PCC Sylvania African American Focus Group Project
Presentation Handouts

Handout 1: Summary of Findings

African-American college students face significant barriers to student success. These barriers include, but are not limited to, differences in level of career preparation as compared to White students, feelings of alienation, varying levels of support for college, and prejudice and discrimination (as cited in McJunkin, 2005). The barriers faced by African-American students in college likely have an impact on college retention and student success.

In 2010, the Sylvania Diversity Council's Research committee reviewed the college's Noel-Levitz and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) data and identified discrepancies between African American students and their counterparts. Given the small sample size, the committee acknowledged that it would not be prudent to move to conclusions without gathering more data. In line with trends towards the use of mixed-methods and qualitative research design within academia, the committee sought to gather more information on the needs and experience of Sylvania's African American students using focus groups. Three focus groups were conducted with self-identified African-American students during week seven of the Fall 2010 quarter at PCC's Sylvania campus.

Focus Group Participation

Participation in the three focus groups were segmented as follows: Focus Group 1 included students who had completed three or more terms on the Sylvania campus within the past two years, Focus Group 2 included students with varying terms of experience, and Focus Group 3 included students with 0-2 terms completed in the past three years.

A total of 17 students participated in the focus groups (see Table 1). At the time the focus groups were conducted, 53.3% of Sylvania credit students were female and 46.7% were male (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2010b, p. 1).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Groups	Female	Male	Black/ African- American	Mixed Race	Mean Age (x)
Group 1 (3+ terms)	1	5	5	1	30
Group 2 (mixed terms)	5	1	2	4	28
Group 3 (0-2 terms)	2	3	4	1	33

Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed for major themes using qualitative software NVivo 9 (QSR International, 2010) by members of the committee and the project consultant. Several iterations of coding and calibration between the researchers were applied in the early stages of analysis. The researchers' individual codings were merged and evaluated for inter-rater reliability considering Cohen's Kappa coefficient scores and by examining percentage of agreement in use of codes. A cluster analysis using the Pearson correlation coefficient was utilized to examine codes that were frequently coded

together or commonly adjacent to other codes. Further, comparisons between groups were made and portions of text that were the most densely coded were examined.

Results

The process of analyzing the three focus group transcripts resulted in the identification of key themes. An overview and discussion of these themes follow.

Theme 1: Impressions of College Personnel

When students interacted with college personnel in a positive and authentic manner, the learning experience was improved and students appeared to feel acknowledged. The opposite was true as well, leading students with negative authentic experiences to report negative outcomes. Students use these interactions to informally assess the genuineness of college personnel: "The way the instructor treated most of the students really sent us a clear message of who the instructor is." As the instructors are agents of PCC and are viewed as representative of the college as an entity, this then calls into question whether these interactions, either negative or positive, impact students' overall experience at PCC Sylvania.

Theme 2: Differences between PCC Campuses

The African-American students who participated in this project identified a number of differences between Sylvania and Cascade in each focus group. Students referenced the Cascade campus with great frequency. Discussion of differences centered on characteristics of each campus, instructors, and program/course offerings. When students mentioned specific elements that influenced their preference towards one campus over the other, they most often indicated physical, structural, and environmental characteristics of the campus. Students also had some reactions to African American studies classes only being offered at Cascade. The Cascade neighborhood was referenced in these reactions. Concerns that African American Studies is only offered at Cascade were raised in two out of the three groups.

Theme 3: Diversity

When students referenced diversity, they often included variables beyond race/ethnicity (e.g., sexual orientation, age, socio-economic status). When speaking about racial/ethnic diversity, students sometimes noted that there is an underrepresentation of African Americans at Sylvania and in the Portland area, in general. Students also spoke about diversity in the context of campus events. Students recognize that efforts are being made to encourage inclusiveness through campus events.

Theme 4: Student Expectations vs. Actual Experience

Students identified their actual Sylvania experience compared to how they expected it to be (better than expected, not expected, or worse than expected). Focus group participants reported that their expectations were different than expected (whether positive, negative, or neutral) and most often centered on people and classroom experiences.

Theme 5: Information Gathering

Students are accessing information about college processes, procedures, and resources in a variety of ways, but they appear to be relying most heavily on *peer-to-peer resourcing* (information sharing between peers) for important student information. In the focus groups they exemplified this process, engaging in peer-to-peer resourcing to exchange information and student success strategies. Students are sometimes unsure of the process for accessing information in a timely manner.

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Theme 6: The Classroom Experience
Students in the focus groups placed emphasis on their experiences in the classroom. As such, it appeared that instructor and peer relations were both very influential in the overall experience of participants. Students indicated that they appreciate dialogue in the classroom, but want the instructor to take an active role in moderating the discussion. They're acutely aware of how they are viewed by others. In addition, they reported experiences of exclusion and communication barriers, most often related to race.

Theme 7: Course Design and Delivery Preferences
Students displayed clear preferences for the design of college courses and delivery of material. Instructor preferences included 1) incorporating dialogue/discussion into the classroom, 2) putting material in context, 3) being clear about expectations of students, 4) not making assumptions that students already have knowledge of the course material being covered, 5) developing instructor technical writing skills to aid in communication, and 6) being understanding of the complexity of students' lives and how this influences their performance and time constraints.

Theme 8: Student Connections
Focus group participants who made connections on campus to other students most often reported a more positive experience with PCC Sylvania. Connections occurred in a variety of ways, but mostly outside of the classroom through work or social activities on campus. Connections appeared to foster a sense of identity or belonging as a PCC Sylvania college student.

Theme 9: Time
Students are acutely aware of the time it takes to navigate college. They mention both positive and negative aspects of time, including 1) financial aid processes, 2) completing developmental education pre-requisites, 3) acculturating to the college environment, and 4) taking time to make decisions about one's career/life path.

Theme 10: Student Services
Student reactions to student services were mixed. It appears that when student services staff take time to meet the needs of students and build relationships, students are generally more satisfied with services. In addition, the time sensitivity of student services activities also appeared to have an impact on participant experiences, as students reported negative experiences when discussing services that were time-sensitive.

Theme 11: Strategies for Getting Needs Met
Students are employing a number of strategies in order to promote their success when anticipated or unanticipated needs are not being met by the college. Some of these are proactive, preventive success strategies, while others are reactive strategies which may lead students to be unsuccessful in responding to an unmet need.

Theme 12: Age
Age was raised a number of times by focus group participants, so this theme was assessed in greater depth. Other than the self-awareness of being an "older", non-traditional student, there were no significant differences among the various age categories for participants between the ages of 32 to 43. In some cases, the non-traditional students described their educational objectives as means to an end, rather than exploratory in nature. Their interactions with the college (faculty, staff, coursework, and various resources) were described as more intentional and purposeful.

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Suggestions and Action Items from Focus Group Participants
Throughout discussion, students offered suggestions for college personnel to consider (see Table 4 from focus group report copied below). In addition, students recorded advice and suggestions on note cards at the end of the focus group session (see Table 5 from focus group report copied below). This information provides valuable input on changes that may help to promote the success of our African American students.

Suggestions offered in focus group and on note cards appeared to cluster into the following categories: resources/programming, cultural competence, skills for success, advising, access to information, pedagogy, and environmental factors.

Table 4

Summary of Suggestions Offered During Discussion

Clusters	Summary of Suggestions
Resources	Put more course texts on reserve at the library.
	Create a Transitions program for men.
Cultural Competence	Consider student preferences for terminology (African American vs. Black)
	Hire instructors and staff who are culturally aware.
Skills for Success	Start a chapter of the IEEE (organization for the advancement of technology).
Advising	Target students entering specific programs and provide a referral to advising.
Access to Information	Explain the types of services provided in service locations in campus tours.
	Use the Internet to advertise dates and deadlines
	Advertise resources through class visits or emails.
Pedagogy	Explain course material and expectations in person (not over email or online).
	Hold office hours.
	Include expectations and course calendar with all deadlines in syllabus.
	Hold instructors accountable to making changes based on student feedback.
	Consider consequences for instructors who are not performing.
	Create uniformity in online courses.
	Provide students with opportunities to interact with each other in class
	Encourage the development of writing skills for technical instructors.
	Infuse multicultural content throughout the curriculum.
	Teach to multiple learning styles.
Environmental factors	Give incentives to encourage underrepresented groups to attend SYL to diversify Sylvania.

Table 5
Suggestions from Written Note Card Responses

Clusters	Suggestions
Resources	More scholarships for African Americans
	Better activities for all cultures
	More programs like Men of Color and ROOTS
	Don't require students to go to the Web so much
	Raise more awareness about the resources for students on campus
	No segregation of organizations. We have to look beyond the color of skin
	Continue to have fairs and speakers that inform white students of racial subjects
Cultural Competence	Come to learn and gain an education
	Look around you, take it all in, get your education and never be afraid to give your personal opinion on who you are
	Broaden cultural horizons and try to understand their view points
	Just make sure that things stay diverse. Nobody wants to feel like they are the only one of a given group
Skills for Success	Email students letting them know about the Transitions program and scholarship advice.
	Make eye contact with everyone
Advising	Stay focused on your goals, dream, and needs. Have a good experience at any cost
	Make a mandatory advising meeting for those new to this campus
	Make people more aware of the resources, like Transitions, etc. Maybe with an email
Access to Information	Include not only the "where things are on campus" tours but also the "how they can help".
	Make people more aware of the resources, like Transitions, etc. Maybe with an email
	Be open to suggestions from people
Pedagogy	Teach all of the material, not just the stuff people speak up about in the class
	Grade teachers
	Require extensive syllabus
	Be more easy on late homework and due dates
	Instructors to be aware of how students deliver (?) certain information to a class if it's appropriate for that particular class
Environmental factors	Make class enjoyable equally to all students
	More parking
	Lockers for students
	Make it easier to use buses to get to campuses

Conclusion

The Sylvania Diversity Council is committed to promoting an inclusive climate that supports the academic and personal success of PCC Sylvania students. This is evident in the council's commitment to conducting focus groups to explore the African-American student experience, as a complement to the quantitative data collected through the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. This research further illustrated the experience of African-American students, highlighting needs and challenges faced by this population and hinting at strategies useful in addressing those issues. The proposed recommendations and specific suggestions provided by focus group participants provide action items to be implemented by the Diversity Council and college in order to better support the needs of PCC students.

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Handout 2: Recommendations

		Student Services			Administration			Faculty		
		Continue	Increase	Initiate	Continue	Increase	Initiate	Continue	Increase	Initiate
1	Discuss with college personnel the impact of authentic interactions on the student experience.			X			X			X
2	Offer inservice and TLC sessions to deliver information/training on the following topics: effective communications, cultural competence, customer service, pedagogy, student success through the cultural lens, strategies for student persistence		X			X			X	
3	Systematically examine grievances, complaints, and student evaluations for program and policy improvement opportunities, as well as content for staff training.	X								
4	Provide formal venues for peer-to-peer resourcing. This may take the form of peer resourcing groups that are facilitated by student leaders.		X			X				
5	Provide informal venues for African-American students of varying lengths of time as students to develop relationships, by supporting the development of clubs or programs for Sylvania's African-American student community.		X			X				
6	Make a concerted effort to recruit student workers of various lengths of time as students as well as various races.		X			X				
7	Create a Sylvania-hosted event that draws the African-American community and surrounding neighborhoods.			X			X			X

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		Student Services			Administration			Faculty		
		Continue	Increase	Initiate	Continue	Increase	Initiate	Continue	Increase	Initiate
8	In bond planning, consider student input about how they physical environment (both physical structures and environmental characteristics) affects their perception of campus climate.	X			X			X		
9	Offer African-American and Black Studies courses at the Sylvania campus and online.					X			X	
10	Recruit and hire more instructors and staff of color.		X			X			X	
11	Continue holding diversity events on campus.	X			X			X		
12	Continue supporting student-led programming on diversity.	X			X			X		
13	Encourage visits to classes from financial aid, advising, Transitions, WRC, MC, counseling, and other student service units.			X						
14	Continue to offer CG100C tuition-free to students. If courses continue to fill, consider increasing the number of CG100C course offerings. Send emails advertising CG100C to newly-admitted students from underrepresented groups.	X			X					
15	Interview or survey faculty concerning their role in classroom management and compare this information to students' perceptions about conducting class and maintaining an effective learning environment.						X			X
16	Replicate study with other racial groups and evaluate similarities and differences between groups.			X			X			X

Handout 3: Focus Group Guide

Welcome & Overview
"Good [morning, afternoon] and welcome to our session. Thank you so much for taking the time to join our focus group. My name is [name] and I am a [graduate student] in [degree, education] at [institution]. I am assisting PCC with this project because I am interested in helping students get through college and reach their educational goals. "

"You were invited today because we are particularly interested in hearing about your experiences as an African-American student on the Sylvania campus. Our hope is that by receiving direct input from students we can make changes that promote your success at PCC. We have asked for two hours of your time, but these sessions usually don't last that long."

Guidelines & Ground Rules
"Before we get started, I want to share some ground rules with you to help make our time together productive. Please speak up—only one person should talk at a time and be sure to silence your cell phone.

Remember today that there are no right or wrong answers If you decide to participate you can stop at any time without jeopardizing your relationship with the focus group moderators or Portland Community College. There are also counselors available should you need to speak with them during or after the focus group."

"There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

You've probably noticed the microphone. We're recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and we can't write fast enough to get them all down. We will be on a first name basis tonight, but we won't use any names in our reports. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. On that same note, it is best to keep what you hear today in this room so that people feel completely comfortable sharing.

You may have noticed the person on that side of the room. He/she is helping us with the recording equipment."

Moderator's Role
"My job here is to ask questions and listen. I won't be participating in the conversation other than asking a few questions. I want you to feel free to talk with one another. Occasionally I will help the group move along so that we can get through our questions. It's really important that we hear from everyone. Sometimes there are a few people that like to talk a lot and others not so much. So if you have been sharing a lot, I might ask you to let another have a chance to speak. On the other hand, if you aren't sharing much, I might ask you for your opinion or thoughts from time to time.

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There's a lot to cover today, so we'll be dividing up some of the work. About half-way through our time together today, Kermit who is seated over by the door is going to help me out."

Ice Breaker
"To help us feel more comfortable with each other, there are name cards in front of us. *So let's get started. Tell us your name and how long you've been a student at Sylvania."*

<u>Questions</u>

1. *I'd like you to think back to when you first started taking classes at Sylvania.* Now that you've been a student here for a while, how would you describe your <u>actual experiences</u> at the Sylvania campus compared to <u>how you imagined</u> things would be?

    1a. Let's think about these same issues [or experiences], what are some things that have made it easier or harder for you to be successful at Sylvania?

    1c. You mentioned [advising, financial aid, and X], what other programs or student services have made it easier or harder for you as a student at Sylvania?

2. *You probably spend a lot of your time on campus in classes. Imagine you are taking [OR Reflect on] two different courses at Sylvania (two different instructors, as well). Take a minute to think about the ways professors run a course. One of the instructors makes the course better for you and the other makes the experience worse for you.*
    What aspects of the teaching or the course affected your experience?

    2a. *It seems like you mentioned two different types of things, one is how the course is designed (syllabus, assignments, etc) and the other has more to do with how teachers conduct the course and relate to students (discussions, availability before / after class, knowledge of PCC policies, etc).*
    Beyond the way the course is designed or how instructors run the course, was there something else that affected your experience in the course?

    Thanks for sharing with me. Now [Moderator 2] is going to join you.

    ENTER MODERATOR 2

    2b. You've mentioned several types of relationships you've developed on campus with faculty, staff, and students. How have these relationships affected your experience at Sylvania?

    2c. How and when did you develop these relationships?
    [as students describe the relationships, ask the following:]
    Where on campus did you develop these relationships?

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3. *One of PCC's core values is cultural awareness.* Thinking about your experiences both in and outside of the classroom at Sylvania, how would you describe Sylvania in terms of racial, ethnic, and cultural understanding?

4. *There are two sides to the note card in front of you. On one side of the card, please write 3 suggestions for improving the African-American student experience at Sylvania. Based on the information we get from you, we'll be letting PCC employees know about the things that make it easier or harder for African-American students at Sylvania.*

   On the other side of the card, please write down one piece of advice you could give to a new student just like you taking classes at Sylvania for the first time, what would that be?

   Remember, your responses are confidential, but we will ask you to share at least one thing from your card with the group.

> 4a. Now, let's go around and have everyone share at least one suggestion or piece of advice they came up with from each side of the card. If you hear one of yours on your list, go ahead and put a check mark next to it and share something new.

> Have we missed anything?

CONTINGENCY ITEMS (may or may not be asked, depending on what comes up in the focus group):
1. Some of you mentioned experiences at other PCC campuses [and/or colleges] besides PCC Sylvania. How were those experiences similar or different than your experience at Sylvania? [a probe that could be used anywhere]

Closing
"Well that wraps things up. Thank you all for your time and input today. It is incredibly valuable to us. Be sure that the registration desk has your correct address so that they can mail you the gift card. You should expect it to arrive in about a week."

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Handout 4: Web Resources, Books, & Articles

Web Resources for Instruction
Center for Teaching and Learning- University of Minnesota
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/resources/multicultural/resources/index.html

Center for Research on Teaching and Learning- University of Michigan
Occasional papers
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multiteaching/multipapers.php

Teaching and Learning Center- Temple University
http://www.temple.edu/tlc/resources/resources_main.htm#diversity
Teaching and Learning Center- Portland Community College
http://www.pcc.edu/resources/tlc/

Books available through PCC
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