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for California Community Colleges

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Amplifying the Voices of Students of Color:

Opportunities to Address Equity
Gaps at Folsom Lake College

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Introduction

In fall 2020, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) conducted four focus groups with specific student groups identified by Folsom Lake College's institutional data as experiencing disproportionate impact in terms of access and/or success. These focus groups included two with African American/Black students, one with Latinx/Hispanic students, and one with a group composed of students from a range of other backgrounds and identities such as Filipino and students of mixed race (a summary of the research methodology can be found in Appendix A). Thirty-two students participated in the focus groups.

The focus groups were originally scheduled to take place in person in spring 2020. However, they were rescheduled for fall 2020 due to COVID-19 and were subsequently adapted to a virtual setting and conducted via Zoom. A second event—the surge of activism to address systemic inequities sparked by the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others—was an impetus for the college to change the line of inquiry of these focus groups. The initial focus of the research was gathering information that would inform the improvement of the college's Soar to Success program. In light of everything that happened in 2020, that focus shifted to learning about the perspectives and experiences of the disproportionately impacted student groups listed above (a copy of the focus group protocol is found in Appendix B). The purpose of this report is to take what was learned from these students and use it to inform Folsom Lake College's planning efforts to close equity gaps and facilitate success for disproportionately impacted students.

Road Map to This Report

The rich conversations facilitated through the focus groups enabled the RP Group to explore a wide range of topics with African American/Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and other students comprising other mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds and identities. As we began to synthesize the learnings and experiences shared with us by focus group participants, we discovered themes and experiences that were unique to particular student groups. Additionally, we identified a number of crosscutting themes that were consistent among students in all four focus groups. Lastly, students also discussed their current educational experiences with online and primarily asynchronous instruction, which was a direct response to the pandemic.

This report is organized into the following five sections: 1) belonging and community, 2) experiences inside and outside the classroom, 3) experiences with student supports and access to resources, 4) the college experience during COVID-19, and 5) moving from data to action. Within each section, we draw attention to issues raised by specific student groups and interweave representative student quotes to validate their experience. Each section concludes with recommendations for how the college may want to respond to what students shared about their experiences.

Belonging and Community

Focus group participants were asked to describe their experience as students of color at Folsom Lake College (FLC) whether they felt welcome and a sense of belonging within the college community. In contrast to Latinx/Hispanic and other students of color in the focus groups who largely shared feeling welcome and a sense of belonging at the college, African American/Black students described having the opposite experience. What follows is an exploration of the reasons why African American/Black students do not feel welcome and part of the college community, and why other students do feel a sense of belonging.

Belonging or Not Belonging

African American/Black Students

Overall, African American/Black students who participated in the focus groups shared that they had experienced an unwelcoming environment and felt a lack of belonging within the college community as compared to Latinx/Hispanic and other students of color. From the perspective of African American/Black students, reasons included the overall lack of diversity among faculty, staff, and students, as well as the area's demographics and assumptions and stereotypes about African American/Black students. In the words of four students:

I struggle [with] having no sense of community because I feel alienated. I feel alone in the school. It affects my motivation to get good grades. I can't go to school and not be social. After a while, it messes with me psychologically.

I haven't seen any Black faculty at Folsom Lake in the two semesters I've been there.

I think I've only ever had White professors, now that I think about it.

Not having people that look like you means the absence of having people to connect with that share your experience. You can be on campus without really connecting with other students and even with professors.

While the majority of students expressed not feeling a sense of belonging at FLC (as illustrated in the quotes above) one student voiced a contrasting experience:

Even though FLC does not have many African American students, I still feel supported and safe. I just don't see a lot of African American people there.

To gain a better understanding of what made this student feel safe and supported, the RP Group facilitator, asked the student to share what support and safety looked like to him, and his response was:

Well, to me it's not feeling out of place. Still being able to connect with some of the students and some of the professors.

At the same time that students shared wanting to have more faculty and staff that look like them, they also noted that simply bringing in more African American/Black students and faculty would not be enough to lessen the micro-aggressions many of them experience and create a more welcoming campus culture. Increasing diversity comes with a responsibility from the college. Campus leaders need to create an environment and climate that will allow African American/Black and all students of color to flourish in a predominantly White area. Two students remarked:

I don't think it's enough to necessarily have more people that look like me. Say you bring in more Black people. Other people might just look at it as, "Oh well, there's just more Black people here," and any micro-aggressions they have [might] then be magnified. If [the college is] going to [bring in more Black people], they have to make it clear that everybody is welcome and that they want everybody to feel they have a place here and everybody [should] feel seen and heard. Any disrespect, or any intolerance, is not going to be accepted at all.

[The college] can't really dictate somebody's personal beliefs, [but they can] create an environment where people can be more open-minded. I think [increasing] the visibility of Black students and making people more aware and even have more discussions like [these focus groups], I feel is a really big step because there are so few of us, and the experiences we have are very different to everybody's else experiences. They don't know our experiences [and] we don't know theirs.

Pacific Islanders and Other Students of Color

Similar to African American/Black students, students who identified as Pacific Islanders and other students of color who participated in the mixed race focus group also shared feeling estranged from the campus community. In one student's words:

I really didn't feel any sense of community for the few years that I've been at that main campus. Everybody that's there, they're already in their little cliques; [even] the other students, other minority students. I had a few Asian girls in my class [and] they cliqued together. Everybody else on campus that I saw was White and Caucasian. I just keep my head down and walk to class.

Latinx/Hispanic Students

In contrast to African American/Black and Pacific Islander students, Latinx/Hispanic students overall shared that they did not feel singled out or treated differently because they were students of color. Two students described:

My experience has been all positive. I've been feeling welcomed [by] all my professors, all the other students, and the staff. I don't feel different because of my language or because I'm Latina.

I think everyone looks at everyone the same. I don't think they look or treat me different because I'm another race.

Rancho Cordova Center: A More Welcoming Place

Across all four focus groups, several participants shared that they live in Rancho Cordova and take classes at Folsom Lake College's Rancho Cordova Center. Students of color are very cognizant about the difference in demographics and socioeconomic status between the city of Folsom Lake, which is predominantly White and on the affluent side, versus the city of Rancho Cordova, which is more diverse and less economically prosperous. Moreover, students were quick to note the stigma they experience living in this community. As two students commented:

People from Folsom just assume that if you live in Rancho [Cordova], you live in a bad area and that it is super ghetto. I guess Rancho has a really bad rep, but not all areas are the same. [People from Folsom] seem to give you a weird type of look: "Oh, you're from Rancho? You're probably one of those types of people that lives in the hood area, and there's probably police officers all the time on your street." People kind of look at you funny. It's not like Folsom, but it's not as bad either.

I've definitely been called "ghetto" a few times for living in Rancho. There's definitely this weird stigma against it.

Despite the differences in demographics, socioeconomic status, and reputation of Rancho Cordova, students who lived in Rancho Cordova and/or took classes at the Center shared feeling much more comfortable, supported, and welcome compared to students at the main campus in Folsom. Two students described:

I feel a little bit like an outsider at the main campus. The Rancho Cordova campus is a lot more diverse. It is a lot easier to talk to the person next to me and ask them a question, and they would like actually acknowledge me.

After attending [FLC] for almost two years, I've only met with one counselor of color and that was at ... the Rancho Cordova location. Speaking with her, she set really high expectation-type goals because there isn't a lot of people of color at that campus.

Invisible on Campus

When students of color do not see themselves represented through positive images on campus, they are getting a message about which students are important and which are not important at the college. For these students, the lack of representation can also indicate they are not part of the college community. One student captured the overall sentiment shared by many students across all four focus groups:

I feel like I need to be able to picture myself or be able to picture other students that look like me or see pictures of other minorities. The advertising I see for club rushes, it's always pictures of the majority of white students that are there.

Dedicated Spaces Can Foster a Sense of Community

African American/Black students noted the absence of dedicated spaces on campus where they could interact with one another, build a sense of community, and not feel alone on campus.

I feel like there's not much of a community [for Blacks] at Folsom Lake College. There is for White people and Asians and Mexicans, but there's nothing for Blacks.

Another student shared his experience being part of a Black student club when he attended another California community college with similar demographics to FLC:

Having events like poetry, Black authors, movies, hosting student panels fostered a sense of community; something which is absent at FLC.

There was consensus among African American/Black focus group participants that having a Black student club at FLC would encourage the building of community by providing African American/Black students the opportunity to be with peers who look like them and share common experiences. However, when asked if the college would support the development of a Black student club, one student stated:

They would entertain the idea, but it would be hard to get it started because there's not enough Black or African American students at Folsom Lake.

Moreover, students pointed out the importance of faculty in terms of supporting and being advisors to student clubs. The lack of African American faculty makes students feel that it would be difficult to get a Black student club started at FLC. In the words of one student:

Let's say I wanted to start a BSU (Black Student Union), but I see that there's no faculty that could give me that support. I probably wouldn't want to start a BSU [at FLC], or I'd be less likely to pursue that.

Reflections on Student Life

African American/Black students were very cognizant that beyond the college celebrating Black History month, there exists a dearth of cultural activities centered on African Americans/Blacks and their positive contributions to FLC and society at large. Students articulated the importance of including different types of events and mediums (e.g., music, art) to showcase the diversity of the African American/Black community. Offering monthly events and activities that focus on the richness of African American/Black culture and people could provide the college an opportunity to increase awareness in the campus community about the value that African American/Black students bring to the college. Moreover, African American/Black students

would be able feel more visible and valued by the college faculty, staff, and other students on campus. Two students shared:

There are things for White people and Asians and Mexicans, but not so much for Blacks. We get one reminder of Black History Month, but [Black culture] is not talked about in classes or anywhere else.

Let's get some activities and entertainment that show and represent the African American community. I'm not talking about no Black History, it's every day, all day, all year. We got a lot of talented Black musicians out there. We got a lot of talented Black screenwriters and photographers, so let's bring them to the campus. If [the college is] going to create a better learning environment, do it for everybody even though the number is small.

Assumptions and Stereotypes

Labels are regularly applied to groups of people and/or individuals, which, for good or for bad, affect how others think about these groups and individuals; these labels often stem from unfounded assumptions and stereotypes. Moreover, people can also internalize the assumptions and stereotypes made about their group affiliation that can cause them to anticipate certain behaviors towards them. For example, some African American/Black men, especially tall men, often expect they will be perceived as a “threatening African-American male.” Another example held among many people of color is the expectation that they might be racially profiled as suspicious and likely involved in criminal-based activities based on their race or ethnicity. On a more subtle level, many people of color wait for macroaggressions to be directed towards them verbally in the form of hurtful or stigmatizing comments and/or behaviorally in the form of being ignored or dismissed. Focus group participants, especially African American/Black and other students who were visibly not White shared feeling as if faculty, staff, and students who barely knew them or were meeting them for the first time treated them differently.

African American/Black Students

African American/Black students conveyed feeling as though they were treated differently because of their race or ethnicity. They expressed that the negative interactions they experienced on campus with faculty, staff, and other students stemmed from assumptions made about them and being seen through the lens of stereotypes about African Americans/Blacks. Moreover, African American/Black students noted that their lived experience has conditioned them to look at situations through the lens of racial dynamics, and to internalize racial dynamics affecting how they interact with their faculty, staff, and peers. Focus group participants also mentioned having to get used to being the only African American/Black student in the classroom. Three students described:

If you speak up or get overly passionate about a topic, sometimes it's taken as you being an angry Black man or an angry Black woman. Then, you feel like you can't talk anymore.

When you're walking around campus, nobody wants to speak to you, look in your direction, smile, wave; there's always that stereotype that people that look like me have an attitude [and] we're not easily approachable. We are friendly—just speak or smile, it goes a long way, or wave or something!

There's numerous times when I'm the only Black person in the class. People kind of see you negatively and treat you differently in a negative way. We get through it, we navigate it—that's just something we have to do [in] society regardless. We have to do that switch, so we can function in that type of environment.

Other Students of Color

Physical characteristics are often the basis for assumptions and stereotypes; however, students in the Latinx/Hispanic and mixed race focus groups shared experiencing assumptions and stereotypes based on their religion and their primary language not being English. Two students shared their experience:

I feel like I'm always on guard [and] more cautious because [Folsom Lake College] is in a predominantly White area. There are times I'm not as comfortable around my peers on campus in terms of racial dynamics. I am Arab, I am also Muslim, and I wear a headscarf. That's an immediate visible indication of who I am as a person. Although I may not have faced extreme racism, thankfully, I do have this subconscious thought in my mind that when I am out in public, people do look at me differently. People might not have the best idea of me, even though that may not be true. I automatically assume that people don't want to talk to me and probably think I'm weird because I wear a headscarf. While I haven't really experienced that on [the] FLC campus, since I have only been online, that's kind of something that I am expecting to happen just because the campus is pretty much majority White. So due to the lack of diversity, I'm not expecting to fit in immediately.

I think people do judge you when they look at you [and by] how you speak, especially if you [are] speaking a second language. That's what I experienced. [Other students] basically start judging you when you pronounce [in a] different way the words [rather] than pronouncing words [like] the people who are born in this country. They judge you based on where you grow up and how you speak. I think that should not be the case.

Recommendations: Belonging and Community

1. Review the college's practices for recruiting, screening, and hiring faculty and staff of color.

One student noted the impact having teachers and staff who look like them can have on their sense of belonging at the college:

I do know in community college, it's open acceptance [and the college] can't control the student body that enrolls. What [the college] can control is faculty.

While having a teacher that looks like you might not be the same as having a friend that looks like you, it does bring a sense of comfort. It [creates] a sense of community, even if it is in a small way, it can make a big difference for some students—it really does! I think that is one thing that's 100% in [the college's] control and that they can work on.

2. **Ensure supportive onboarding and retention efforts for faculty and staff of color** who often feel marginalized in predominantly White departments within a predominantly White college that is located in a predominately White community. Hiring more faculty of color is not enough. Efforts must be made to retain them.
3. **Examine who is represented in messages and images used by the college** (e.g., website, class schedule, brochures) to ensure that students of all races and ethnicities see themselves as valuable members of the FLC community.
4. **Identify and employ different mediums to counter stereotypes on campus.**
 - a. **Increase the awareness of systemic racism** against African Americans/Blacks among students, faculty, and staff and provide strategies for how to reduce it, such as workshops on unconscious bias.
 - b. **Provide opportunities for the campus community to learn about new cultures.** These activities can help broaden people's minds and opens them up to new possibilities. However, it is important to keep in mind that while celebrating diversity is fun and worthwhile, it is no substitute for addressing difficult questions head-on. In the absence of dealing with the tough issues of prejudice and stereotyping, cultural celebrations by themselves do not usually affect the fundamental ways in which we think about people of other races and cultures.
 - c. **Develop and support allies on campus** who, while not members of a marginalized group, can team up to support those who are experiencing bias and make a significant impact.
5. **Identify and implement different approaches to validate the identity and lived experiences of African American/Black and other students of color.**
 - a. Share practices that validate the identities and lived experiences of students of color outside the classroom through guest speakers, workshops, student panels, art exhibits, and community networks.
 - b. Promote a campus culture grounded in student-centered practices to help foster genuine relationships between faculty, staff, and students.

Experiences Inside and Outside the Classroom

In addition to feeling invisible due to the lack of images and messages reflecting students of color on campus, African American/Black students in particular, also shared not seeing themselves reflected in and/or having limited opportunities to explore their identities in the college's curriculum, as well as a dearth of student life events that celebrate their racial/ethnic

and cultural identities. Furthermore, students across all focus groups shared mixed experiences in their relationships with faculty.

We Are Part of United States History

African American/Black students shared their disappointment when discussing their experiences with how African American/Black history is taught at FLC; either their contributions to American history were minimized or limited to slavery and/or the civil rights era. The quotes from three students capture this sentiment:

When I was taking history class [and] we got to the part about talking about Black people, the teacher just skirted along and rushed through it. Whereas, we talked about White people the entire time. I feel like Black people should be talked about as much or more in US History classes, because we have a huge part to play in the history of the United States, just as much as White people or any other race.

Like no offense Martin Luther King, you did wonders, but there's just so many more people that we can talk about and acknowledge on an educational platform.

I feel that the only history we ever hear about is the civil rights era. All those people are legends, and we need to hold them up. However, I know Black history is more than one story. It's very diverse and encompasses all different types of perspectives. I think [the college] can really do that justice.

Student/Faculty Relationships

Students in the four focus groups offered a variety of opinions about their relationships with faculty at Folsom Lake College. African American/Black students felt they worked twice as hard to be noticed and/or prove to their professors that they are as capable as student from other racial or ethnic groups. They also expressed that many faculty members did not take the time to support their academic development, and voiced being put in the role of representing the African American community on social issues in class. Four African American/Black students shared:

Having to work harder is just a fact. I have to work extra hard just to get noticed, to even be recognized in the classroom when you're the only Black student or African American student in your class. That's how my classes are. I'm the only one.

Any time that I tried to ask [my professor] questions, she seemed to snap at me or have some type of attitude with me. Other people in the classroom were asking similar questions, and she would be completely nice with them. When we're doing [work] by ourselves, [my professor] is so willing to help everybody else out, but she would just completely skip past me.

In my administration of justice class, it seems like when it came to [issues] about arrests and crimes, I seemed to get a lot of questions.

I don't like when a professor brings up topics from the news that have to do with Black or African American people. Sometimes I think [professors believe they are] being inclusive, but really it's more singling you out because then all the other students look to you, quite literally look at you, and then you're pressured into speaking on behalf of the whole community.

In contrast to these painful interactions described by African American/Black students, Latinx/Hispanic students in particular described experiences with faculty in a more positive way. Two students commented:

I'm taking a human career development class with [X] Professor. I'm really happy I took the class because of how welcoming and inviting he is. He also helped me navigate the college in terms of which classes to take, how many units to take, [and] how many things I can manage.

I have a teacher who I've known for two years. He has always been very kind and flexible. It's almost like we're his friends as well as his students, and that really helps us feel welcome in the class and also feel motivated to keep going with the class. And, if it gets tough, not to give up because we know that we have him as a support system. It's nice having someone who wants you to succeed like that.

Recommendations: Experiences Inside and Outside the Classroom

- 6. Provide ongoing professional development around equity-mindedness** to help change classroom practices in ways that help all students feel supported and cared for by faculty in the classroom.
- 7. Provide professional development to support all faculty in becoming culturally competent** and in creating culturally relevant learning experiences for their students. For example, learner-centered instructional techniques such as cooperative and collaborative learning, in which students are encouraged to work together, can help create an environment in which everyone's viewpoint is acknowledged through equal participation as experts, and students feel safe because their perspective is respected.
- 8. Conduct a curriculum audit to ensure that the culture, values, and lives of dominant groups are not the only ones reflected** and seen as the norm. Culturally responsive curriculum is filled with people's stories, and it can offer activities, assignments, and illustrations that influence how people understand the world, as well as contribute to centering and normalizing people who are not from the dominant culture. One student provided a concrete example:

Contemporary African American leaders could be woven into the curriculum. You don't necessarily have to go back in history. For example, if you're in an anthropology class, who are some notable contributors to that field of African descent? African American descent? And then others as well. Non-white people of color. [The college] could make that effort to diversify the curriculum, just to expose people and then also bringing in more faculty that can represent those fields as well.

9. Encourage the development of special programs that promote the success of African American/Black Students.

- a. Identify the necessary resources to develop a **support program to meet the academic and other support needs of African American/Black students at FLC**. One student referenced a program called Umoja¹, a two-semester college success program, which he had taken part in at a different California Community College. In his words:

Maybe Folsom could have a program like Umoja? It's like a learning community with a lot of support.

- b. Identify faculty and staff who could work with African American/Black students to create and support a **Black student club**.
- c. **Develop and offer support groups for African American/Black students**. One student shared her perspective about the importance of support groups for African American/Black students:

What I've seen, it wasn't really too much support groups. The only thing I've seen that was supportive was in the summer a crisis hotline or support group when we were having all these riots when the police was killing all our men and women. I was really surprised [about] that. That was a good start. But we need more because the world we're living in is very diverse, but the systematic racism is still there.

Experiences with Student Supports and Access to Resources

Feedback from participants across the four focus groups revealed a number of key themes related to how they access and experience student supports at the college. These themes included: the importance of finding the right counselor, getting conflicting information from different counselors, ongoing issues accessing counseling, an appreciation for helpful supports

¹ <https://umojacommunity.org/>

provided by special programs, and a desire for better communication about resource availability.

Navigating the General Counseling Experience

Overall, students cited negative experiences with general counseling. Students described having a difficult time getting to see a counselor, not being able to see a particular counselor consistently, getting conflicting information from different counselors, and finding some counselors to be uncaring. Three students shared their experiences:

It's hard to set up an appointment with counselors because their schedules are so booked. When you are in that session with them, the sessions are so short that you can't really fully discuss what it is that's concerning to you or what you need to have done. Instead of them listening to you, they just say, "Okay, well this is what you're going to do, this, this, and this." They set a map for you instead of discussing with you what type of plan you need to have.

When I was on campus, I would see a different counselor every time. Sometimes counselors would tell me different things that weren't going to work for what I actually wanted to accomplish. It was really difficult to figure out exactly what classes I needed to be taking when I had several different supposedly qualified counselors telling me different things, or counselors who aren't working coherently with what other counselors have said. It's hard when you don't have an assigned counselor who knows you and knows your academic path.

The counselors that I've talked to just came off like they didn't really care, like you were just another student that they had to try to give advice to.

In addition to sharing the same experiences with counselors described above as their peers, African American/Black students described feeling that oftentimes counselors held them to lower academic standards as compared to other student groups. Two students expressed:

I don't want to say it's because I'm Black. I told the academic advisor the specific school I wanted to transfer to, which is UC Davis, or UC Merced would be my second choice. She kept trying to steer me to Sac[ramento] State. [I felt like], "Do you not think I'm capable of doing that? Why are you trying to lower the bar for me?"

I had a counselor that [I felt] was racist to me. When we were discussing the nursing school I wanted to get into, she was so discouraging. She was like, "I just feel like based off your current GPA, you'd be better off aiming for this place." They weren't the best nursing schools. I was shooting for UCSF, and she was like, "Let's lower the bar just a little bit." She was trying to tell me that only certain type of people get into those schools, and I don't fit into that category.

In spite of the overall negative experiences with academic counseling, a handful of students shared having positive experiences with general counselors, some after switching counselors numerous times. One student illustrates:

I ended up switching and getting a new advisor. She's been amazing! I get in contact with her, and she's so quick with getting back to me. She's very helpful. I feel like she really takes her time and makes sure that my needs are met.

Communication about and Awareness of Resources and Services

Appreciation for Valuable Support Services

Students enrolled in special programs like Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) offered positive feedback about the valuable resources these programs provide. In the words of one student:

I am a part of EOPS, and there are times where I wasn't able to pay for books. [EOPS] covered the cost of all of my books and school supplies. EOPS has been there for me.

Other students appreciated the food pantry. One student commented:

There were times when I didn't have much food in my house. [The college has] a place where you can go to receive food for free.

Lastly, students also lauded faculty who showed awareness of the challenge students have in paying for textbooks by finding open-source material for their courses. As one student illustrates:

Many of my instructors have put their text online. That saves a lot of money for many students. It's helpful if faculty can choose resources for their text references though open-source type material.

Resources and Supports Are Great, but Only “If You’re Aware of Them”

Participants across focus groups acknowledged and appreciated the resources and supports available to all students at Folsom Lake College. That said, they also noted that timely awareness of these resources and learning how to access them were challenges. A number of students reported not knowing that some services even existed and expressed that they could have sought the help they needed had they known about these services earlier. Four students shared:

I have never been [to] a tutoring appointment even though I should have. I didn't know how to book online. Also, whenever I would go to the main campus and I'd be in the library, [the tutors] all sit and talk with each other in the library. It just

seems like they're too busy with each other to help anybody out. So I never really wanted to bother them. So I never went and got actual help.

You only know what's available if the counselor kind of tells you. Other than that, it's really hard to access [different] type[s] of help, because you really don't know what's available.

[We need] better communication from the people who work at the school. I'm part of student leadership, [and] I feel the district has good intentions, and they're trying to get work done, but it's not reaching students. There's all sorts of help that students could receive that they just don't know about, just because they haven't heard of [the available resources]. I think it's really unfortunate. I think students could really benefit from it.

I've been advocating for information to trickle down through faculty. This would really put [the details] in front of students. They'd be able to digest [the information] rather than [receiving] an email which could be thrown into the junk mail very easily or glazed over.

Recommendations: Student Supports and Access to Resources

10. **Provide general counselors with professional development designed to help them keep them up to date** with the large amount of often-shifting information they must be able to accurately share with students.
11. **Examine the feasibility of developing a system that enables students to consistently work with a dedicated counselor**, which would facilitate the development of stronger relationships between students and counselors. In doing so, this approach would also increase counselors' capacity to understand students' goals, help them overcome obstacles to these goals, and ultimately, pave their path to success.
12. **Identify effective communication strategies to raise awareness of campus resources** among students and provide clear direction on how to access them.
 - a. **Engage students themselves in the design, development, and testing** of messages and media.
 - b. **Assess the college's communication strategies used to promote programs and services** to students. To ensure equitable access to information among all students, it is important for the college to be mindful of the variation in how students access information and thus reach out to students in multiple ways (e.g., email, social media, text messages, student portal, website, flyers, posters, Canvas).
 - c. **Do not overlook traditional information-sharing strategies**, such as flyers, bulletin boards, word-of-mouth.
 - d. **Encourage faculty to provide students with information about academic and student supports**. For example, faculty could include information in their syllabi, invite counselors to make brief presentations on critical deadlines and available

services and supports, or create a section in Canvas that students can go to for this information. In fact, students appreciate faculty who share information about resources in their classes and this information becomes more likely to reach students because it does not rely on students having to seek and find it on their own.

The College Experience during COVID-19

Focus group participants were a mix of students in their first semester at Folsom Lake College and those who had been attending for two or more semesters. A number of themes emerged that were related to the way in which the move to online education in response to COVID-19 has changed the student experience. Specifically, students noted the loss of community and needing to be more self-sufficient. Students attributed much of the lessening of community to the heavy emphasis on asynchronous online instruction.

One student captured the general sentiment among the majority of focus group participants regarding the need to be much more self-reliant than when attending in-person classes:

My teachers have the whole calendar in their syllabus, but you really have to monitor the calendar because they won't really tell us when discussions post and the times that assignments are due. They just expect us to be able to do it, so you really have to keep track of all your work. All the due dates and especially the times [are] different. Sometimes things might be due at midnight [or] they may be due at 5:00 in the afternoon, so you really got to pay attention.

Furthermore, students across focus groups shared various perspectives about the opportunities to have a sense of community while engaging in online instruction. There was a general sentiment that synchronous instruction was one way to continue to have some connection and/or sense of community. They further noted that asynchronous instruction does not really foster community and connection unless one makes a significant effort to reach out. In the words of two students:

There is less community because of the nature of asynchronous modality. I feel like some people, the more outgoing people, are trying to establish that friendly feeling that you get in the classroom when you start interacting with everybody. So some people will really go out of their way and comment on your discussion like, "That was a really good," but it isn't the norm.

Three [of my] classes are all asynchronous. I'm going to be honest, I hate asynchronous classes because you have no connection [with] the professor whatsoever. All my work is on the Web Assign and just automatically gets graded. The professors just tells us to [post] a discussion on Canvas. I feel like just posting on Canvas and just replying to two classmates is not enough, just not enough [to form a] connection.

Recommendations: Supporting Students during COVID-19

14. **Identify ways the college can foster connections between students, faculty and the college in a virtual environment.** Two students suggested ways in which the college can help create a sense of community during COVID-19:

I too have asynchronous classes, and I do agree those can be very disconnected. You pretty much [don't] talk to or see anyone. But something two of my professors did [was] post videos of themselves every week [to] catch [the class] up with what's going on and what to expect for the week. While I wasn't necessarily seeing my classmates face to face, it was pretty helpful see what my professor looked like and have them talk to me. I think that small decision to be able to see what my professor looked like did go a long way.

I think Zoom lectures are really important. It gets everyone together to have a discussion; they don't have to be super long. I think office hours are pretty important too. It's important for teachers to have a way to connect with every student and just listen to them because I feel very disconnected in my asynchronous classes.

15. **Find ways for the college to create and offer different types of student meet-ups over Zoom** on different days and times including weekends. For example, students suggested a Spanish meet-up group or study groups for different subjects. Instructors, counselors, student groups, or others at the college could offer these opportunities.

Moving from Data to Action

Reports such as this one are all well and good, but ineffective if the results do not meet the objective of the research -- to achieve impact. Triangulating student accounts of their experiences at the college with college-wide surveys and other institutional data serves to validate issues that are coming out in the college's quantitative data, deepens the understanding about the complexity of students' experiences, and provides multiple angles of the same story to faculty, staff, and administrators. Together, qualitative and quantitative data can be powerful catalysts to enable the development of the conditions necessary for administrators, faculty, staff, and students to create meaningful changes to institutional practices and policies that are getting in the way of supporting the success of students of color at Folsom Lake College. However, in order for the data to have the most impact on moving a change agenda, it is critical to pay attention to the college's culture, being sensitive to the ways in which faculty, staff, and administrators digest and react to information. To that end, it is critical that some thought be given to how these findings are disseminated--how will the data be presented? By whom? To whom? In what setting? What is the expected action in response? To assist the college enact the recommendations provided in this report, we offer the following suggestions:

- Develop a workgroup, committee, or task force that will be responsible for developing an action plan with concrete strategies to make the recommendations in this report actionable.
- Prioritize recommendations to reduce people feeling overwhelmed with more things to do in light of all the different initiatives colleges have had to respond to over the last 10 years (e.g., Guided Pathways, Student Equity Plan) and more recently the pandemic.
- Involve the college's Office of Institutional Research in developing a plan in partnership with the workgroup mentioned above to evaluate and track the strategies that are implemented by the college based on the recommendations provided in this report.
- Identify the challenges and opportunities that might hinder or support the college moving forward with this plan.
- Know your campus culture when preparing to share these focus group findings; package the information in ways that will make the information palatable and accessible to the campus community.
- Determine what resources and supports (e.g., human, technology, financial) are needed to advance this work.

Recommendations at a Glance

As the college reviews the report's key themes and recommendations, we offer a summary of all the recommendations made in this report on the following pages.

Belonging and Community

1. Review the college's practices for recruiting, screening, hiring, and retaining faculty and staff of color.
2. Ensure supportive onboarding and retention practices, especially for faculty and staff of color who themselves often feel marginalized in predominantly white departments and or colleges located in predominantly white communities.
3. Examine who is represented in messages and images used by the college (i.e. website, class schedule, brochures, etc.)
4. Identify different mediums to counter stereotypes on campus
 - a. Increase the awareness of systemic racism against African Americans/Blacks among students, faculty, and staff and provide strategies for how to reduce it such as workshops on unconscious bias.
 - b. Provide opportunities for the campus community to learn about new cultures, try new food, and commemorate new holidays. These can help broaden people's minds and opens them up to new possibilities. However, it is important to keep in mind that while celebrating diversity is fun and worthwhile, it is no substitute for addressing difficult questions head-on. In the absence of dealing with the tough issues of prejudice and stereotyping, cultural celebrations by themselves do not usually affect the fundamental ways in which we think about people of other races and cultures.
 - c. Develop and support allies on campus who, while not members of a marginalized group, can team up to support those who are experiencing bias and make a significant impact.
5. Identify and implement different approaches to validate the identity and lived experiences of African American/Black and other students of color
 - a. Identify practices that validate the identities and lived experiences of students of color outside the classroom through guest speakers, workshops, student panels, the arts, and community networks.
 - b. Promote a campus culture grounded in student-centered practices to help foster genuine relationships between faculty, staff, and students.

Inside and Outside the Classroom

6. Provide ongoing professional development around equity-mindedness could help change classroom practices so that all students feel supported and cared for by faculty in the classroom.
7. Provide professional development to support all faculty in becoming culturally competent and in creating culturally relevant learning experiences for their students. For example, learner-centered instructional techniques such as cooperative and collaborative learning, in which students are encouraged to work together, can help create an environment in which everyone's viewpoint is acknowledged through equal participation as experts, and students feel safe because their perspective is respected.
8. Conduct a curriculum audit to ensure that the culture, values, and lives of dominant groups are not the only ones reflected in the curriculum and seen as the norm. Culturally responsive curriculum is filled with people's stories, and it can offer activities, assignments, and illustrations that influence how people understand the world as well as contribute to centering and normalizing people.
9. Encourage the Development of Special Programs that Promote the Success of African American/Black Students.
 - a. Identify the necessary resources to develop a support program to meet the academic and other support needs of African American/Black students at FLC.
 - b. Identify faculty and staff who could work with African American/Black students to create and support a Black Student Club at FLC.
 - c. Develop and offer support groups to provide outlets for African American/Black students.

Student Supports and Access to Resources

10. Provide general counselors with professional development focused on keeping them up to date with the large amount of often-shifting information they must be able to accurately share with students.
11. Examine the feasibility of developing a system that enables students to consistently work with a dedicated counselor, which would facilitate the development of stronger relationships between students and counselors. In doing so, this approach would also increase counselors' capacity to understand students' goals, help them overcome obstacles to these goals, and, ultimately, pave the path to success.

13. Identify effective communication strategies to raise awareness of campus resources among students and provide clear direction on how to access them.
 - a. Engage students themselves in the design, development, and testing of messages and media.
 - b. Assess the college's communication strategies used to promote programs and services to students. To ensure equitable access to information among all students, it is important for the college to be mindful of the variation in how students access information and thus reach out to students in multiple ways (e.g., email, social media, and text messages).
 - c. Do not overlook traditional information-sharing strategies like flyers, bulletin boards, word-of-mouth, and in-class announcements. In fact, students appreciate faculty who share information about resources in their classes.
 - d. Encourage faculty to provide students with information about campus academic and student supports. For example, faculty could include information in their syllabi, invite counselors to make brief presentations on critical deadlines and available services and supports, create a section in Canvas that students can go to for this information.

Supporting Students during COVID

14. Identify ways the college can foster connections between students, faculty and the college in a virtual environment.
15. Create and offer different types of student meet-ups over Zoom on different days and times including weekends.

Considerations to Make the Data Actionable

- Develop a workgroup, committee, or task force that will be responsible for developing an action plan with concrete strategies to make the recommendations in this report actionable.
- Prioritize recommendations to reduce people feeling overwhelmed with more things to do in light of all the different initiatives colleges have had to respond to over the last 10 years (e.g., Guided Pathways, Student Equity Plan) and more recently the pandemic.
- Involve the Planning and/or Research Office in developing a plan to evaluate and track the strategies that are enacted by the college based on the recommendations provided in this report.
- Identify the Challenges and Opportunities that might hinder or support the college moving forward.
- Know your campus culture when preparing to share the focus group findings; package the information in ways that will make the information palatable and accessible to their campus community.

- Determine what resources and supports (e.g., human, technological) are needed to advance this work.

Appendix A. Methodology

In partnership with FLC staff, faculty, and administrators, the RP Group researcher developed the protocol for the focus groups.

The questions were designed to explore students' experiences around their overall sense of belonging at FLC and challenges they encountered because they were students of color.

Specifically, students were asked about the following topics:

- Sense of belonging at and connection to FLC
- Challenges students have faced during their educational journey at FLC, either as a student in general or as a member of a particular student population
- Students' advice to college leaders on how FLC can better serve and support students attain their educational goals

All of the focus groups were facilitated via Zoom and audio-recorded, with students' consent, and then transcribed. Subsequently, transcripts were analyzed by RP Group researchers.

Participant Recruitment Process

Faculty and staff worked with FLC's Institutional Research office to identify the specific student populations whose experiences would be key to informing the college's equity planning efforts. Based on the college's institutional data, the specific student groups identified for this project are all experiencing disproportionate impact at the college. These groups include:

1. Students who identify as Black/African American
2. Students who identify as Latinx/Hispanic
3. Students who identify as other students of color

Once student groups were identified and selected, the college sent personal invitations via email asking them to participate in the focus groups. Follow-up phone calls were made to confirm participation twice prior to the focus group date. \$50 gift cards were provided to further incentivize students to take part in the focus groups.

Focus Group Participants

A total of 32 students participated in four focus groups. Two focus groups were held with African American/Black students; 14 students participated across both focus groups. One focus group was held with Latinx/Hispanic students; nine students participated. The final focus group was held with a mix of students of color, including Pacific Islanders, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and mixed race students; nine students participated. The length of time students have attended FLC spanned from fall 2020 being their first semester at the college to four or more semesters.

Participants' Academic Interests

Participating students described a broad range of career interests, and as such were pursuing majors that included: accounting, anthropology, architecture, biology, biomedical engineering, business, chemistry, childhood education, computer engineering, criminal justice, dance, economics, geology, nursing, psychology, social behavioral science, and water/waste management.

Appendix B. Focus Group Protocol

Introduction:

Please introduce yourself by telling us your name, how long you have been attending FLC and your educational goal.

Questions:

Sense of belonging/connection to FLC

1. What is it like to be a [add student group] at Folsom Lake College?
 - a. Is it welcoming?
 - b. Is it safe?
 - c. Is it supportive?

2. As a _____ student, do you feel a strong sense of community at FLC? And in what ways could your sense of community as a _____ student be improved?"
[PROMPTS: images, messages, assignments, activities?]

Challenges to your success

3. As a [_____ student] at Folsom Lake College, what have been some unique challenges you have faced during your time at the college

4. From your perspective, what are the barriers to establishing an inclusive environment and equitable opportunities for _____ students at FLC?
 - a. Where are the opportunities for improvement?

5. Are you currently accessing any student services supports, like online counseling or online tutoring? If so, what is working well? What could be improved?

6. Now, imagine you are meeting with the top leaders of FLC. What advice would you give them about how to increase success for you and students like you at the institution?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a student at Folsom Lake College?

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in today's conversation.

Additional Questions if Time Allows

10. With whom do you interact with most often when you are at FLC? PROMPT: instructional faculty, counseling faculty, administrators, staff, other students?
11. Overall, how would you describe the quality of interactions with [refer to the individuals named by students]
 - a. Inside the classroom
 - b. Outside of the classroom
12. Who are some key people on campus that convey messages of encouragement and support and show that they care about you? (“you belong here,” “you can do it” “you have what it takes to be successful”)?
 - a. What does support and or caring look like to you?
13. In what ways do you feel your identity is represented at the college [PROMPTS: faculty and staff that look like me, images, messages, assignments, activities?]

Challenges to your success

14. As a student, what challenges do you face in working towards your educational goal?
Prompts:
 - a. Financial/personal issues: cost of textbooks, family obligations, having/choosing to work, stress, health, meeting basic needs, childcare
 - b. Student support issues: not knowing what resources are available on campus, unproductive counseling sessions
 - c. Academic issues: access to faculty, access and availability of academic supports
 - d. Institutional issues: unhelpful interactions on campus? faculty, staff or students, feeling unsafe
16. In thinking about the challenges you just shared, what has personally helped you overcome these challenges?
 - a. What is the college currently doing to help you overcome these challenges?

Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, the RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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