



# Skyline Students Voice Their Perspectives

May 25, 2017

The following individuals from Career Ladders Project contributed to the writing of the report or facilitation of the student focus groups: Mina Dadgar, Dina Buck, Brook Sinclair, Chase Fischerhall and Kristina Palmer. The authors would like to thank Amory Cariadus, Anjelica Cacutan-Viloria, Zahra Mojtahedi, Angélica Garcia, and other Skyline administrators, faculty and staff who worked to recruit students for the focus groups.

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This report outlines findings that the Career Ladders Project (CLP) garnered from students at Skyline College in San Bruno, California, through a series of focus groups conducted in March 2017. Skyline College invited CLP to run focus groups with Skyline College students to better understand their experiences at Skyline, especially about what had helped or hindered their ability to select a major, choose classes, and access the support they needed. One goal of the focus groups was to systematically include student perspectives in the conversations about designing guided pathways at Skyline.

## **RECRUITMENT, FACILITATION, AND ANALYSIS**

Skyline's Office of Student Development sent an open invitation to all students to sign up for one of several pre-determined focus groups and was able to recruit 51 students for seven of the time slots. The slots were created based on a student traffic map that was created by Skyline's Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE) and in consideration of convenient times for both daytime and evening students. That office was able to provide statistics on characteristics of 40 of the 51 participating students who were able to RSVP. These characteristics included race/ethnicity, gender, age, number of units accumulated, length of study at Skyline, and educational goals. See Appendix A for a detailed breakdown of the participating students' characteristics.

Each focus group was run by a CLP facilitator who asked students what their process had been in selecting majors and choosing courses, what resources had been helpful to them in navigating their college experience, and what other help they felt they needed. When time allowed, students were also asked if they knew of anyone who had dropped out of college and if they knew why that individual had decided to leave. For the list of focus group questions (focus group protocols), see Appendix B. All seven focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to draw out recurring themes.

In this report, we will summarize the main themes from the student focus groups and, where possible, include examples and student quotes to clarify those themes. Generally, quotes that we chose to highlight reflect a larger shared sentiment among students.

## FINDINGS

### I. Most students found choosing a major to be a daunting task

Most students in the focus groups found it difficult to decide on a major, which proved to be a significant obstacle to finishing their programs on time. Students attributed this to having unclear career goals when entering college, having little to no opportunities in college to engage in career exploration, and lastly, not being able to link different majors offered to possible careers of interest.

**Generally, we were able to arrange students' questions about selecting a major into the following categories:**

- a. What are my career options? How do I get more information about those careers and about whether I'd be successful at those jobs, or enjoy them?
- b. What are the different types of jobs that various majors lead to?
- c. Is the major I am pursuing "practical," in terms of my ability to find a job with a decent salary later on?

The following quotes reflect common themes in the answers students provided to questions about selecting a major when they entered college:

*"Initially, I wanted to become an actress. I wanted to be on stage through theater, but I know that's something that's not very stable...but, I think the medical field is always something that's really stable. People are sadly always getting sick."*

A repeated theme was that trying out classes in an attempt to figure out one's major or career of interest was "wasting time and money." That said, a small group of students expressed that taking a few courses had at least helped them know what they did *not* want to major in. However, the majority of students said that taking various courses was not helpful to them in choosing a major. Their comments included:

*"At least for me, it was a [lot about] not knowing where to go...Like [a major in] communications. Okay, where do you go from there? Do I become a professor? Do I work in TV? What kind of jobs do people have? It sounds corny, but are [people] happy in those jobs?"*

*"I know a lot of people who have been here for 5 or 7 years, and they switched their major so many times, and that is why they are here for so long...and I think that happens so often because there isn't really someone to sit down with them and say, 'Here, these are your strengths, these are careers that would be really good for you, and these ones aren't.' So, that's why they keep jumping around... I think we definitely need a program [to help with] that."*

*“I’ve been guilty of this—and it is a common thing here—where you take class after class and you kind of forget your end goal...But [it] would be great to have something tangible, like a shadowing program or something else, that would get you excited about picking a major.”*

While some students blamed themselves for not having clarity about their careers of interest early on, other students shared ideas about structured ways the college could help them learn about different careers and the majors that lead to them. For example, in one interaction, a student shared that he felt he needed to leave college in order to stop wasting time and paying tuition as he tried to figure out what career he wanted to pursue and which degrees would lead to that career. Another student disagreed that it was a good idea to leave college until one knew what one wanted to study, because at least, in theory, the college could find ways to help students find careers and majors of interest. The first student agreed that this model would, in fact, be ideal.

**Overall, when asked what additional supports a student needs to help choose a major, students shared the following responses, which we synthesized into the following list:**

- 1. Experiences to learn more about different careers, including “more guest speakers, ”as well as “shadowing and internship opportunities.” Opportunities to be around other students with similar interests.**
- 2. An “overview of major classes”**
- 3. “A daylong seminar, a low-cost workshop, and career fairs”**
- 4. Having all students take the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) personality test and Strong Interest Inventory assessment at the beginning of their college careers**

When asked which of the existing resources were helpful in supporting them to choose a major, some students mentioned that the career center had been helpful to them and pointed in particular to the opportunity to take the MBTI and Strong Interest Inventory tests there. However, many of the students were unaware of the career center and what it offers. One student said:

***“At the career center, I was able to take the MBTI and the SII assessments. Maybe that can refine the decisions that students have [when they are struggling to choose] a major. So, if the students know that there is a career center and that there are assessments that can refine choosing a major...that may knock off some years [for them to be] in community college...and paying for classes, because they’d know what the heck they want to do.”***

Another student recounted a story from her adult high school. She had assumed accounting was boring, but changed her mind after her adult school brought in an accountant to talk to the students. After being exposed to different types of accounting and learning about them through a professional’s lens, the student decided to pursue a degree in accounting at Skyline.

Related comments from students in the focus groups included:

***"I'm currently in a fellowship, and I'm surrounded by people who are in the environmental science major. This gives me an opportunity to [think about] that [field] and [try to] understand if that is something I like or don't like, which is so effective when you have to make such a huge decision, and so much money is involved."***

***"I feel like more Counseling 100 teachers {should} find inspirational speakers and have them come talk to their students..., because that's what helped me. Hearing all their personal stories and what they went through...and how they're telling you to make your lives better, I think that really helped me."***

## **II. Choosing courses and getting into the right ones was often challenging.**

We asked students how they went about deciding which courses to take each semester and what worked well or needed improving when it came to selecting courses. The most frequently repeated theme was being unable to take the courses they needed because they were already full.

The majority of students in our focus groups said they had sometimes been unable to enroll in a class they needed and had to face a frustrating waitlist process that failed to prioritize students who required the course to complete their studies. Some students were also concerned that the classes they needed were offered with limited time slots or weren't offered during the semester they needed to take them. Sometimes classes were only offered at times that conflicted with students' work or after work schedules. Not surprisingly, obtaining priority registration was considered advantageous and eliminated many registration challenges.

The second most common theme was making a mistake in selecting courses that ended up not counting toward the student's degree. Most students felt they had, at times, mistakenly selecting courses because it was not clear to them which ones counted toward their majors or which courses fulfilled multiple requirements for their majors. Some sample comments were:

***"I found it really hard to find classes because I'm a big fan of not wasting time. So, I was like, 'I'm not going to take anything I don't need to take.' It was really hard."***

***"I think also if there was a [clearer] path for people who had decided on their majors, there would be such an overflow in classes... If there's a clear-cut path for what classes you should be taking, then [the college will] understand the ratio of students taking classes, which would hopefully (indicate to) the school, 'Oh, we need more classes in business.'"***

However, not all students found selecting courses and enrolling in them to be challenging. Specifically, two of our focus groups included several students in cosmetology. They shared that it was clear to them which courses they needed to take each semester, and that they could always get into the classes they needed. Some of the students who had switched to cosmetology from another major reflected that their understanding about which cosmetology courses to take was significantly clearer than when they were trying to figure out which courses to take for their previous majors.

### III. **Students generally found that the supports available to them were helpful, but many were unaware of the different types of supports that exist**

Several of the students found the services available to them to be helpful. The learning center, disability center, career center, transfer center, and learning communities, as well as financial support, scholarships, free tuition, and transportation, all make a significantly positive difference to students. That said, the students felt their school could do better a better job referring them to and raising awareness about these services, as it had taken many of them a long time to learn about these supports.

#### **Representative comments included:**

*"...when I talked to some people in the admin office, they [were] unaware of what resources are available. Or, some people do know, and it's kind of like miscommunication or just lack of communication about what the school has to offer. I found out about a lot of resources after the third or fourth semester, and I'm like, 'Wow. These exist. It's too late for me to join that now.'"*

*"...through my learning community I got to know about so many resources here on campus, like TRiO (student support services), SparkPoint, EOPS."*

When discussing how helpful counselors are in guiding them through their time at school, most students said they found counselors to be helpful, although there was a large variation in students' perceptions of the support they received from counselors. Students frequently expressed that counselors seemed to have limited time or limited specialized knowledge in a specific subject area and therefore weren't as effective in helping students with tasks like career exploration, choosing a major, or understanding the content of specific courses. Several said they wished they could see the same counselor every time so that they did not have to "recreate the wheel" when seeking advice from someone new. Others thought having counselors assigned to a specific subject area or department would be helpful.

Students repeated the following themes in describing their counseling experiences:

***"I was thinking about the [idea of having] counselors who are almost specialized in a certain area...a counselor for the science department, a counselor for the art department, a counselor for, let's say, kinesiology. Or, it could be broader, or more general. I feel like that would be a lot more helpful,...[if] so that they can take time to kind of see the classes in those areas, so that they can help the students better, and that way the students can be guided toward a more specific route rather than such a broad route where they'll waste time."***

***"...my first year here, I just rotated [among] so many different counselors...It was hard for me to just get one concrete thing..."***

***“I think the counselor should be knowledgeable about what each class would entail...I know it might be a lot to ask because there are a lot of classes.”***

In summary, students reported that limited time (short sessions) with counselors, as well as limited open hours of availability, made counseling services—which they found valuable—less accessible to them. This was especially true for evening students. In addition to expressing frustration with limited availability, students reported a desire for more specialized counseling services. Some students reported that counselors and program staff had different information, or that information changed fast, leading students to make mistakes when selecting courses. These common themes point to structural barriers that could be addressed by introducing levels of specialization in counseling, as well as a need for more attention to student needs and schedules when developing counseling hours.

#### **IV. Students yearn for a sense of community and peer connection.**

A secondary theme that was echoed by a small, but sizeable, group of students was a yearning for a greater sense of community. This is something we did not ask students about, but the topic came up naturally. Their comments included an interest in connecting with other students to receive support and advice, or just to connect and develop a sense of community. They also expressed an interest in connecting and learning from students who had similar career interests or majors. Some students expressed a desire for peer-to-peer mentoring, stating that, while counselors are helpful, it would be inspiring and helpful to hear stories and get support from students who are ahead of them in the college process. Comments included:

***“I feel like one of the biggest things that's missing at Skyline is a celebration of culture. Not just ethnic culture, but I mean, even within each major there's a certain kind of unity. If we're able to create those kind of spaces at events rather than just [in] offices, and have that kind of network and start building them off each other, I feel like that would promote education, in general, and [having] students stay on campus...People just come in and out, and of course they're not going to run into these services [like] TRiO or EOPS, because they're not looking at bulletin boards or their email, they're just trying to get in and out....”***

***“One thing that would help me, I think, is to set up study groups...or even a classmate that is at your level to help you along—somebody you can communicate with and deal with to try to keep you motivated.”***

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

To summarize, some actionable findings from the Skyline College's student focus groups include the need for:

- **Guidance in choosing a major and better understanding of the careers it might lead to:**
  - Most students felt they did not have enough information about careers to help them choose a major. Students suggested that the college could provide assistance such as an introductory course about career exploration and choosing a major, guest speakers, workshops, hands-on opportunities, internships, and job fairs. All these could help provide students with a tangible understanding of different careers and if they might find them enjoyable.
  - Students who had visited the career center felt they had benefited from the MBTI personality and Strong Interest Inventory testing as a first step to clarify career interest and suggested incorporating those tests into an activity or class that all students would do automatically.
  - Students wished they had more information about how various majors are linked to different careers, as well as about salary ranges for different careers.
- **Clearer course sequencing and course availability:**
  - Students expressed that they are not able to get into the courses that they need when they need to take them and that the waitlist process is frustrating.
  - Many students have taken a course or courses that end up not counting toward their major and/or are unsure which courses fulfill more than one requirement.
  - When students were clear about course sequence (e.g., cosmetology students), this seemed to significantly eliminate confusion and keep them from inadvertently taking courses that waste time and money.
- **Improvement of available resources:**
  - Existing supports, including the various resource centers, are extremely helpful to students.
  - Students wished they knew earlier about the various resources.
  - Students wished they could see the same counselor, and that counselors could be more specialized, or have more time available for students.
- **Campus community and peer-to-peer support:**
  - Students yearned for a sense of community on campus.
  - Students felt peer-to-peer connection, mentoring, and study groups could be inspiring and helpful in navigating their education at Skyline.

***While the data outlined above are rich, they don't answer all the questions that Skyline faculty, staff, and administrators have about students' experiences. Answering some of those questions will require methods other than student focus groups and include an analysis of quantitative data. CLP is documenting the ongoing list of questions raised by Skyline faculty, staff, and administrators to inform future inquiry work in collaboration with Skyline's PRIE office and other campus constituents.***

**Appendix A: Characteristics of Participating Students**

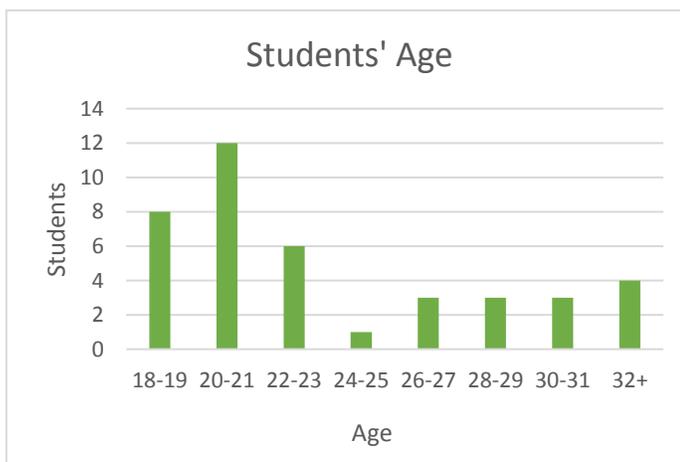
Skyline's Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE) was able to provide statistics on characteristics of 40 of the 51 participating students who were able to RSVP. These characteristics included race/ethnicity, gender, age, number of units accumulated, length of study at Skyline, and educational goals<sup>1</sup>:

**Demographic Characteristics:**

The majority of students who participated in the focus groups were female. In fact, only 20 percent of the focus group participants were male. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 51, with about half of the students falling into the 18-to-22-year-old range and half falling above that range. The table below details focus group participation by race and ethnicity.

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage of Focus Group Participants
Asian	15%
Black	3%
Filipino	13%
Hispanic	20%
Multi Races	30%
Pacific Islander	3%
Unknown/other	8%
White	13%

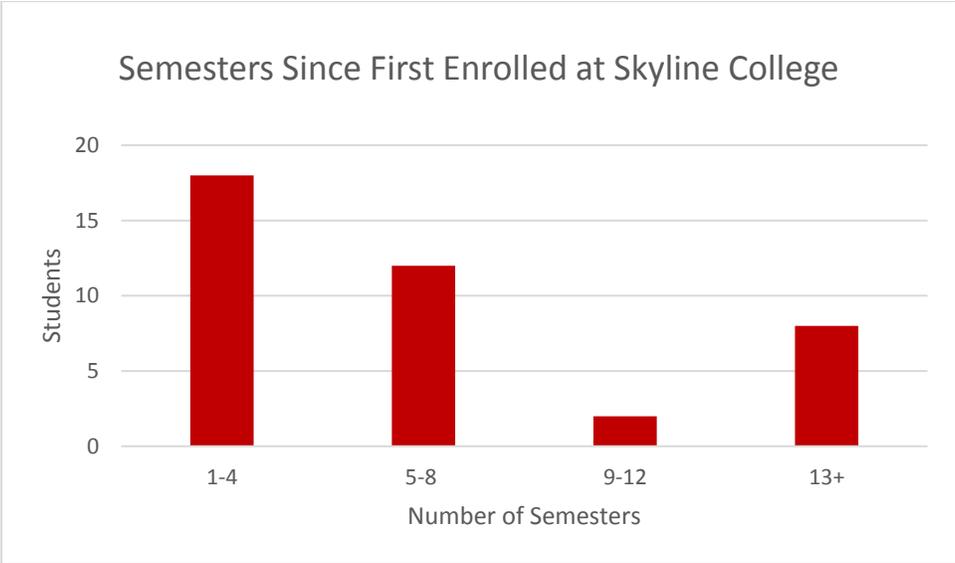
The students' ages ranged from 18 to 51. The graph below provides detail on the participants' age.



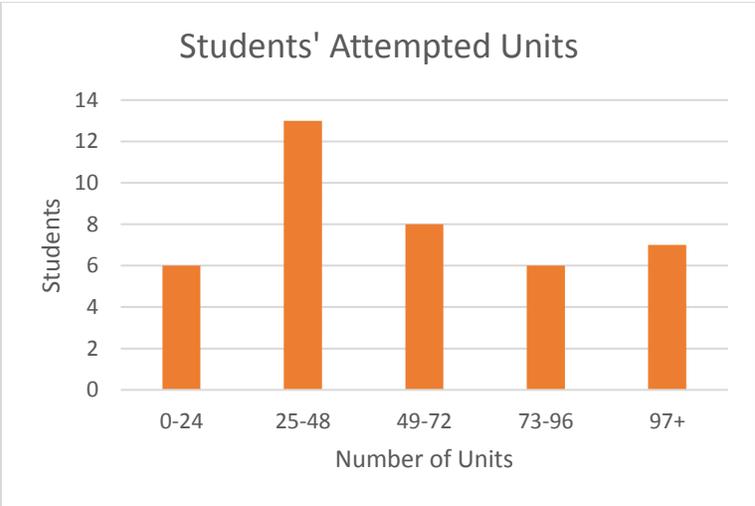
<sup>1</sup> In addition to the 40 participants who had RSVP'd, and whose records could thus be provided by the PRIE office, 11 students showed up during one of the focus group without an RSVP. Those students were allowed to participate in the focus groups, but we do not have detailed information about them.

**Educational Goals, Length of Enrollment, Credits Attempted:**

In terms of the length of enrollment, about half of the focus group participants had enrolled at Skyline before 2015, and about half had enrolled between 2015 and 2017. The graph below provides detail on the participant's length of enrollment at Skyline College.



In terms of credits earned, the median number of credits for our focus group participants was 50 units. The graph below details the distribution of the units attempted by the focus group participants:



The table below details the participants' educational goals:

Educational Goal	Percentage of Focus Group Participants
Earn AA and transfer	55%
Earn/maintain vocational certificate	18%
Transfer to 4-year school without AA/AS	20%
Update job skills	3%
Undecided	5%

## Appendix B: Focus Group Protocols

### Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. We have been asked to include student voices and experiences in discussions with your college's leaders and faculty about how the college can better serve students.

Would it be OK to record the conversation, so that we can capture your ideas as you present them? As we write this up, we will not be using your names. We want you to know that we think everything you have to say is important, and we are here to learn from you and your experiences here at Skyline College.

We would like to hear from everyone, whether your experiences are similar to or different from others.

### Focus group questions

#### Intros:

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

#### Choosing a major:

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

#### *Probes:*

- *How long did it take you to choose a major?*
- *Have you changed your major along the way? (Look for a show of hands for people who changed their major multiple times)*
- *What was helpful in exploring what your interests were?*

4. **For those who have not decided on a major, how do you think you will go about making the decision?**

#### *Probes:*

- *How much do you know about your areas of interest? What other information do you need to make a decision?*

**5. What do you think the college could do to help you and other students decide on a major early on?**

Choosing Classes

**6. How do you decide which courses to take?**

Probes:

- *Do you know which courses you need to take next semester? If no, how will you find out?*
- *Where can you get the most helpful information on which courses to take every semester?*
- *What has been your experience in choosing courses? Can you usually register for the courses you need?*
- *Are you able to get the advising/counseling that you need?*
- *What do you think works well when it comes to choosing your courses every semester?*
- *What do you think could improve?*

Closing

7. Do you know anyone who has had to stop or drop out before finishing their program? Why do you think that happens?

8. What kinds of things can the college be doing to help students overcome the biggest challenges and stay in school?

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