

Listen to Me

Community College Students
Tell Us What Helps Them Persist

Student Discussion Guides



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INTRODUCTION

What follows are four sample focus group discussion guides that can be used to conduct longitudinal focus groups with entering students at your college. The questions in these discussion guides ask students about what is and isn't working in their early community college experiences and they focus on the triggers that lead to attrition and the leverage points for changing those outcomes.

The four discussion guides can be used at three touch points in your students' first academic term and once early in their second academic term. If possible, you should plan to interview *the same students* each time so that you can better understand what is helping them to be successful as they move through their early experiences at your college. CCCSE recommends conducting the first focus groups in September of the fall term, the second focus groups in October of the fall term, the third focus groups in November of the fall term, and the fourth focus groups in February of the spring term.

To access the full CCCSE Focus Group Toolkit, visit <https://cccse.org/resources/focus-groups>. Featured on this page is the Focus Group Manual, which provides comprehensive guidance around planning and conducting focus groups with students, faculty, and staff. This manual contains several appendix resources, such as templates for invitation emails and consent forms as well as sample intake survey questions and basic focus group opening questions. In addition, the Toolkit includes a variety of discussion guides (including this one) devoted to a diverse array of topics important to community college student engagement and success.

DISCUSSION GUIDE #1 – SEPTEMBER

1. Why did you decide to go to college? [Did anyone urge you to go to college? Parents? Friends? High school teachers or counselors? Anyone else?]
2. Did anyone discourage you from considering college? If so, who was that? What reason were you given?
3. Before you decided to come to this college, how did you get information about college? In high school? At your job? From family? From friends? Other?
4. Why did you choose this college? Location? Cost? Academic reputation? A particular program? A family member or friend went to this college? Other?
5. At this time, do you feel supported in your decision to go to college? From family members? Friends? Others?
6. Before you came to this college, what did you expect college to be like? Where did those expectations come from? High school counselors and teachers? Employer or co-worker? Friends? Family? Information you read? Other?
7. While in high school, did you take any of the following: college prep classes, honors classes, AP (Advanced Placement) classes, college courses?
8. While in high school, did you take any of the following tests: SAT, ACT, college placement test?
9. Think back to the first time you came to this campus. You're sitting in the parking lot or getting off the bus, preparing to walk into the building to register for your classes. What was going through your mind? What were you worried about? What were you excited about?
10. Based on your first impressions of this college, think to yourself and complete the sentence: **"This college is like a _____."** Tell us about your response.
11. Think about your first week here and the people you met in class and outside of class. Who in the college knew your name at the end of the first week? Do more people know your name today than at the end of the first few weeks? If so, how did you meet them?

ADMISSIONS PROCESS

12. When did you first walk into a building at this college to get information? Within the last several weeks? At an earlier time?
13. Now think about the **first time** you walked into a college building to get information, apply for admissions, register, or for any other reason. [Ask about online registration.] What did you see? Whom did you see? Were you greeted? By whom? How did you feel? Comfortable? Confused? Lost? Describe your experience.

14. So far, what are your impressions of the people (students, faculty, college staff) you have met at this college?
15. On the following scale, please respond to this statement: ***“The very first time I came to this college, I felt like I belong.”*** 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree. [Ask for a show of hands to each response.] Please explain your response. Has your impression changed since your first visit? Do you feel more or less welcome today? If so, please explain why. Describe if there is a culture of caring at this campus. Explain how you came to this conclusion. Do you feel like the instructors care about your success in the courses that you are taking? Do you feel like the college staff (other than instructors) care about you?
16. Today, do you know all the steps you need to take to apply for admission, enroll, register, sign up for classes? How did you learn or are you learning what steps to take? From college staff? From friends or family members? From other students who attend the college?
17. What offices or programs have you worked with so far? What has been your best experience? What has been your worst experience? Describe each.
18. Did you take placement tests? Were they required or optional? Did you know you’d have to take them before you arrived? Did people at the college do anything to help you prepare for the tests? If so, what? Who helped you? Explain the process you went through after learning about the placement tests.
19. If you did take placement tests, as a result of those tests, were you required to take any particular courses? If so, which ones? Have you signed up for them or are you planning to sign up for them this term? Why or why not? What is/was your reaction to the results of your placement tests?
20. During the process of registering for classes, have you met with anyone on the college staff? If so, who was it? Advisor? Financial aid staff member? Faculty? Other students? Other?
21. Of the individuals you met with, were there representatives of particular offices who did a particularly good job of providing the information you needed? Advisor? Financial aid staff member? Faculty? Other students? Other? What made your contact with them helpful?
22. Were there representatives of particular offices who were not effective in providing you with the information you needed? Advisor? Financial aid staff member? Faculty? Other students? Other? What about your contact with them was not helpful?
23. Are you aware of any type of orientation available at the college? Online? Face to face?
24. Did you participate in or have you signed up to participate in any type of orientation designed to help you get started at the college? Why or why not? Is it required or optional?
25. If you’ve already attended an orientation session, did you find it helpful? What did you learn? If it was helpful, in what ways? If not, why not?
26. So far, on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being the easiest and 5 being the most difficult, how would you rate the ease or difficulty of registering for classes? Explain your answer.

27. Now that you've gone through all or part of the registration process, to what degree do you feel like you are prepared for your classes this fall? Very prepared? Still confused? Completely lost? What, if any, additional information do you need to help you feel more prepared?
28. During the process of registering for classes, did you ever consider walking out the door and not attending this college? If so, why? What made you stay?
29. As you consider your experience signing up for classes, is there anything you wish you had known before you came to campus to enroll and register?
30. Now that you've been through the registration process, who in this college do you think knows your name?

ADVISING AND PLANNING

31. Before you registered for your classes, did you meet with anyone to help you plan your college program or select classes? If so, who was that person? Do you know what that person's job is? An advisor? An instructor? Other? If so, was the meeting with that person required or optional? Did you meet with someone face-to-face? Online? If online, did you have any in-person contact as well? Required?
32. What was the nature of your conversation with the first college staff person who gave you advice? (Academic and career planning? Goal-setting? Discussion of your academic strengths and challenges? Choosing a program or major? Course selection? Other?)
33. So far, has anyone worked with you to set goals? Have you laid out a plan for your time at school? Have you declared a major? Do you have a written plan for earning your degree or certificate or for taking the classes that you need to transfer? If you don't have a written plan, do you feel like you have any kind of plan?
34. Have you been assigned to a particular person who will help you during your time at this college (advisor, mentor, student success coach, case manager, other)? Is this the same person you met the first time? Have you been told if this is a one-time meeting or if you will continue working with this person during your time at this college? If you've declared a major, do you have an advisor in your program?
35. So far, how would you rate the quality and usefulness of the advising or counseling [whatever language the student uses to describe] you've received? Excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? Explain your response.

FINANCIAL AID

36. Before you came to this college for the first time, did you know that you might be able to receive financial help to go to college? If so, when and how did you learn about it?

37. As of today, have you received any information about financial help that might be available to you?
38. Have you met with a financial aid advisor as part of the process for getting enrolled in college? Why or why not? Have you been told whether you are required to do so?
39. Are you eligible for financial assistance? How do you know? Did you fill out any forms to determine whether you're eligible? If you don't know whether you're eligible, do you plan to look into it? If not, why not?
40. Whether or not you are considered "eligible" for financial assistance, do you believe you will need some financial help in order to complete your college program?
41. How will you be paying for college? Your own income or savings? Money from parents or other family members? Other?
42. If you already know or believe that you might be eligible for financial assistance, have you applied? If not, why not? Are you interested in receiving financial assistance if it's available to you? If not, why not?
43. If you've already applied for financial assistance, when did you apply? Have you received it yet? If so, how long did it take from the time you began the process to the time you received the aid?
44. If you have already applied but haven't received the funds yet, what does the financial aid advisor tell you about when you'll receive the money?
45. Describe the process you went through from the time you applied to the time you received the money.
46. If you're in the middle of the financial aid application process, describe the process so far.
47. On a scale of 1–5 with 1 being the easiest and 5 being the most difficult, how would you rate the ease or difficulty of going through the financial aid process? Explain your answer.
48. How would you rate the quality and usefulness of the financial aid advising you received? Excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? Explain your response.
49. Is there anything you wish you had known about getting financial assistance before you arrived on campus for the first time?

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

50. How many classes are you enrolled in for this term? How did you decide how many classes to take in your first term? How did you decide which classes to take in your first term?

51. Are you enrolled in two or more linked classes that a group of students take together (learning community or other name)?
52. Did anyone talk with you about taking any classes that would be particularly helpful for new students? If so, who talked with you and what classes did they talk about? Required or optional?
53. What do you expect from your classes at this college? How many hours per week do you expect to spend studying and/or preparing for class outside of class? What do you think your instructors will expect of you? Have you talked to anyone so far who explained the expectations for students? If so, what did they tell you? How do those expectations match with your own expectations for your college experience?
54. As you prepared for the first week of class, what was going through your mind? What were you excited about? What were you worried about or feeling stressed about? Was there anything you think the college could have done to help alleviate your stress?
55. Describe a class this term that is really working well for you—a class you enjoy and where you feel like you are learning a lot. What is the teacher like? What about that class makes it work for you? What happened during the first class session? How much time does the teacher lecture? How much time do you work with other students? What else do you do in that class that helped you learn?
56. Describe your access to the internet at home when you need it for your coursework at this college. Do you ever have any connectivity issues? If so, describe the issues that you typically experience.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND OTHER COLLEGE SERVICES

57. Did you enroll in any specific classes or programs that you were told would help you learn how to be successful in college? [Listen for student success class, student life skills, student development, 1st year experience, learning community.] Were you assigned to a group of students you'll be taking classes with? Will you receive college credit for this class? If so, how many credit hours?
58. Has anyone given you information about services available to help you with your coursework if you need that help? Tutoring? Study groups? Labs? Other? If so, who gave you this information? If you should need additional help, how likely is it that you will use one or more of these services? Why or why not?
59. What, if anything, have you learned about any ways you can become involved at this college? Where did you get your information? Are you considering becoming involved in any particular activities while you're in school? Why or why not? Are there other activities or kinds of activities that you might become involved in if they were available to you? If so, what?

WORKING LEARNERS

60. If you work, describe how working impacts your educational experience? Does working for pay make it difficult for you to take the courses you need for your program, major, or pathway of study?
61. Describe how much your instructors know about your outside commitments. Do your instructors know how many hours you work per week?
62. Has anyone at this college helped you decide how to balance the number of classes you are taking and the number of hours you work for pay? If so, what position does this person hold? What advice/support has this person provided you regarding being a working learner?

ADVICE

63. What advice would you give the college about one or two things the college could do to improve the entering student experience?
64. If you were giving advice to a friend who was planning to attend this college about what they could do to get off to a good start, what advice would you give?

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

65. Right now, what's the single most important reason you have enrolled in this college?
66. How confident are you that you can stay and complete your academic goals? 1 being not very confident, 5 being extremely confident. Explain your answer.

Describe the next steps in the focus group process—that you will be contacting students soon for a second round of interviews that will take place in October.

DISCUSSION GUIDE #2 – OCTOBER

1. During our first visit, we talked about what you expected college to be like. Now that you've been in class for 7–8 weeks, were your initial expectations of what college would be like accurate?
 - a. Describe how college is different than what you expected it to be and if there are any ways in which it is better than you expected it to be.
2. How is your term going?
 - a. What's going well? Why?
 - b. What's not going well? Why?

ADMISSIONS PROCESS

3. Do you feel more or less welcome today than when you first arrived on campus? If your feelings have changed, please explain why.
4. Describe if there is a culture of caring at this campus. Explain how you came to this conclusion. Do you feel like the instructors care about your success in the courses that you are taking? Do you feel like the college staff (other than instructors) care about you?

ADVISING AND PLANNING

5. Let's talk about advising for the next term.
 - a. Have you met with your advisor to talk about registering for the next term? What were those conversations like?
 - i. Is the advisor you met with the first time the same advisor you met with to prepare for the spring?
 - ii. Talk about how often you review your written academic plan? If you don't have a written plan, do you feel like you have any kind of plan?
 - iii. Has anyone changed their major?
 - A. Describe the reasons for changing your major.
 - B. How was the process for changing your major?

FINANCIAL AID

6. How are you feeling about having the money you'll need to go to school?
 - a. If you applied for financial assistance, have you received it? If so, how long did it take from the time you began the process to the time you received the aid?
 - b. If you haven't received the funds yet, what does the financial aid advisor tell you about when you'll receive the money?

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

7. Of the classes you are attending this term, think about some positive experiences. Describe them. What made it good for you?
8. Think about any class experiences you've had so far that have not been so good. What about that experience didn't work for you? What could have improved that experience for you?
9. Have you worked with other students outside of class? In what ways? [Explore class projects or activities related to coursework.]
10. Have you had contact with any of your instructors outside of class?
11. What are your instructor's expectations for you, and how have those expectations been communicated?
12. For those in developmental education courses, what have those experiences been like? How do you feel about taking a developmental course?
13. So far, for each of your classes, how much time per week are you spending preparing for class (reading, completing assignments, studying, practicing, reviewing notes, etc.) outside of class? Is it enough to help you complete your work and feel prepared?
14. Do you know how well you're doing in your classes so far? If so, how do you know? Did your instructor give you that information or did you go to your instructor to find out? If you don't know how well you are doing so far, are you concerned about it? Do you plan to talk to your instructor?
15. Have you missed any classes so far? If so, why? How many? If so, did you hear from your instructor or anyone else about those missed classes? Did your instructors say anything about missing class at the beginning of the term?
16. Have you dropped any classes so far? If so, why? Were you required to talk with your instructor or an advisor before you dropped? Did anyone have to sign off on the drop?
17. Have you added any classes so far? If so, what are they and why did you add those classes?

SUPPORT SERVICES AND OTHER COLLEGE SERVICES

18. Since the last time we met, has anyone used the college's student support services? Tutoring? Study groups? Labs? Other? If so, talk about what your experiences have been like. Are they useful?
19. Since last month, what, if anything, have you learned about any ways you can become involved at this college? Where did you get your information? Are you considering becoming involved in any particular activities while you're in school? Why or why not? Are there other activities or kinds of activities that you might become involved in if they were available to you? If so, what?

WORKING LEARNERS

20. Has anyone started a new job since we last met? Has anyone quit a job since we last met?
21. How have outside commitments affected your schooling: job, family, health, finances, other?
 - a. Do you feel you need help prioritizing and balancing schoolwork with other commitments you have?
 - b. Have you had any experiences at the college that help you develop time management skills?

REFLECTION

22. After your first couple of months, in your opinion, what are the college's strengths? What is the college doing well that is helping you feel comfortable and able to stay on track?
23. What aspects of college cause you the most worry or stress? What do you think the college could do to help alleviate your worry or stress about those issues?
24. From your first experiences at this college, do you think some students will have an easier time being successful here? If so, what are the characteristics of the students who you think will be more successful? What leads you to that opinion? Consider who you are—your gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age, whether you are a part-time student, whether you are a working student, how academically prepared you were coming into college, etc. How well do you think the college is doing for you and people most like you? Explain your answer. What more do you think the college can or should do for you or people like you? Explain.

ADVICE

25. If you were giving advice to the college about how to improve the first 7–8 weeks of the term, what one or two pieces of advice would you give?
26. If you were giving advice to a friend who was planning to attend this college about what they could do to be successful here, what advice would you give?

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

27. Right now, are you considering not continuing here? If you are, what is the reason? What would cause you to leave? If you are considering leaving, what would help you stay and continue your studies?
28. When you look back on your reasons or motivation for being here, has anything changed?
29. When you look back on your confidence level for finishing school, has anything changed?

Describe the next steps in the focus group process—that you will be contacting students soon for a third round of interviews that will take place in November.

DISCUSSION GUIDE #3 – NOVEMBER

1. Describe how you are feeling as your first term in college is about to wrap up.
 - a. What have you enjoyed most about your first term in college?
 - b. What have been the challenges?
 - c. What have been the lessons learned that will help you for the next term?
2. In general, do you find students at this college to be friendly and supportive or unfriendly and unsupportive? Please describe an experience that explains your answer.
3. In general, do you find **instructors** at this college to be friendly and supportive or unfriendly and unsupportive? Please describe an experience that explains your answer.
4. In general, do you find **administrative personnel and offices** at this college to be friendly and supportive or unfriendly and unsupportive? Please describe an experience that explains your answer.

ADVISING AND PLANNING

5. Has anyone changed their major since the beginning of October?
6. Is the college offering you the support you need? Have you met with an advisor to discuss the upcoming term?
7. How is your second term going to be different than your first term?

FINANCIAL AID/COMMITMENTS

8. Is money an issue?
9. Has anyone started a new job since we last met? Has anyone quit a job since we last met?
10. How have outside commitments affected your schooling: job, family, health, finances, other?
 - a. Do you feel you need help prioritizing and balancing schoolwork with other commitments you have?
 - b. How have your time management skills changed over the course of this term?

HOME LIFE

11. Are you getting the support and encouragement you need from home?
12. Are you feeling bogged down by work and/or family responsibilities?
13. How do you feel your living situation (living in a dorm or with your family) has impacted your first term in college?

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

14. Has anyone dropped or considered dropping any courses since the beginning of October?
15. Are you making the grades that you expected in your classes?
16. For those of you who took dual enrollment courses at this college while in high school, how do you think your dual credit experiences here impacted your first term in college?
17. For those of you who have felt a lack of motivation at times, how have you overcome this feeling?

REFLECTION

18. Overall, how do you rate where you are at this point? Going fine? Getting more difficult? What exactly is getting more difficult? What is your view of your future in school?

[Ask individualized questions based off of facilitator notes.]

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

19. As you wrap up your first term in college, what is your greatest motivation for staying in school and completing your academic goals?
20. How confident are you that you will stay in school and complete your academic goals?

Describe the next steps in the focus group process—that you will be contacting students soon for a final round of interviews that will take place in February.

DISCUSSION GUIDE #4 – FEBRUARY

1. How did you prepare for your finals at the end of the fall term? How did finals go?
2. Talk to me about your final grades. Did you receive the grades that you expected to receive? How did your family react to you finishing your first term in college?
3. We talked in our earlier conversations about the instructors, staff, and peers that provided you the most help. In the last month of the first term, did anyone have a faculty member, staff member, or peer who went above and beyond to help them? Please describe an experience that explains that answer.
4. As you think back on the first term, what memories or feelings enter your mind?
5. What was the biggest surprise from your first term?
6. What were the best experiences in your first term?
7. What experiences did you not enjoy your first term?
8. Describe a challenging time during the fall term and explain how you got through it.
9. What course do you feel you learned the most in? Describe why you learned the most in this course.
10. During the winter break, did anyone contemplate not returning for the spring term? Describe why you were feeling that way.
11. Did anyone think about college during the winter break? If so, what thoughts or feelings came to mind?

SPRING TERM

12. How is your second term so far different than your first term?
 - a. Has anyone changed their major since last term? Why?
 - b. Has anyone taken more courses or fewer courses than last term? Why?
 - c. What are you feeling as you begin your second term? Is this a different feeling than from when you started your first term?
13. Is anyone not considering continuing here?

ADVISING AND PLANNING

14. Has advising gotten better or worse since you started at this college? Explain your answer.
15. At this point in your second term, would you say you have a plan for your education here? If so, describe it. When did you come up with that plan? If you don't have one, do you feel you need a plan?

FINANCIAL AID/COMMITMENTS

16. At this point, how concerned are you about having the money you'll need to continue in school? If so, what are those concerns (tuition, gas, food, housing, clothes, etc.)? What are you doing to address those concerns.
17. Has anyone started a new job since we last met? Why did you decide to take on this new job? Has anyone quit a job since we last met? If so, why?
18. How have outside commitments affected your schooling: job, family, health, finances, other?
 - a. Do you feel you need help prioritizing and balancing schoolwork with other commitments you have?
 - b. How have your time management skills changed since your started college 6 months ago?

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

19. Of all of the classes you have taken so far, what class has been your favorite and why? Teacher? Content? Assignments? Paint a picture of what it was like to be in this class.
20. What was your least favorite course and why?

ADVICE

21. What piece of advice would you share with new students who are about to begin their first term at this college?
22. What advice do you have for this college about one or two things the college could do better?
23. What one or two things you would tell your instructors about how they could make their classes better?

REFLECTION

24. Based on your first impressions of this college, think to yourself and complete the sentence: ***“This college is like a _____ because _____.”*** Tell us about your response.
25. Do you think you are a successful student? Identify 1–3 characteristics that attribute to you being successful.

SUMMARY AND CLOSE

26. What is your greatest motivation for staying in school and completing your academic goals and how has this changed in the past 6 months?
27. What is your confidence level for staying in school and completing your academic goals and how has this changed during the past 6 months?