



Office of Research & Planning

RESEARCH REPORT

Building a welcoming community: A qualitative assessment of students' sense of belonging

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Abstract

Four student retention programs, CalWORKs, EOPS, Guardian Scholars, and HARTS, collaborated with the Office of Research and Planning to assess their shared Student Services Outcome: program provides students a welcoming space and community that will serve to encourage persistence. In this qualitative research study, the Office of Research and Planning facilitated focus groups with students from the four retention programs. A total of 29 students participated in four one-hour focus groups facilitated in November 2019 at the main CCSF campus. Several research analysts developed and constructed themes through an iterative and collaborative coding process to ensure validity of the results. When analyzing aggregate data from all four focus groups, students extensively addressed the topics of welcoming space and community. We found similar themes related to program space needs were often largely shared within a program, and each program shared similarities with other programs related to the goals of students, but each program appears to have overall different space needs. We also found that students value community they find within these programs, actively building community through their interactions with each other both organically and through program facilitated events.

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Introduction

The Office of Research and Planning conducted a qualitative research study to support the assessment of a Student Services Outcome (SSO) shared by four student services programs: CalWORKs, EOPS, Guardian Scholars, and HARTS. These four programs provide a multitude of services to specific subpopulations of CCSF students: students who are low income working parents, students facing academic disadvantage, former foster youth, and students experiencing homelessness. While each program is unique and serves a group of students with distinct experiences and needs, the programs have some common services and the students they serve sometimes overlap. Therefore, they were able to develop a shared SSO, and a shared assessment.

The goal of this research was to assess the following SSO: program provides students a welcoming space and community that will serve to encourage persistence.

We sought to identify gaps between services the programs provide and the students' needs, specifically related to a program's space and community. The programs strive to make students feel welcomed and to instill a sense of community to support students in their educational journeys. Through this study, we hoped to gain insights that could inform improvements in these services and, help the programs to engage and retain students more effectively.

Methodology

Method and approach

Through a series of consultations, we determined a qualitative study using a grounded approach would provide the best results to assess the SSO. Our study design was exploratory and inductive, which allowed students' voices to shape our findings.

The approach was developed by a team of SSO Workgroup members, the Director of Planning, and analysts from the Office of Research and Planning. During our early meetings we determined that neither existing data nor a quantitative approach would allow the SSO Workgroup to assess the selected outcome. The group decided that a qualitative study, using focus groups for data collection, was the best approach for this assessment. There were several characteristics of this situation that made it a good candidate for focus groups:

- The SSO sought to assess perceptions and process, which are often more appropriately measured through qualitative methods.
- While the total population of students who participate in each of the programs is small, analyzing participant responses in aggregate would allow the researchers to identify generalizable themes across the student service programs.
- There are existing communities of students who could benefit from hearing from each other in a structured, facilitated conversation.

Members of the SSO Workgroup identified topics of interest that would speak to the assessment of the SSO and guide the facilitation of the focus groups. We summarized and assigned titles to the initial topics of interest, as described by the SSO workgroup, which we refer to as "topic areas" for simplicity (Table 1). The research analysts then designed a focus group protocol to engage participants in a discussion that would yield data about the identified topic areas.

Table 1. Initial topics of interest for SSO assessment

Topic area	Initial topic of interest as described by program coordinators
Welcoming space	a non-judgmental safe zone on campus where special population knows they can get help or just stop by
Program materials - written communication	how we are describing program and students on website, brochures - emphasis on using asset/strength focused language
Staff interaction - verbal communication	how we as staff communicate and interact with our students
Staff interaction - nonverbal communication	consistent positive customer service that includes respect, empathy, tact as well as being aware of making eye contact, body language and tone
Comfortable physical space	space in program office that communicates to students, “your space” with comfortable seating that promotes relaxation
Sense of belonging	a sense of belonging to program
Intentional community	program events that are intentional about bringing students together to interact

The populations of interest for this study included highly vulnerable groups: low-income, working, single parents; former foster youth; students experiencing homelessness; and other marginalized student populations. We anticipated these students would likely have had experiences with institutional oppression that might lead them to be distrusting of recruitment efforts from unfamiliar researchers. Subsequently, we utilized the existing relationships between program staff and their students to recruit focus group participants. Staff from the four programs that serve these students were asked to handle the focus group logistics and participant recruitment, with support from the Office of Research and Planning.

Data collection

Analysts from the Office of Research and Planning facilitated four focus groups composed of students who participated in one of the four student service programs: CalWORKs, EOPS, Guardian Scholars, and HARTS. The sessions took place in November 2019, at the main CCSF campus (“Ocean”), on weekday afternoons. The specific locations and food provided differed across groups, but they were otherwise similar sessions. Locations included conference rooms, a meeting room, and a classroom. Food provided included pizza, sandwiches, and other snacks such as fruit and chips. Each session began with 10-15 minutes of set-up and settling in, followed by 40-55 minutes of facilitated discussion. A total of 29 students attended the four focus groups.

In each of the focus groups sessions, there were two analysts present: the facilitator and a notetaker. The facilitator asked questions from the protocol and guided the conversation, while the notetaker recorded the main thread of the discussion and other observations. The focus groups were also audio recorded. For each recording, one analyst transcribed the data, and at least one additional analyst independently reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy. These transcriptions comprised the primary dataset for analysis, although we retained the notes and audio files for reference when the transcript text was unclear or needed further illumination.

Analysis procedure

Three analysts from the Office of Research and Planning used an iterative process to code and analyze the data (Charmaz, 2014). Each analyst independently reviewed the data to identify initial themes. The

analysts then reconvened to collaboratively develop emergent themes, which were then applied and refined through another round of coding of the data. This cycle of coding and analysis supports the validity of the findings, ensuring that multiple independent analyses had similar interpretations and found common themes.

Findings

Participants provided extensive comments directly responding to the key topic areas in Table 1. Additionally, we identified two emerging key topic areas that contributed to our understanding of the SSO: student responsibilities and navigation of program services.

The program space

Participants spoke about their experiences within the physical space, both with respect to how comfortable they were and whether it felt welcoming. These topics were not mutually exclusive as participants often described experiences that spoke to both topics.

Comfortable physical space

Participants in each focus group described program's physical space in terms of size, location, layout, noise level, and availability. Students varied in what they felt was a comfortable space and described a variety of desirable furniture and equipment layouts. We found more differences in what students found comfortable in a physical space between programs than within programs. We saw a clear example of students' differing perspectives when students in two different programs described the environment they prefer:

"You have the computer lab---but this is place to relax, too. People are relaxing, talking aloud, then you can work... at the computer. I don't use the books in the library; I...want to use the lab." (Ken 13:48)

"I like how [the program office] had that table in the middle where you could do your homework and stuff and didn't have the computers. And it was set off to the side for the counselors. So it kind of felt like you know, you're just going through, and going, you know, going through and getting your services. Like this one just seems like the couch, there's really no where to like sit down and like do your homework so I don't really go to [that program] anymore to do my homework. I just go to the library because I have my little section there." (Nancy 11:58)

Despite these differences, three key elements to a comfortable physical space were described in most or all groups: wanting a place for private conversations, having consistent access to spaces, and a desire for more space. Participants described wanting privacy when speaking to staff, summed up by one participant:

"We are talking about just not counseling here. We're talking about income and all these other issues, and I feel like it should be---there should be privacy." (Faith 22:03)

Participants across programs noted their frustration when trying to access program services or the space itself when the room was closed for staffing breaks. This most often affected access to printing and computers:

"...[A] kind of like hassle is that when [the staff] go on break, they have to leave the door where the computers are at locked and we can't enter on our own." (Natalia 12:30)

"You can't print stuff. If you really need to print your homework at the last minute, and the door is locked, you're like 'Oh dang'." (Benjamin 12:59)

Consistently, participants in all four focus groups described wanting more space available to them, summarized by one participant below:

"It is definitely a little cramped for the number of people that rely on [program's] services and expertise." (Edward 12:52)

Welcoming space

Generally, students described the programs as welcoming environments that encouraged them to visit. Both the layout of a space and how students interacted with staff contributed to how welcomed they felt in the space. Students repeatedly described their interactions with staff and the way visitors were invited into the space as welcoming:

"When I just came in, I felt very comfortable. ... They're like, come in, sit down, use the computers, anything you need. So it's very accessible and they're like very friendly too." (Kayla 15:35)

"...It does seem small, but I notice the staff are real welcoming. As soon as you come through the door. You know, 'how can I help you?' -- 'come back in,' they invite you into their little area.... I did notice that, that they were really welcoming and inviting." (Eric 14:22)

"We even have a couple people that come in who haven't even like done the formal thing but they come in for snacks or something like that, which everybody is allowed to do...they're not ostracized or whatever." (Salvador 11:00)

There were some aspects of programs that participants described negatively during these discussions of feeling welcomed. Specifically, participants indicating feeling unwelcomed by policies requiring appointments to speak with staff, and physical space layouts that separated them from program staff.

Program communications

The focus group participants discussed program communications primarily related to verbal communication, with a smaller emphasis on nonverbal communication. There was very little discussion of written materials during the groups.

Verbal communication

Most focus group participants described their individual interactions with program staff, some discussed interacting with other students in the program, and a few discussed interactions within group settings. Interactions with staff included: requests for information, in person or over the phone; completing program requirements, such as turning in paperwork; individual counseling appointments; and personal one-on-one conversations.

"For example, the people at the front desk, they don't hesitate to answer any

question I have over the phone. Sometimes we're not on campus, or we don't have time to go. They always answer the phones, which is good, and any questions you have that they don't have answers right away, they always give you a call back within the hour, which I find is really helpful." (Gabriela 40:14)

Written and nonverbal communication

Three of the four groups occasionally mentioned learning about a program through written materials that they found via self-directed exploration. Written materials that participants mentioned included the CCSF course catalog, the CCSF website, signs directing students to a program office, and a list of resources provided by the CCSF financial aid office.

"I was browsing the catalog when I first enrolled and I was looking at all the programs that could actually help me... It is my first time here in San Francisco. So I was trying to get as much help as I can get, and I found [my program] in the catalog...[I went to] check it out, sign up, and then there you go." (Miguel 05:08)

Participants in several groups also described receiving emails from program staff about available services, though they did not describe the contents in depth.

While focus group participants had limited discussions of their experiences with nonverbal communication, the comments were generally positive. Several participants positively described being warmly greeted by program staff.

Belonging and community

Participants in all four focus groups commented on their feelings of belonging to the programs. While students did describe aspects of their program participation as contributing to a feeling of community, their comments were not often related to program events directly intended to bring students together.

Sense of belonging

Participants conveyed a sense of belonging through a variety of observations. Some participants discussed how they viewed themselves as members of the college community, while others discussed their interactions with program staff in the context of community. Several students described their interactions with other students in the program as contributing to their sense of belonging to the program:

"... I was happy to see other people that were happy with me too because they needed [the program] as well. ... You get more motivated to see other people going through the same things that you're going through." (Kayla 45:47)

"I have been coming around a little more often because I can appreciate the positivity that flows through the place. Just hearing other people's stories and what they've been through...They have some place where they feel is somewhat their own. They can come, relax, not worry about being judged or bothered, get work done and all that stuff... There are plenty of folks there that are willing to chat with you and tell you their story." (Edward 32:11)

However, participants seemed to value a sense of belonging to the program in varying degrees, depending on factors such as their educational goals, their life experiences, and their availability to

engage with the program staff and other program participants. With her busy schedule, one student described feeling like she was at the right college because of her limited emphasis on engagement with other students:

“It's like nobody has time to just sit around and talk all day. Like you got to go to work, you got to go to school, you have other things to do. So I hardly ever see people just like, like stopping and chatting, you know what I mean? Which is like fine. I know, everyone has their kind of own thing to do. Yeah, it feels like a pretty good school.” (Nicole 33:21)

Intentional community

Some students in the focus groups described participating in program activities such as orientations, group meetings or resource fairs. Events that took place off campus included scholarship events and social events with students from the same programs at other colleges. While participants did not tend to focus on program events, they generally spoke positively of the interaction with other students from their programs at events:

“...I think it's good that they do the group orientations, 'cause that way you're not alone learning [about new things].” (Kayla 45:47)

“It was pretty cool. It wasn't too many people from our location... Because I think a lot students just in and out. So only a few people came by... But they were cool. And it was fun seeing them. And gel and stuff. It was a good environment.” (Tiffany 30:52)

Some students expressed feeling part of a community by interacting with staff or spending time in the program space despite not attending any program sponsored events.

Emergent topic areas

While participants shared many experiences mapping to the key topic areas in Table 1, we identified two additional topics that emerged from the focus groups. Participants often talked about their other responsibilities not directly related to the program, and participants commonly shared experiences navigating in and among programs, particularly when getting started.

Student responsibilities

Students discussed a variety of responsibilities in their lives, not all of which were directly related to being a student. We identified four categories of responsibilities: schoolwork, family, work, and basic needs. Some students described tension between their outside responsibilities and their participation in a program. One participant described the challenge of fulfilling all their responsibilities:

“I find myself at this point of the semester just drained. I'm tired. I need a vacation or something, 'cause it's like, it's nonstop. You wake up, you go to school, you go to work, you come home, you have your child, you have homework you still gotta get done, you got midterms to do, you got papers to turn in. You got this on Canvas, you got that, you knock out, you wake up. Back at it. Back at it. Back at it.” (Wendy 48:13)

Other students described the value added when their retention program was able to, directly or indirectly, help them meet their outside responsibilities. This coordination between program services

and outside responsibilities took a variety of forms, including dedicated study space for students in the program; snacks, especially at busy times of year like finals; transportation vouchers; printing services at hours when other options are not open; or reliable access to food and restroom facilities.

“It's an essential program. Some people can't even take a shower without the program because they offer ... access to the showers. ...through [the program], or whatever. Sometimes that's their only opportunity to take a shower.” (Salvador 20:12)

“You would be able to grab a few snacks for finals. ‘Cause sometimes, some of us, you know we rush out of the house, or we don't have time to go to a restaurant, we're stuck on studying, and we need nutrition, and I appreciate that.” (Frances 19:24)

“...my things were stolen from me. ...---my wallet, my bag, my phone... She was like ‘Oh you need a new book bag?’ She reached back behind her chair and pulled out this nice new fresh CCSF bag.” (Edward 28:30)

Program navigation

Participants described a range of experiences getting started and maintaining eligibility to receive services from their respective programs. Students described some aspects of joining a program with excitement, such as receiving school supplies or Clipper cards. However, students described more negative feelings when recalling frustrations with completing some program requirements. Many participants, especially those who discussed participating in an orientation, described the process to sign up for their program as easy, simple, and fast. Some participants acknowledged that these processes were challenging, but with their extensive experience in accessing support services from other agencies and other CCSF programs, these students found the process to be manageable. Other participants found it difficult to navigate their program requirements and outside systems or agencies at the same time.

Students who described positive academic counseling experiences often identified similar components: being able to access counselors in a timely fashion, either via drop-in hours or scheduled appointments; having enough time during a counseling appointment to ask and address their questions; having privacy during an appointment; and feeling confident that they are getting the right information to effectively plan for their academic goals. One participant summarized an experience representative of what many participants said they wanted from counseling:

“She actually gave me the name of the classes that I needed to take---how many classes, how many units, and how long it was gonna take. And what, what was the meaning of taking those classes, why do I need to take those classes. So it made it clear for me ... how important it was for me to take those classes. ... I know where to focus more because of that. It gives me a sense of direction, how to plan for future, like, ‘okay, I know what I'm doing.’” (Kayla 24:03)

Students expressed frustration when they experienced long wait times for appointments, did not have enough time during an appointment, when tasks required multiple visits or going to multiple offices, or when they received conflicting information.

Some services described were offered across multiple programs, and participants described accessing these services in multiple locations. Specific examples include picking up snacks between classes and

accessing printing services from a wide variety of programs and locations. Services offered by the four student services programs were referenced in addition to other programs not included in the focus groups, such as the Queer Resource Center, and Latino Services Network. Students routinely cited convenience as the reason for selecting a given service location or program.

Discussion

From the findings, we identified several key themes in the data that help us understand the student experience in these four student services programs. We found that students' experiences were affected by several overarching factors: how well the program requirements and services aligned with their priorities outside of school; the ways in which students interacted with program staff; navigating program requirements, particularly the intake process; the utility of program spaces and how welcomed they felt; and building community with other students within the program.

Student priorities: Competing or coordinating with the program

Necessarily, students who participate in the four programs in this study are facing challenges that decrease the likelihood of academic success. Focus group participants described various challenges, especially including responsibilities that required time and energy to fulfill, like caring for children or providing for basic needs. Students described their outside responsibilities as either discordant with their participation in one of the programs, or as being alleviated by their participation in the program.

"I have work, I have school, and I have an internship. So I'm just like, I don't really have time." (Nicole 29:16)

"I find myself at this point of the semester just drained. I'm tired, 'cause it's like, it's nonstop. You wake up, you go to school, you go to work, you come home, you have your child, you have homework you still gotta get done, you got midterms to do, you got papers to turn in." (Wendy 48:13)

The types of outside responsibilities varied by program, in keeping with the characteristics of the student populations in each program. But students across programs described demands on their time and energy, which were generally either competing with their participation in the program, or program services were coordinated such that participation in the program helped them also meet their other responsibilities.

A common example of a small but important way that their program could support participants in meeting their outside responsibilities was the program providing a place for them to complete their homework.

"I like how [the program office] had that table in the middle where you could do your homework." (Nancy 11:58)

Notably, even when students described challenges in meeting program requirements, they repeatedly stated that they valued participation in the program. And when program services coordinated with students' outside responsibilities, students expressed gratitude as well as a greater feeling of care and belonging.

Interactions: How students engage

During the focus group sessions, students described a variety of interactions and relationships with

program staff. Program staff primarily engaged with students in one of three ways: completing transactions, acting as advocates, or developing personal connections. Staff would often fill several of these roles for students participating in the program. For example, while most students described counseling as a transactional interaction, some described the importance of “connecting” with counselors as a reason for why they would visit a particular counselor.

Transactional interactions

The first type of interactions we identified could be described as transactional, in which the primary purpose of the interaction was to exchange information or materials with a program staff member – including student workers, by phone, email, or in person. Examples of transactional interactions include asking front desk staff about registration dates or dropping off program paperwork. When talking about these types of interactions, students emphasized the importance of getting the right information, when they need it, and in a way that recognizes their specific needs:

“The people at the front desk, they don't hesitate to answer any question I have over the phone. Sometimes we're not on campus, or we don't have time to go. They always answer the phones, which is good, and any questions you have that they don't have answers right away they always give you a call back within the hour, which I find is really helpful.” (Gabriela 40:14)

While participants sometimes identified the role of connection in counseling, participants frequently identified specific elements we found in line with other transactional interactions.

Building personal connections: “Aunties”

The participants enthusiastically described staff as friendly, attentive, able to authentically relate to their experiences, and genuinely interested in students’ well-being. When talking about relationships with staff in this context, students focused on the interpersonal connections with staff rather than specific tasks needing to be completed. Participants frequently praised program staff as good listeners and likened them to family:

“...[She]’s such an open heart, she's very true, she's very real, and I was very appreciative of her sharing her story...being that open and honest with everybody.” (Edward 28:30)

“...[She] remembers you---your whole situation... and just relentlessly helps you get what you need to get through.” (Steven 24:12)

“Someone to talk to when I need encouragement, if I'm not like doing well in the class or personal issues. [She] is always a really good listener...” (Nicole 15:43)

“When I go in, I feel like, I feel like they're like aunties or something, you know? They're super cool and laid back, like everybody said.” (Nancy 23:29)

Making an impact: “Advocates”

We found that students generally felt program staff were available and engaged in supporting them toward achieving their goals. Beyond describing the nature of the relationships they developed, focus group participants talked about the impact staff had on their experiences at CCSF:

“...[this program] is definitely my advocate in situations with, you know, maybe,

issues with teachers. Or, there was that whole financial aid thing, which was – I didn't even want it. All the little issues with that and dealing with that, [the program] helped me out.” (Salvador 41:58)

In this example, the focus group participant expresses her appreciation for the program staff member who has implemented some changes that streamline processes for students:

“You know..., she's really trying to do a lot of things to better, like, save time for us... she's trying to make it easier, which is good. And I'm grateful for that. So she is thinking of us and how to...not to be going, have to go running around.” (Carolina 35:41)

Some participants directly related their educational goals to relationships with program staff, citing program staff as “encouraging” them to pursue more than they had originally intended, like pursuing transfer to a four-year college. Generally, participants described their experiences with the programs as positive, with some identifying these programs as critical to their continuing success at CCSF:

“At first I was kind of scared... starting college with nothing basically. It's kinda scary. But with the program---it pretty much helped me start...college and pretty much survive---made it from scary negative to positive. [I'm] starting my classes, I'm meeting new friends, and I'm actually part of a club now.” (Miguel 38:56)

“[This program] has me feeling like I can make it here.” (Thomas 49:53)

“I always do a little bit better when I am in [the program] because I kind of need that person in my head like ‘You need to go.’ Like, like you need to do this, or could get a service, or like I need to have some type of incentive, or somebody be stressing me out, or ghost in my ear like, ‘you need to go do your homework,’ or something so. I feel like that's good, a good thing. It gives us like a little bit of support and push or whatever.” (Nancy 37:55)

Navigating the programs

Focus group participants shared a range of experiences when navigating program requirements. We found that participants brought up experiences related to program eligibility and onboarding in response to a wide variety of questions and sometimes spontaneously.

We observed that participants routinely broke into side conversations to clarify differing understandings of program rules and requirements, such as the minimum number of counseling appointments required per semester, specific documentation requirements for scholarship eligibility, or how to make up hours. Navigating the program requirements was clearly central to students' experiences.

While the students in the focus groups shared many positive experiences, they also shared some frustrations with program rules, and various related systems and processes. However, despite frustration with a situation, participants acknowledged that many challenges they faced when navigating services are systemic, and do not reflect the efforts of individual programs or staff: “the staff is great, like, they're great! It's not their fault that the system's like this.” (Faith 43:14).

Accessing services

Participants demonstrated flexibility and adaptability when choosing services, and were often driven by

convenience. When a comparable service was available in multiple locations, students tended to use the location closest to them or available when they needed to use it. This can be seen when Salvador and Steven were discussing why they access services provided by two different programs:

Salvador: "They're just slightly different. And also the placement on the campus..."

Steven: "It's nice to have [this program] on this end of the campus and [that program] on that end of the campus."

Importance of intake

Participants first learned about their programs in one of two ways: through self-directed exploration or via referral. Similarly, participants first signed up for these programs with the support of an advocate or on their own. Students who had previously received some type of services at CCSF before applying for a student services program more consistently described the program intake process as easy, partly because CCSF already had the information needed.

While participants were sometimes frustrated with the intake process, they found challenges associated with that process easier to overcome when supported by an advocate.

"[Signing up was] really easy, they were really helpful. They help you fill out the documents, like he said." (Eric 9:22)

"Why do you need so many forms of verification?... that was a little difficult, but [the staff] was really supportive." (Nicole 9:08)

We heard a clear example of the importance of an advocate from Guardian Scholars. The participants were discussing their experiences and discovered that those who had applied as a minor found it much easier to obtain program application documents, while students who had "aged out" found the process more challenging. They explained that minors have access to a much broader network of people to support them in handling paperwork and compliance issues.

Space and community

We found three themes emerged with respect to space and community: there is a relationship between the kind of spaces where students feel comfortable and the goals of the program; feeling welcome can be connected to feeling permitted to engage; and community developed in a variety of ways, not only through facilitated events.

Participants identified the relationship between the program space and their sense of community. In this example, a student had been involved in a program at a prior college, and had a clear sense of how her friendships with other program participants related to the availability of a communal space:

"When I was at [another community college], it was like, like a circle-ish room and like you would go in there and literally like 20 students are there. They have tutors on one section, the counselors in one section, so like, ...that's all my friends that I've met, were from [the program]." (Nancy 28:43)

Utility of program spaces

Satisfaction with the space seems to hinge on how well the space maps to the primary focus of the program: the students they serve and those students' goals. The exact same space would not work for

all groups, although there are some aspects that are similar across some programs. Students nearly universally valued space to relax or hangout, print documents and use computers, and have private conversations with program staff.

Focus group participants from different programs tended to express different needs, specifically with respect to space layout and equipment. Within each group, participants emphasized different goals and subsequently different space needs. Some students preferred to have a quiet place to do homework, while others indicated interest in more computer stations. A single space layout is not appropriate to meet each of these programs' needs, but a summary of key space elements for each program is show in Table 2.

Table 2. Program space needs described by students

Program	Dedicated study space	Somewhere to relax, regroup, socialize	A place to have private conversations with staff	Family-friendly space	Computing and printing stations
CalWORKs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
EOPS		Y	Y		Y
Guardian Scholars	Y	Y	Y		Y
HARTS		Y	Y		Y

When participants found the physical space did not meet their needs, they described their experiences as negatively affected:

"I think that kinda like, the [lack of] privacy creates a barrier ...[it limits] the connection that you can develop you don't feel like you can express [everything you want to discuss] in the office setting where everybody's hearing your conversation." (Wendy 22:26)

Feeling welcomed in the space

The idea of permission and access seemed to impact how welcome participants felt. When physical space was available to them, they reported feeling welcomed. When aspects of the program required explicit permission for them to access, then participants reported not feeling welcomed by their program. At times, students seemed to associate being granted or denied permission with how they were perceived by staff; Naomi described being granted access to space based on staff assessment of "character" while Wendy asked if staff create physical barriers because they feel threatened by students:

"They no longer allow us to go in [the restroom]. But if they do know you, know your character, they might unlock the door and let you use it. But due to some bad experience that happened there they not allowing other people to use the bathroom, just for the staff now." (Naomi 12:50)

"...So why are you guys separating us from the staff? Like we're not going back there, we're not going to attack you guys, it should be welcoming." (Wendy 19:41)

"I don't like how it's like [the program coordinator] has like a room entirely separate from where

the ...students are located. I mean, it's kind of like strange ...[it], seems kind of like a cell, kind of." (Benjamin 36:29)

Building community

We learned that these programs do support the development of community for these students, though less through intentional events and more organically, through relationships based in shared experiences. Participants who felt they did not have a welcoming physical program space, were frustrated that the focus group session was the "first time" they had spent time together and felt a sense of community together. Participants who spoke more about comfortable shared spaces did not express similar concerns, and while they did not generally know all of the other participants from their program, they were not frustrated by that.

Despite describing different experiences with their program's community, the group of students in each of the four focus groups demonstrated that participants were able to draw on shared experiences and connect over those experiences. We observed natural rapport among participants, even when they had not previously met. Participants readily shared their own experiences during the group and often drifted into intense conversations, sometimes not directly related to the topic. Participants shared a wide variety of experiences, advice, and encouragement with one another.

"And I'm like, I have 14 units, I only have a kid, I do have a job but...You have two kids, you have more than I do. It's good that you're here. She was happy, we were happy, so it was -- you get more motivated to see other people going through the same things that you're going through. And I think it's good that they do the group orientations, 'cause that way you're not alone, learning." (Kayla 45:47)

"Man, I was just thinking the same thing, yesterday. I was like, in my house I'm stressed out about my homework and all of this. And I'm like, I don't have any kids! I'm not even working right now! How do I have stress right now? You, look at you, getting the stuff done, I commend you for what you're doing." (Thomas 47:36)

The expressed desire for an explicit community differed between groups. Several students described their relatively solitary habits, and not being interested in more community engagement:

"I honestly only met like maybe one person and we still keep in contact but it's just I'm barely at [the program office] this semester because I have work, I have school, and I have an internship. So I'm just like, I don't really have time. I kind of like go in and out, you know what I mean." (Nicole 29:16)

Positive comments about the sense of community within the program included feeling "like a family," having a place that "they feel is somewhat their own," and "inclusive." Participants expressed gratitude for the services they receive, the accommodation they get from staff, and the "positivity" that they feel when they are in the space.

"They can come, relax, not worry about being judged or bothered, get work done, and all that stuff. It makes for a rather joyous environment of folks. There are plenty of folks there that are willing to chat with you and tell you their story." (Edward 32:11)

"But that's what I like about each resource center. It's certain resources, ...[for] a

targeted population of students, but not only that, it's inclusive of everyone: religion, race, creed, orientation, and I kind of like the spirit of that, ...It kind of creates a togetherness, students supporting each other, basically.” (Frances 28:58)

“It kind of feels like a family almost. At least to me, I just feel most comfortable going there because I feel like we've built that trust. And [the program coordinator], she's just really helpful, like she's like the auntie almost, yeah.” (Nicole 23:58)

Some participants recognized the benefit of community for the first time as they participated in the focus group discussions. These students were frustrated about what they felt was a missed opportunity to build community with people who shared their experiences, and wanted to engage with each other more:

“We can all benefit from helping each other too. If you guys aren't gonna have like structure, and faculty, and staff within there to help us...then let us build a community within ourselves.” (Wendy 41:27)

Conclusion

Over the course of the four focus groups, we were able to assess the SSO as requested by CalWORKs, EOPS, Guardian Scholars, and HARTS. Analyzing the data across programs allowed us to find common themes regarding welcoming spaces and community that we would not have been able to identify at the individual program level.

Across the focus groups, students addressed how welcome they felt in program spaces and the extent to which they felt part of a community. We found similar themes related to program space needs were often largely shared within a program, and each program shared similarities with other programs related to the goals of students, but each program appears to have overall different space needs. We also found that students value community they find within these programs, actively building community through their interactions with each other both organically and through program facilitated events.

Sources

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