major along the way? (Look for a show of hands from people who changed their major multiple times)
 - What was helpful in exploring what your interests were?
4. For those who have not decided on a major, how do you think you will go about making the decision?

Probes:

- How much do you know about your areas of interest? What other information do you need to make a decision?
5. What do you think the college could do to help you and other students decide on a major early on?

Choosing Classes

6. How do you decide which courses to take?

Probes:

- Do you know which courses you need to take next semester? If not, how will you find out?
- Where can you get the most helpful information on which courses to take every semester?
- What has been your experience in choosing courses? Can you usually register for the courses you need?
- Are you able to get the advising/counseling that you need?
- What do you think works well when it comes to choosing your courses every semester?
- What do you think could improve?

Closing

7. Do you know anyone who has had to stop or drop out before finishing their program? Why do you think that happens?
8. What kinds of things can the college do to help students overcome their biggest challenges and stay in school?

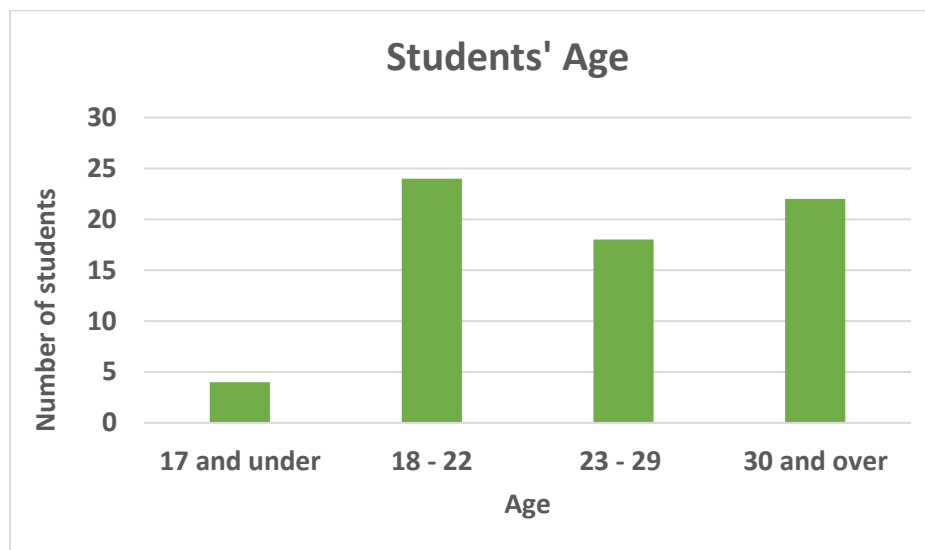
Now, we are close to the end. We have talked about a lot of things. Let's take a moment to think through what might be most important when it comes to helping more students hang in there and finish their programs of study or degrees. Let's go around and share any final thoughts you may have on this—maybe something we talked about, or something that just occurred to you.

Appendix B: Characteristics of Participating Students

San Mateo Community College District's Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness was able to provide demographic data for 68 out of 78 students who participated in the focus groups. These student characteristics are summarized below:

Gender, Age, and Race and Ethnicity:

Of the 68 students for whom data was available, female students represented well over half (64 percent) of the participants. The focus group students' ages ranged from 15 to 61, with roughly half of the students being 25 and under. The graph below details the age distribution of the participants:

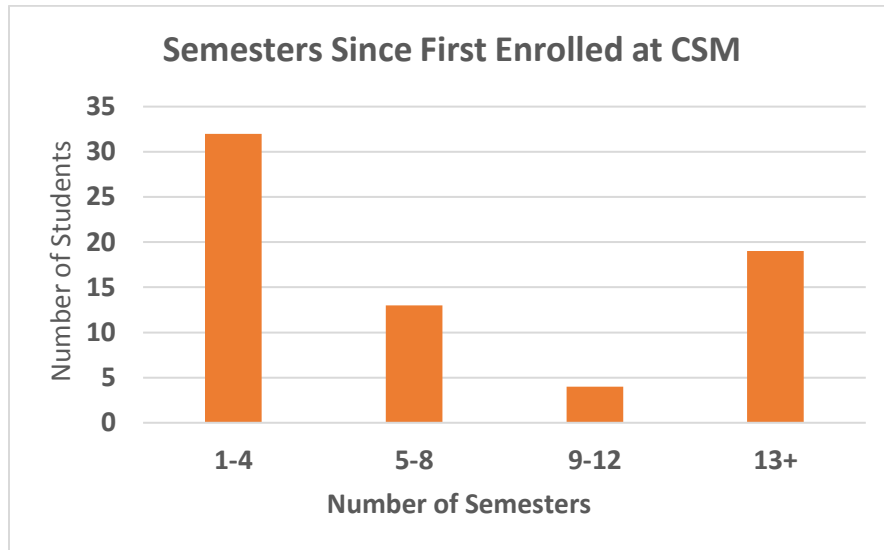


In regards to race and ethnicity, White, Hispanic, and Multi Races students constituted 73.6% of the focus groups. See below for a detailed breakdown of participants by race and ethnicity:

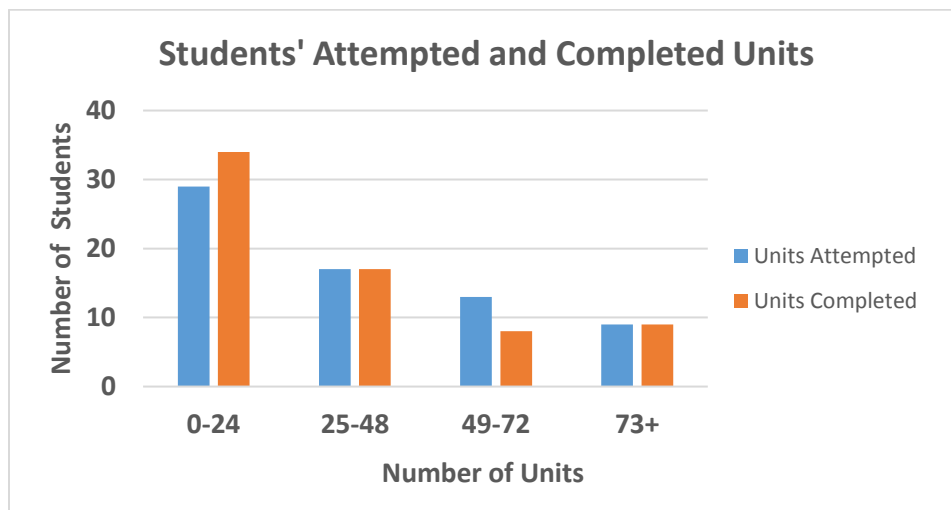
Race/Ethnicity	Percentage of Participants
Asian	14.7%
Black	2.9%
Filipino	1.5%
Hispanic	20.6%
Multi Races	20.6%
Pacific Islander	5.9%
Unknown	1.5%
White	32.4%

Length of Enrollment and Credits Attempted:

In terms of length of enrollment, the participants represented a wide range of students – from first semester students to those who first enrolled at College of San Mateo 20 to 30 years ago. Nearly half of the participants enrolled after 2016, while a quarter of students enrolled between 2013 and 2015.¹ The graph below illustrates the length of enrollment by the number of semesters since focus group participants first enrolled:²



Nearly 43 percent of students have attempted up to 24 units, equivalent to 1 year or less of full-time enrollment.³ Similarly, half of the participants have actually completed up to 24 units, with a median of 23 units completed. Of the 13.2 % who attempted and completed over 73 units, equivalent to 3 or more years of full-time enrollment, about half of them are seeking an associate degree and/or transfer.



¹ The remaining quarter of students enrolled between 1987 and 2012.

² The counting of semesters here include the summer session (i.e. each year is counted as three semesters).

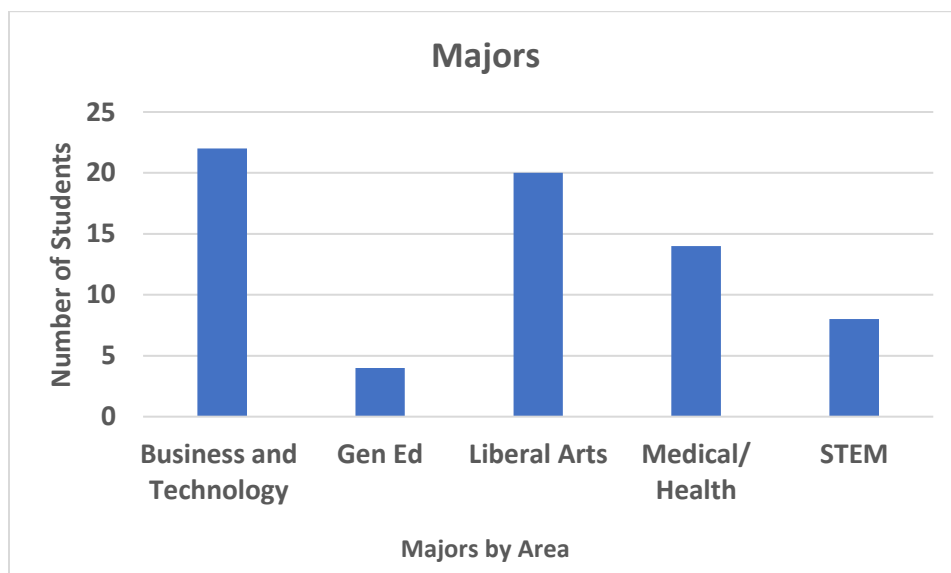
³ One year of full-time load defined as 12 units for both fall and spring semesters, excluding summer session.

Educational Goals and Majors:

In terms of educational goals, 68% of focus group participants are seeking a degree (associates and/or transfer), while others are at CSM to fulfil other educational and job skills related goals.

Educational Goals	Percentage of Participants
Transfer (with or without AA)	55.9%
Earn AA	11.7%
Formulate career plan	7.4%
Job skills/ certificate	11.7%
Basic skills, educational development, HS diploma	8.8%
Undecided	4.4%

A range of majors were represented in the focus groups, which for the purpose of visual representation CLP clustered into 5 major areas: Business and Technology, General Education (for transfer), Liberal Arts, Medical/Health, and STEM, as seen below. For a more detailed breakdown by individual majors, see tables on page 15.



See below for a breakdown of focus group participants by subject areas/ majors:

Business and Technology (32.4 %):

Majors	# of Students
Accounting	2
Addiction/ Alcohol & Drugs Studies	2
Administration of Justice	1
Architecture	1
Business	9
Computer & Information Science	2
Human Resources Management	1
Investments and Securities	1
Multimedia Technology	2
Office Management AS	1

General Education (5.9%):

Majors	# of Students
IGETC1 CSU Certification	1
IGETC2 UC Certification	3

Liberal Arts (29.4%):

Majors	# of Students
Art	2
Communication Studies	2
Economics	1
Music	1
Psychology	5
Sociology: CSU	2

Medical/Health (20.6%):

Majors	# of Students
Dental Occupations	1
Emergency Medical Technician	1
Kinesiology	1
Massage Therapy	2
Medicine, General	1
Nursing	8

STEM (11.8%):

Majors	# of Students
Biology: Medical	3
Engineering	2
Life Sciences - General	1
Mathematics	2

