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Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

STUDENTS SPEAK:

Perspectives to Inform Opportunity (Equity) Gaps at Sierra College

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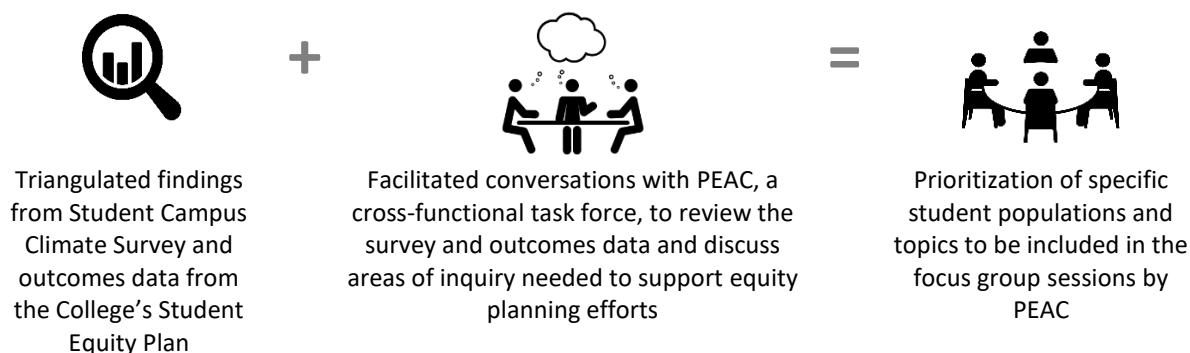
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Introduction





In spring 2020, nine focus group sessions were conducted at Sierra College by the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) with specific student populations **to gather information to complement the recent Student Campus Climate Survey. The focus was on students' perspectives and experiences** to inform planning efforts to support and ensure equitable student success.¹ This report provides an **overview of the impetus for this research and the themes and recommendations drawn from the perspectives shared by 69 student focus group participants.** Additional information on the study methodology is summarized in Appendix A. Figure 1 below highlights the various steps of this inquiry process and research.

Figure 1. Student Equity Inquiry Process



The President's Equity Advisory Committee (PEAC) identified three themes to be explored through focus groups with eight student populations that reported lower satisfaction rates in the student survey. Figure 2 presents these prioritized topics and student populations. A copy of the focus group protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Figure 2. Prioritized Focus Group Topics and Student Groups

Focus Group Topics	Focused Student Groups
 Sense of Belonging and Community	 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) African-American/Black (2) Latina(o)(x) (3) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) (4) Middle Eastern (5) Native American/Alaskan Native/Pacific Islander (6) Enrolled at the Nevada County Campus (NCC): two sessions (7) Part-time, ages 18-24 (8) Part-time, ages 25 and older
 Quality of Interactions Inside and Outside the Classroom	
 Communication about and Awareness of Resources and Services	

¹ On March 11 and 12, just before the COVID-19 pandemic required a shutdown of the college campus, the nine focus group sessions with 69 students were facilitated by the RP Group.

In This Report

This report provides a summary of the key findings from each focus group topic, along with unique perspectives from certain student groups. The recommendations, highlighted in the “Consider the Following Actions” sections, are informed by students’ comments and experiences, information, and insights gathered during an all-day inquiry meeting with PEAC, and an analysis of the college’s Student Campus Climate Survey. At the end of the report, are key questions for PEAC to consider to move these findings from data to action.


Key Findings by Topic



Sense of Belonging and Community

Focus group participants were asked to describe the culture and climate at Sierra College to someone who was unfamiliar with the institution and to discuss what would constitute a sense of community and belonging. Students were also given the opportunity to reflect on what advice they would share with college leaders to ensure that students felt they belonged and were welcomed.

Across all the focus groups, **students lauded the institution’s overall welcoming environment, noting their appreciation of the diversity in the college’s student population, and the collegial and supportive environment.** The following student quote captures the sentiments of many focus group participants:

 *I feel the staff in general, in all departments, are also very welcoming and they want ... you to succeed, and they want to help you out the best way they can. So, I feel it’s a really good dynamic here on campus.*


Students Find Community within Special Programs, Clubs, and Study Groups

Students identified numerous places in which they have experienced a sense of community at Sierra College, such as within special programs, in the classroom, and among their peers, especially within study groups. Students who are part of special programs, such as Umoja and RISE², spoke about their dedicated spaces, which provide them with the opportunity to interact with one another and build a sense of community. These same students often described finding themselves alongside peers who looked like them and shared common experiences, which created a sense of comfort. In particular, students mentioned special programs offer learning communities during the students’ first semester, which create cohorts of students that stay


² According to the Sierra website, RISE is an academic support program for historically underrepresented and underserved students attending college for the first time.

together. These relationships are critical and remain strong throughout the students' educational journey.

However, many students—both those who were and were not participating in special programs—also described that when interacting with the campus at large, there is a different sense—a lack of comfort. For many students, as highlighted by the following quote, it was often difficult to navigate between the two worlds—that created by special programs and the world of the larger campus:

 *... Because I'm in Umoja, I feel really comfortable. ... I'm around people that look like me and that have been through the same experiences as me. But sometimes when I go outside of that hemisphere, like if I have other classes, ... it's a little uncomfortable because I'm not seeing the same faces every day. ... In the Umoja Program, ... you see the same people every day—grow a bond with them, these are people you laugh with [and] see all the time. ... Sometimes it's hard to adjust between the two [environments].*

Several students from the part-time (18 to 24 years old) and Latina(o)(x) student groups, in particular, commented that **teachers who promote cooperative and collaborative learning, where students are encouraged to work together and inform the curriculum, help create a sense of community in the classroom, in comparison to lecture-only classes.** In addition, students shared that having classes with the same peers for several semesters and participating in study groups led to a greater sense of community. The following quote illustrates many students' feelings about their instructors and the classroom environment that was created:

 *... Sierra College hands-down has some of the best professors ever. I think they do a very good job of making sure that the students are very well represented. And I personally think professors that include students more in ... their day-to-day ... lessons and lectures and things like that make it easier for [students in] the classroom environment ... to become friends or get to know each other.*



Consider the following actions:

- **Create and sustain intentional communities**, such as cohorts of students who complete courses together.
- **Find more opportunities to adopt cooperative and collaborative learning approaches in the classroom** to support positive and effective learning environments.

Students Seek Cultural Awareness and Understanding More Broadly across the Campus.

There were participants across focus groups, who described an institutional culture that was somewhat lacking in cultural sensitivity and understanding more broadly. The text box below highlights the specific areas, where certain student groups reflected on situations when they felt discomfort, or a lack of community, belonging, and/or understanding at the college.



African-American students described being stared at, seen as aggressive when expressing an opinion, or occasionally asked to speak to the entire Black experience when they found themselves to be the only Black student in a class, which was a frequent occurrence. Given the small number of Black residents and students on the campus, Umoja provides a unique space both inside and outside in the classroom, where Black students felt comfortable and safe from the conservative nature of the surrounding community.

Native American students lamented the lack of support for cultural events and outreach by the college to the Native American tribes in the area, which is particularly striking to them, given that the institution is built on tribal land. They do not feel supported by the college, not only with a lack of resources for Native American cultural events, but through the absence of Native American faculty.

Middle Eastern students had mixed opinions about whether the college recognized their culture. Perspectives appeared to vary between those who immigrated here versus those who were born and/or raised here. Those who had been in the country longer expressed a desire that more cultural events be offered.

LGBTQI+ students expressed feelings of belonging in courses where sexuality was discussed but did not feel safe with students knowing their sexual orientation in other courses.





Consider the following actions:

- **Host events and recognize celebrations and holidays** that are important to different groups of students (e.g., Ramadan), to highlight students' unique value to the Sierra campus community.
- **Strengthen partnerships with local Native American tribes to co-host events and recognize different cultures** as another way to educate and build appreciation within the Sierra campus community.


Students Seek Clear and Assertive Messages from College Leaders on Issues around Hate and Racism

Another issue that students across many of the focus group sessions cited, pertained to the college's response to incidences on campus that promoted hate and racism. Across several groups, many students, particularly students of color, expressed dismay at how the college has responded to racist or politically divisive protests and incidents (e.g., white supremacist flyers, anti-abortion protests). Several students **reported feeling there was a lack of institutional sensitivity and indifference regarding issues of ethnicity and race, culture, sexual orientation, and politics** that compromised students' feelings of belonging and safety at the college. The following quotes suggest that students often felt that free speech seems to trump anti-hate or ultraconservative viewpoints:

 *Well, for a sense of community, I feel like Sierra lacks in the area of ... a zero tolerance for hate. ... When you have different groups like the pro-life group and white supremacists on campus, ... I feel like [the administrators] don't take in mind how that jeopardizes our feeling of safety and comfort.*

 *If [college leaders] had said something [about the white supremacist flyers], I might have felt more comfortable. Even if it's just explaining like, "Yes, we understand that what this person is doing can negatively affect people, and we as a college do not stand with them. [However], we are not legally allowed to remove them from campus."... Then I'd be okay. I'd understand you've stated that you aren't with them. I'm okay now. I know why this is ... still happening versus like, "Oh, are you just letting this guy stand here for no reason," right?*

On a related note, when modes of communication were discussed, the use of the Sierra mobile application as vehicle for hate speech was raised. Without a clear and assertive message from the college around issues of hate and racism, students are left feeling unsure and unclear about exactly where the college stands on those issues. The following quote highlights a student's negative experience with the mobile app:

 *I thought initially that the [college's mobile application] was going to be a great place, but on Indigenous People's Day, or some people call it Columbus Day, there was a whole bunch of hate coming at us that day. And so it was like, "Okay, we're not going to use that as a form of communication either."*



Consider the following actions:

- **Reinforce the college's core values and institutional outcomes associated with the college's broader equity agenda assertively** in campus-wide communications, especially when there are incidents that compromise the college's efforts to create an inclusive and equitable community.
- **Develop/enhance a communication policy to clearly identify appropriate forms of speech or messages that are and are not acceptable** to use on campus-wide communication systems, such as the Sierra mobile application.



Quality of Interactions Inside and Outside of the Classroom

Students were asked whom they interact with most often when they are on campus—such as instructional faculty, counseling faculty, administrators, classified professionals, and other students—as well as about the quality of these interactions and how these individuals specifically show that they care about students.


Students Feel Cared About Through Simple Gestures


Across focus group sessions, students commonly **described interactions with both instructional and counseling faculty that made them feel that somebody cared about their success and helped them succeed**. Students **described multiple ways that particular instructional and counseling faculty members had gone out of their way to ensure their students' success**. For example, several students noted that some instructors acknowledge that not all students have their textbooks at the beginning of the semester. They show they care by being sensitive to this issue and providing materials, until students can get their books. Other counseling and instructional faculty wrote letters of recommendations and were willing to make themselves available to their students. Counselors help students consider course load demands, as part of the educational planning process.

Students also **appreciated instructors who recognized that they had lives and interests outside of school**, as well as those who reached out to students to ensure they were learning and had access to the support and resources they needed to be successful. The quotes below highlight the ways that students tended to describe the quality of their interactions with instructional and counseling faculty:



I take classes online right now. The teachers are very in-tune with their students. If they notice your grades are slipping, they'll send you a personal message and let you know that they noticed. Or they give you resources [you may need].

 ... *Going through something one-on-one with a professor is [something] really cool that we're able to do this here at a small college, because a lot of universities won't have that experience. So to me ... the biggest thing ... is spending time with your students and really making sure they understand something, and that's being invested in their learning.*

 ... *My counselor was very helpful [in] pointing out [things like I] shouldn't mix these classes with these classes because they're super hard. And that's something I appreciated because I was an incoming student and so I wouldn't know which classes are harder than which others, and which ones I should mix and shouldn't mix.*

Different groups of students reported unique experiences related to their interactions with others on campus. The text box below highlights the unique experiences of certain student groups both inside and outside of the classroom.



For both **part-time and NCC students**, in-class experiences were very important since for many, the only time they interact with instructors and other students is when they are in class. Having instructors who are supportive and knowledgeable about available resources was important.




Consider the following actions:

- **Take time to provide ongoing and regular encouragement** to let students know the college wants students to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom.
- **Explore additional mechanisms for providing regular feedback to students** in the classroom about their assignments, general progress, and their understanding of the material and connecting them with resources and services to support their learning.

Students Do Not Feel Cared about, When They Feel They Are Not Heard

The role that faculty plays in supporting student success is critical. **Some students expressed disappointment in the ways that instructional faculty were insensitive to recognizing and/or addressing challenges they commonly faced.** As two students shared:

 ... *A suggestion would be making all professors go on like a retreat that kind of discusses racism and cultures so that when they're teaching, they are more aware of certain things. Because I know that's a big problem on campus. And I've heard from multiple students about incidents, with professors with racism...*



I think the only reason why it makes me uncomfortable [to be the only Black person in a class] is because usually I'm always at least around one Black person, friends, family, somebody. So it just makes me feel uncomfortable because I feel by myself. I feel like the token Black girl. They're always going to ask me questions...if I'm the only Black person in the class. If some issue pops up, or there's an argument, or just a debate about something, I'm always the first person they go to. And it's like, "I'm going to tell you what you need to know about the Black people. I'm going to tell what you need to know about the culture."

Students also mentioned feeling that there is a lack of recourse, when they bring issues to administrators' attention. Students' experiences suggested that the college may lack a clear and transparent process to hear and address student grievances. Students want to understand who at the college can help them and how—especially when related to their experiences inside and outside of the classroom. In particular, the apparent inconsistencies in how the administration addresses student grievances was confusing to students. The following quote highlights when a student felt unheard and pointed out the inconsistency in responses to grievances:



...Everyone that's taken [classes with this particular instructor] knows he's [problematic], but nobody has ever talked to him about it. ... I've even sent e-mails to ... the dean of his department, and nothing ever happened. Whereas, my friend sent an e-mail to the dean ... for our class because he went on a tangent about diabetics. And she's diabetic, and he was like extremely harsh and shunning about it. And the dean immediately e-mailed her, ... within an hour of that e-mail, and everything was taken care of. But situations with other teachers that are known not to care, nothing happens. And nothing ever changes.



Consider the following actions:

- **Determine how to ensure the college's grievance policy is transparent to students and is being applied consistently** to help students know they are heard and that their issues matter to the college.
- **Build mechanisms inside and outside of the classroom to regularly ask students for feedback about their experience**, including what works, what needs improvement, and what's missing.
- **Expand and require diversity, equity, and inclusion training for faculty, staff, and administrators who interact with students** to help them (1) identify and avoid the marginalization of certain student groups via behaviors, such as tokenism, and (2) access resources and examples for creating an inclusive learning climate for students.



Communication about and Awareness of Resources and Services

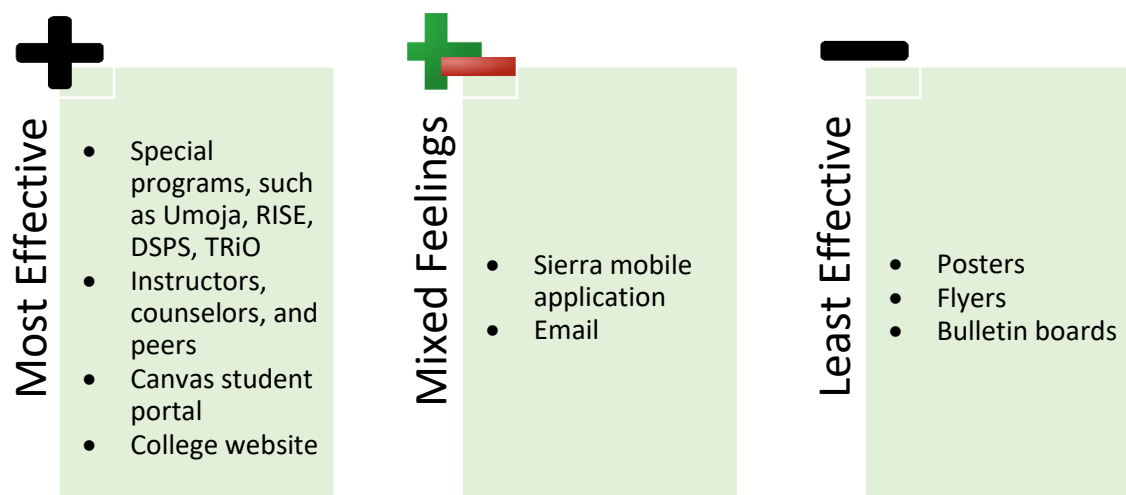
Students were asked to consider how they learned about available resources and services, which of these services they had accessed, and the importance of the accessed support to their success. Researchers also requested students' insights on effective and ineffective ways for the college to get information about resources that are available to them.

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


Overall, students offered **positive feedback about on campus resources** that they were aware of and had utilized. However, students had **mixed opinions about the various ways that the college communicated with them, regarding what supports were available**. The college website and student portal were often mentioned when students were asked about effective ways to communicate information. Instructional faculty and special program staff were most commonly mentioned, when discussing what resources and services had contributed to the students' success. At the same time, an overwhelming number of contacts via the college's mobile application and email system led some students to share that they were unable to stay on top of and sort through the numerous pieces of information. **Bulletin boards, where out-of-date flyers were often posted, were described as the least effective means of communication.**

For many students, a lack of knowledge about available resources may have created a barrier to accessing key supports and services. “Word of mouth” from special programs like Umoja and individuals, such as peers, instructors, and counselors tended to be the most effective relative to more static modes, such as posters and flyers. Some students indicated that messages sent via Canvas were also effective (see Figure 3 below).


Figure 3. Modes of Communication and Their Perceived Effectiveness by Students




Students across focus groups **expressed a desire to know more about student life, campus events, and activities. Several noted that instructors had effectively shared such information in their classes and on their syllabi.** During the student discussions, there was a palpable sense that students wanted to connect more to the college. The following quote underscores the role that the faculty play in providing such resources:

 *My English 1A professor, he's ... Sierra College's best-kept secret. He's honestly amazing. The first day of class, he handed us a packet of every single resource [that] Sierra College offers and went through it with us. And I was like, ... "Sierra College has a food kitchen? Why have I gone two semesters at Sierra College and I haven't learned this?"*

A handful of **students described hit or miss attempts to secure resources and access services.** The following quote highlights the challenges that students face accessing services, as explained by one of the focus group participants:

 *I'm a disabled student ... [and when I go to seek help, I'm told,] you're in the wrong department, "You have to go here." I'm a veteran [and when I go to seek help, I'm told,] "Oh, you're in the wrong department. You have to go here." I need technical accommodations, [and when I go to seek help, I'm told,] "Oh, you're in the wrong department. You have [to go] here." What gets advertised a lot is the Hub. Go there, but [if] I need technical resources, [I'm told,] "Oh you're in the wrong department. You have to go here." So it's basically trial and error finding your way...If I'm not bounced around, from one point to the other, I'm not going to know what else is available.*

Students across the focus groups noted that the college offers many helpful resources and expressed their appreciation for these supports. That said, many students also **shared their frustration about the lack of communication and outreach to inform them of these resources and difficulties in understanding the resources.** Many students reported not knowing about many of these supports, until their second or third semester at the college. **A lack of awareness may be preventing many students from fully benefiting from those resources.** The resources most mentioned by students included the tutoring centers, health centers, library resources, Degree Works, special programs, and the food pantry. The quote below highlights a student's very positive assessment of the health center, a resource that many students may not know about.

 *The health center on campus does everything, and I feel like not a lot of people know about it, but you can get your flu shot there, you can do all kinds of stuff. And the head of it, ... she's a nurse, and she's actually the teacher for some of the nursing classes here*

on Sierra. And they have so many resources. ... Maybe [you] don't have the best insurance—if you go there and talk to them, they... will let you know what they can provide [and] how to get care if you need anything, and it's really good.

The text box below highlights the unique experiences of NCC students attempting to access needed services.



For **NCC students**, some key offices and resources were closed at times, when they were most available to access them (e.g., campus cafeteria). These students also noted that the Rocklin financial aid office staff were more supportive and knowledgeable about financial aid related matters than the NCC financial aid office staff.

Other students **lamented conflicting communications, misinformation, or information received too late after an event or important deadline**. As two students shared:



I had to actively search for resources to help myself be successful. Whereas, other people just don't know this stuff is ... readily available for them. I think people need to know more.



I needed to find a counselor [who] can cater to my needs and what I wanted to do beyond Sierra. I went to five different counselors because there was this uncertainty, so even when I did get to a STEM counselor, there was confusion. I just hit a wall because somebody wasn't sure. They told me this, but the other one would tell me this. I was just confused, [and] that was a lot of pressure I didn't need trying to figure out my plan.



Consider the following actions:

- **Create intentional bridges between instruction and student services** and proactively communicate information about the resources to students, faculty, and classified professionals.
 - **Post academic and support services announcements about deadlines (e.g., add and drop dates, financial aid application due dates) and resources** (e.g., health center hours) in places that students frequent and/or where they access information (e.g., Canvas, the Sierra mobile application, syllabi, classroom bulletins/whiteboards, and the college website).
 - **Create and regularly distribute a campus newspaper** that highlights key information about resources and services.
- **Create a Student Welcome Packet** (electronic or paper) with a list of resources that includes an explanation of what each resource is, who can access the

resource, its location on campus, and a key contact person (not just an office phone number or email).

- **Offer demonstration opportunities for students to learn where and how to access information about the college's resources.** For example, students mentioned the website and how helpful it would be to know where to look for information about available resources and services.
- **Update the Sierra Mobile App** to ensure the content is always up-to-date and free of glitches.
- **Align support services hours and availability to class schedules at NCC** to ensure more student-friendly hours and availability.

Moving from Data to Action

Across all of the focus group sessions conducted in spring 2020, students reported having an overall positive experience at Sierra College. Students felt the college was generally welcoming and noted on several occasions, their appreciation of the diversity in the college's student population, the collegial and supportive environment inside and outside of the classroom, the caring faculty and staff, and the numerous resources and services on campus to support their success. However, students also shared opportunities for the college to do more to recognize and celebrate their cultures, clarify and consistently implement grievance policies, improve advertisement of available supportive services, and most importantly, develop and support clear messaging and policies against racism and hate speech.

Below is a summary of the key findings from each topical area and the corresponding considerations to guide action, based on students' comments and experiences from the focus group sessions, information and insights gathered during the all-day inquiry meeting with Sierra College's President's Equity Advisory Committee, and findings from the college's Student Campus Climate Survey. This list is followed by questions for administrators, faculty, and staff to consider to advance an equity agenda organized by the key findings and topics raised during the focus group conversations.



Sense of Belonging and Community

1. **Students Find Community within Special Programs, Clubs, and Study Groups**
 - a. **Create and sustain intentional communities**, such as cohorts of students who complete courses together.
 - b. **Find more opportunities to adopt cooperative and collaborative learning approaches in the classroom** to support positive and effective learning environments.

2. Students Seek Cultural Awareness and Understanding More Broadly Across the Campus

- a. **Host events and recognize celebrations and holidays** that are important to different groups of students (e.g., Ramadan) to highlight students' unique value to the Sierra campus community.
- b. **Strengthen partnerships with local Native American tribes, to co-host events and recognize different cultures** as another way of educating and building appreciation within the Sierra campus community.

3. Students Seek Clear and Assertive Messages from College Leaders on Issues Around Hate and Racism

- a. **Reinforce the college's core values and institutional outcomes associated with the college's broader equity agenda assertively** in campus-wide communications, when there are incidences that compromise the college's efforts to create an inclusive and equitable community.
- b. **Develop/enhance a communication policy to clearly identify appropriate forms of speech or messages that are and are not acceptable** to use on campus-wide communication systems, such as the Sierra mobile application.



Quality of Interactions Inside and Outside of the Classroom

4. Students Feel Cared About Through Simple Gestures

- a. **Take time to provide ongoing and regular encouragement** to let students know the college wants students to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom.
- b. **Explore additional mechanisms for providing regular feedback to students** in the classroom about their assignments, general progress, and their understanding of the material and connecting them with resources and services to support their learning.

5. Students Do Not Feel Cared about, When They Feel They Are Not Heard

- a. **Determine how to ensure the college's grievance policy is transparent to students and is being applied consistently** to help students know they are heard and that their issues matter to the college.
- b. **Build mechanisms inside and outside of the classroom to regularly ask students for feedback about their experience**, including what works, what needs improvement, and what's missing.
- c. **Expand and require diversity, equity, and inclusion training to faculty and staff, and administrators who interact with students** to help them (1) identify and avoid the marginalization of certain student groups via behaviors, such as tokenism and (2) access resources and examples for creating an inclusive learning climate for students.



Communication about and Awareness of Resources on Campus

6. Students Feel Resources and Services Are Great, but Only “If You’re Aware of Them”

- a. **Create intentional bridges between instruction and student services** and proactively communicate information about the resources to students, faculty, and classified professionals.
 - i. **Post academic and support services announcements about deadlines (e.g., add and drop dates, financial aid application due dates) and resources** (e.g., health center hours) in places students frequent and/or where they access information (e.g., Canvas, the Sierra mobile application, syllabi, classroom bulletins/whiteboards, and the college website).
 - ii. **Create and regularly distribute a campus newspaper** that highlights key information about resources and services.
- b. **Create a Student Welcome Packet** (electronic or paper) with a list of resources that includes an explanation of what each resource is, who can access the resource, its location on campus, and a key contact person (not just an office phone number or email).
- c. **Offer demonstration opportunities for students to learn where and how to access information about the college’s resources.** For example, students mentioned the website and how helpful it would be to know where to look for information about available resources and services.
- d. **Update the Sierra mobile app** to ensure that the content is always up-to-date and free of glitches.
- e. **Align support services hours and availability with class schedules at NCC** to ensure more student-friendly hours and availability.

As PEAC reviews the report's key themes and recommendations, we offer the following questions to inform the development of key activities in response to students' suggestions, a timeline for their implementation, and the identification of who will be responsible for designing, implementing, and monitoring the proposed plans (see Appendix C for Sample Action Plan Template).

1. Context and Additional Information

- a. What additional data and information does the college have or need to collect to support these findings?
- b. What existing efforts/initiatives are taking place at the college to address these findings?
- c. What existing efforts/initiatives (e.g., Guided Pathways, Student Equity Plan, RISE) would these findings support at the college?

2. Challenges and Opportunities

- a. What are the challenges for addressing these findings? What challenges might be anticipated, as the college moves forward?
- b. What opportunities are present for addressing these findings? What opportunities might be anticipated, as the college moves forward?

3. Strategies and Activities

- a. What are the main priorities that can be addressed at this time?
- b. What are the key strategies to advance the identified priorities?
- c. What activities are needed to carry out the strategies?

4. Communication

- a. What information is important to communicate and how?
- b. Who is the key audience(s) for the information?
- c. Who should be the messenger?
- d. When and how should the information be packaged for the selected audience(s)?
- e. How can the information be used to engage students and to solicit their input and feedback?

5. Resources

- a. What resources and supports (e.g., human, technological) are needed to advance this work?
- b. Who is best positioned to champion the efforts needed for each strategy/activity?

6. Timeline

- a. When can the activities be practically addressed and what is the duration of time?

7. Assess and Evaluating the Change

- a. What experiences/outcomes for which student groups will be expected to improve by advancing this work?
- b. How will you know when the desired change has been achieved?
- c. Who will be responsible for monitoring and reporting the changes and impacts?

Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges 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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Learn more:

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Appendix A: Context and Methodology

This research effort was informed by two key sources: a student climate survey that was conducted in fall 2019, and an inquiry session with the President's Equity Advisory Committee (PEAC) to inform the redesign of RISE, a first-year experience program for students historically underrepresented and underserved on college campuses.

Student Climate Survey

In fall 2019, Sierra College administered a 20-question student survey to better understand the experiences of students at the college. The survey explored students' overall ratings of the college; the barriers and supports to their success; their interactions with faculty, staff, and other students; and whether their identity was represented on campus. Demographic factors were explored to allow the examination of similarities and differences in responses across various student groups. A total of 623 students participated. Of those students, 612 provided informed consent and were included in the survey analysis and results.

Sierra's college researcher completed an initial review of the student survey. These findings were then paired with a disaggregated survey analysis completed by the RP Group at the request of the college leadership. The additional analyses were used to identify specific findings and themes to explore as part of the college's equity agenda. Special attention was paid to issues and concerns that could also inform the college's equity conversations around eligibility requirements for special programs, such as RISE, and which student groups to prioritize for focus groups, in order to learn about their specific experiences in more detail, specifically those student groups that expressed concerns and challenges. Another goal was to identify key topics and topics from the survey analyses to more fully explore in the focus groups.,

The overall findings revealed that many survey respondents reported average or above average ratings across the board, reflecting high rates of satisfaction with the institution. However, there were clear differences in overall college ratings across various student subgroups, with many underrepresented minority (URM) groups reporting below-average ratings. A review of their recommendations regarding how the college could better support students in achieving their educational goals found that the most commonly reported solutions included improved communication with professors and counselors, increased awareness of the programs and services available to students, and the increasing availability of supportive services and resources (e.g., tutoring, financial assistance, faculty office hours).

President's Equity Advisory Committee

Coupling the student survey results with Student Equity Plan data, the RP Group facilitated a day-long inquiry session to explore the findings with the President's Equity Advisory Committee (PEAC). Committee members examined and reflected on the results that were analyzed and summarized by the RP Group to identify which student groups and topics would help inform equity planning efforts at the college. This discussion concluded with a desire to examine the following three themes as part of focus groups as a way to unpack the experiences of students

who reported lower ratings of satisfaction at the college and who were experiencing lower rates of success on various outcome measures: (1) sense of belonging, (2) quality of interactions inside and outside the classroom, and (3) awareness of available resources. The student groups were prioritized based on information triangulated from the college's student climate survey (e.g., relatively low satisfaction ratings) and student equity plan (e.g., student groups experiencing disproportionate impacts across a variety of academic outcomes).

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

Sierra College Equity Focus Groups PROTOCOL

Introduction & Ground Rules (5 minutes)

Personal Introduction: My name is _____. I am a / the [title] with the Research & Planning Group for CA Community Colleges or the RP Group.

Introduction of Study: I am here because we are working on a study that seeks to provide Sierra College administrators, faculty, and staff with insights into the experiences of Sierra students from specific student populations to support the college's efforts to ensure equitable student success. This study puts students at the center of the research and our assignment here today is to learn from your experience about what has made a difference for you. Key topics of conversation will include your perceptions of (1) the college's climate and whether / how it creates a sense of belonging, (2) the quality of interactions and experiences inside and outside of the classroom, and (3) communication about available resources and services.

Audio-recording and context: I will audio-record this 90-minute session and our conversation here today is one of 10 focus groups we are hosting at Sierra College. To show you how much we value your time and willingness to share your experience as a student, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Confidentiality: We will analyze the information we gather across all the focus groups to identify themes. We will not report out in a way that can be connected back to you as an individual. Our focus is not on who says what, but on what you all say.

Consent: Thank students for participating. Inform them their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time by leaving. Ask them to sign consent form. HAND OUT 2 COPIES OF CONSENT FORM; one for the students to complete and submit and another for them to keep for their records.

Ground Rules: Review the following ground rules.

- No idea is a bad idea; show respect for others' comments and ideas
- One person speaks at a time
- Respond/add to others' thoughts
- All comments are confidential
- Have fun

Participant Introduction (10 minutes):

Ask participants to briefly introduce themselves: first name, how many semesters/years they've been at Sierra College, and what their educational goal and major is, if they have one, what

special programs/clubs they are in, and what their future plans are after they graduate and/or transfer.

Focus Group Questions

College Culture and Climate and Sense of Community (15 minutes)

Now we want to ask you some questions about your overall experience here at the college.

1. How would you describe the culture and climate at Sierra College - NCC to someone who is unfamiliar with the college? How is the culture here relative to the main campus?
 - a. Is it welcoming?
 - b. Is it safe?
 - c. Is it supportive?
2. What would a sense of community look like for you at Sierra College -main campus / NCC? Where do you find a sense of community? In what ways could Sierra College create a strong sense of belonging [PROMPTS: images, messages, assignments, activities?]
3. Now, imagine you are meeting with the top leaders of the college. What advice would you give them about how they can make sure students feel they belong and that they are welcome here?

Quality of interactions and experiences inside and outside of the classroom (15 minutes)

Consider your typical day on campus and who you see.

4. With whom do you interact with most often when you are on the main/ NCC campus?
PROMPT: instructional faculty, counseling faculty, administrators, staff, other students?
How are the quality of these interactions?
 - a. Inside the classroom
 - b. Outside of the classroom
5. How do these individuals show they care about you? What does caring look like?
6. Now, imagine you are meeting with the top leaders of the college. What advice would you give them about how they improve the quality of interactions and experiences of students inside and outside of the classroom?

Awareness of and Communication about Available Resources and Services (20 minutes)

A number of services and resources are available on community college campuses to help students be successful and realize their educational and career goals.

7. How and where do/did you learn about available resources and services offered at Sierra?
8. Which of the college's available services and resources do you access regularly? Which of these services and resources have been most important to your success as a student and why/how? [Provide list of potential resources]:
 - a. Academic support,
 - b. Financial aid,
 - c. Transfer,
 - d. Career, and
 - e. Health-related resources?
 - f. [Others?]
9. What are the most effective ways for the college to get information out to you? What are some of the most ineffective ways the college communicates with you?
10. Now, imagine you are meeting with the top leaders of the college. What advice would you give them about how to increase students' awareness about what services and resources are available?

Final Comments (15 minutes)

We are almost done! There are just a few more questions.

11. How would you sum up your experiences as a student here?
12. What challenges do you uniquely face as a [Group] student?
13. What have you personally done to overcome these challenges? What is the college currently doing to help you overcome these challenges?
14. What would you tell a [name of student group] student who was considering coming to Sierra College?
15. Now, imagine you are meeting with the top leaders of the college. What advice would you give them about how to increase success for you and students like you at the institution?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a student at Sierra College?

Thank you all so much for your participation and help with our research.

Appendix C: Sample Action Plan Template

Key Finding(s):	
Key Recommendation or Suggested Action:	
Context: What, if any, additional information should be factored in or considered?	
Challenges and opportunities: What challenges and opportunities exist /might be anticipated?	
Strategies: What key strategies or activities can address this finding / action?	
Champion(s): Who is best positioned to champion these efforts?	
Timeline: When can activities be implemented and what is the duration of time?	
Expected Change(s): In what ways will the students' experiences/outcomes improve and for which student groups?	
Tracking: What mechanisms/who will support tracking and monitoring of progress toward the expected changes?	
Communication: Who and what information needs to be communicated to support this effort?	

EVALUATION PLAN:
Provide a summary description of the plans for evaluation here.
COMMUNICATION PLAN:
Provide a summary description of how an activity and its progress will be communicated.
ADDITIONAL NOTES: