

MI-BEST STUDENT FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Gathering Student Voices to Better Support
Financial Stability and Academic Success

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Public Policy Associates, Incorporated is a public policy research, development, and evaluation firm headquartered in Lansing, Michigan. We serve clients in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors at the national, state, and local levels by conducting research, analysis, and evaluation that supports informed strategic decision-making.



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INTRODUCTION

Too often colleges embark on reform efforts and seek to implement innovative practices without sufficiently considering the potential impacts on students. Well-intended faculty and staff begin a process of making changes (or maintain the status quo) without engaging students to gather their perspectives. Systematically incorporating students' voices can provide the institution with invaluable feedback that can spur much-needed reform and help to inform a college's efforts to make changes.

When considering practices geared toward addressing student financial stability, gathering student perspectives is doubly important. Hearing from students who are experiencing economic challenges while attending college can be an invaluable resource in helping the institutional staff learn about what is working well and where additional efforts may be required to meet student needs. The information gained from students is not the end goal in itself, rather the results should inform improvements in institutional practice and community partnerships.

There are several methods for capturing student voices including traditional focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys. Colleges can also integrate classroom or campus-wide activities to gather student input. A recent publication from California¹ focused on gathering student voice as part of the implementation of Guided Pathways and provides a succinct overview of the different methods for collecting student feedback. For the MI-BEST (Michigan - Building Economic Stability Today) initiative, the chosen approach to incorporate students' voices was a series of focus groups.

The Michigan Center for Student Success launched MI-BEST² in 2020. Funded by the ECMC Foundation, MI-BEST is designed to assist Michigan community colleges in developing a systematic strategy to address the needs of their students at scale that can affect student completion and success, such as access to food, housing, transportation, childcare, and other basic needs. The goal of the MI-BEST initiative is to help meet student needs and better support them in reaching their educational goals. To do this successfully, colleges need to hear their students' perspectives to better align services and supports. MI-BEST provides colleges with technical support to help them move from understanding the needs of their students to partnering with their surrounding community and public benefits to address those needs.

As a partner in MI-BEST, Public Policy Associates (PPA) conducted ten student focus groups at a sample of four Michigan community colleges. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand the experiences students have with economic instability and how they perceived their colleges' support offerings. Four colleges—representing large, small, urban, and rural

¹ California Community Colleges, *California Community Colleges Guided Pathways*, February 2018, last accessed June 30, 2021, https://rpgroup.org/Portals/o/Documents/Projects/CCC_Guided_Pathways/Get-Started-Collecting-Student-Voices-Feb2018.pdf.

² "Michigan Best," last accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.michiganbest.org/>.

settings—were selected to participate. The four colleges had existing programs designed to address student basic needs and a commitment to ongoing improvement.

The *MI-BEST Student Focus Group Guide* is designed to help colleges conduct focus groups to gather input from students and apply what is learned to improve their programs and processes. While the emphasis of this guide is on practices and partnerships supporting student financial stability, the general approach can be applied in other contexts as well. The audience for this guide is any Michigan community college faculty or staff member who might be involved in the planning and conducting focus groups to capture the students' voices.

It is important to note that there are additional useful resources to support institution efforts in this regard. For example, the Center for Community College Student Engagement has produced a *Focus Group Guide*³ and *Focus Group Toolkit*⁴ to support practitioners as they work to gather student input. The California publication referenced above is another option. It is not our intention to duplicate these materials, but rather delineate a process for conducting student focus groups in the context of student financial stability.

³ Center for Community College Student Engagement, *Focus Group Guide*, last accessed June 30, 2021, https://cccse.org/sites/default/files/Focus_Group_Guide.pdf

⁴ Center for Community College Student Engagement, “Focus Group Toolkit,” last accessed June 30, 2021, <https://cccse.org/publications-resources/focus-group-toolkit>

PLANNING

STRUCTURING FOCUS GROUPS

When conducting focus groups on any topic, there are several key decisions the organizers will need to consider before getting started. These decisions range from the format and location where the focus groups will take place, the timing of when the session(s) will occur, the topics that will be covered and the questions to be asked, and what participant information is collected in advance of the session. This section will explore these decisions in general and share the choices made for the MI-BEST initiative. Participant recruitment also involves an important set of decisions. The subsequent section is devoted to the recruitment process.

Organizing Team

Before delving into the key decisions, it is important to highlight that colleges need to establish a team that will be responsible for making decisions and guiding the process. The first decision a college makes should be to identify those staff or faculty who need to be involved to ensure the focus groups are successful. The membership of the college team will vary based on the topic of the focus groups, but functionally all teams will need to include someone from institutional research to pull student data and communications to support outreach to students. Similarly, there should be at least one senior college leader who can make financial decisions and help mitigate any organizational barriers that emerge.

For the MI-BEST focus groups, in addition to those already mentioned, the college teams included student services staff who could speak to the specific content of the initiative and provide expertise on the programs and supports for student basic needs.

Format

Determining the format of the focus groups is a fairly straightforward choice between an in-person session or one that occurs virtually. Both formats have their advantages and disadvantages. In-person groups require a suitable location and travel by the participants and facilitators. In-person focus groups are arguably superior to virtual sessions primarily because it is easier for the facilitator to connect with the participants and to pick up on non-verbal signals and body language. However, video conferencing offers students the comfort of participating in their own home and does not burden students with extra costs such as transportation or childcare expenses, although technology access can be a concern.

If opting for in-person groups, organizers will need to secure a physical location where participants will not be interrupted by noise, such as from a nearby classroom. Participants also need to have clear directions to the site with adequate access and parking. Focus groups by

videoconference require that participants have the appropriate log-in information and sufficient technical knowledge and internet speed to engage effectively. When conducting a focus group in either format, the organizers should lay out ground rules, which can be co-created with participants, such as turning off cell phone ringers, not having others in the room, and respecting diverse experiences.

Originally, PPA planned to conduct the MI-BEST focus groups in person on each of the four participating college campuses. If a college had more than one campus, two locations would be selected to hold one session at each campus. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a change of plans, and the sessions were held virtually via Zoom instead.

Scale

Before getting too far into the process, it is important to decide how many focus groups are needed. There is no firm rule about how many focus groups, interviews, etc. is sufficient in qualitative research. So, deciding on a number of groups depends on the main focus group topic and the use of the focus group results. To inform strategic planning or other decision-making, it is not necessary to conduct many focus groups since the common perspectives and experiences will surface even across a few. Two to three groups are enough to understand broadly the views on or experiences with a college's student supports, for example. If a college wanted to hear about experiences by campus or by program, then two focus groups per campus or program would be needed. This gives enough for comparison purposes. Colleges may also want to look at doing a focus group or two with a subset of the student population, particularly if there are concerns about equitable access to services or differing needs that may not be represented otherwise.

One of the reasons to do focus groups instead of individual interviews is to get the participants' reactions to each other's comments. If the group is too small it may be hard to sustain a dialogue and hear a variety of experiences and perspectives. With too many participants, not everyone will have an opportunity to engage. A good size for a focus group is 6 to 10 people, although slightly smaller or larger groups can still be valuable. Knowing the target number and size of the groups early in the process will help to inform the size of the recruitment pool.

For MI-BEST, PPA planned for two focus group sessions per college. Two colleges ended up having three groups each when student turnout was low.

Timing

The choice of when to conduct the focus group sessions is more complex than picking the format. There are several considerations on timing:

- **What timing will work best for the students participating in the sessions?** For some students, a session during the day is more conducive, whereas others might prefer it be in the evening. The choice of format may also impact the timing if the participants will need

to come to campus. Another important timing factor is what time during the semester should the sessions be held. This decision will have implications for both the student participants and the staff organizing the focus groups. Scheduling sessions too near the beginning or end of the academic term will cause unnecessary stress for all involved. It is also important to avoid mid-term exams for students.

- **How much time is needed to plan and recruit for the groups?** The final consideration on timing is to set the dates of the session far enough into the future to prepare for the groups, including recruiting students. PPA recommends a college allow at least eight weeks of planning lead time before the first focus group date, with three weeks reserved for recruitment and registration of students.

Detailing the target dates for each step in the process helps a team stay coordinated.

Table 1. Sample Schedule of Focus Group Preparations

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8
Establish team and roles	Develop recruiting protocol	Set up registration	Pull list of students	Open registration	Monitor registration	Monitor registration	Close registration
Set focus group dates	Establish focus group topics	Draft questions	Review/revise questions	Send out invitations	Send second invitation		Send group reminders
		Draft outreach materials		Send confirmations			

The MI-BEST focus groups all occurred in the 2021 winter term. Each of the participating colleges is on a semester academic calendar with the winter term beginning in mid-January and ending in late April or early May. Working separately with each of the colleges in early January, the PPA team scheduled all the focus group sessions for late February and early March. To address differing student preferences, one of the focus groups was held during the day and the other was held in the evening, for each college. PPA shared a focus group protocol (explanation and schedule of steps) with each college and reviewed it with the college teams leading up to the focus groups.

Topics

To effectively gather student input, the organizers of the focus groups need to begin with a clear conception of the topic driving the inquiry. A lack of clarity about the topic and/or the motivation for the focus groups increases the likelihood that the sessions will not yield useful student perspectives and feedback.

The focus group organizers who will write the questions for students can each share what they see as the key topics and resolve any differences among them before drafting questions that get at those topics. The team can also look at previous research on the topic to help inform the

questions. Good sources to explore include scholarly research, publications and surveys from national intermediary organizations, and similar efforts from peer institutions (such as those available through Google Scholar). It is also helpful to gather ideas for questions from within the team, and perhaps some student helpers, and then choose the best to use in the focus groups. A focus group instrument generally has all the messages that the facilitator needs to say, plus around 12 questions.

Tips for Writing Focus Group Questions

- Ensure that each aspect of the topic is explored by at least one question.
- Ask open-ended questions that require someone to explain their answer. Beginning a question with “what” and “how,” for example, means someone cannot simply answer “yes” or “no.”
- Start with some general, easy-to-answer questions, saving the more layered or sensitive questions until later. Starting the conversation in this way gives students a chance to warm-up and feel comfortable.
- Include a few follow-up and probing questions where appropriate to make sure the facilitators get enough detail in response to questions. Examples of probing questions are “Could you tell me a bit more?” and “Why is that?” An example of a follow-up question coming after a question about a student’s concern about a service is “What do you think caused that miscommunication?”
- Do not ask questions in ways that might be seen as biased, judgmental, or embarrassing by the students.
- Use language that is appropriate to a college setting and familiar to students, avoiding jargon and uncommon vocabulary.
- Do not ask students questions to which you already know the answers (e.g., their enrollment status or whether they are receiving financial aid).

After assembling the draft instrument, the organizers can test the questions with a small group or make any needed adjustments to the way questions are asked, their order, or other details after the first focus group. Keep in mind that extensive changes to the instrument after the focus groups have begun may mean that the responses cannot be compared across groups.

For the MI-BEST focus groups, students were asked about the barriers that affected their participation in education, how they addressed these issues, what they knew and thought about the support services available on campus, and ways they think the college could better help students. Given the timing of the sessions, the students were also asked about how they dealt with any challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific questions posed to the focus groups can be found in Appendix B. PPA’s focus group questions were informed by Trellis’

Student Financial Wellness Survey, the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement’s *Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment*, and the Center for Community College’s *Student Engagement Focus Group Guide*, as well as input from the participating colleges. After the instrument was used for the first focus group, questions were refined to improve the flow of responses.

A Note About Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

In most cases, the student focus groups described here would not require review by an IRB, not being defined as research with generalizable results, statistically speaking. However, each institution should follow its standard practices and procedures.

RECRUITING STUDENTS

Similar to the previous section, recruiting students for focus groups involves making a set of choices about how to proceed. Processes can vary depending on the college, the students, coordination with other campus activities or courses, and other considerations.

Targets

To recruit for a focus group, it must be clear what characteristics the focus group participants should have in order to best address the focus group topic. For understanding student experiences with financial instability, it is important to identify students who have struggled in this regard.

The MI-BEST focus groups targeted students who faced economic challenges and met other criteria, as shown below:

- **For familiarity with the college:**
 - Students who were enrolled full-time or part-time, (at least 18-20 credits over multiple semesters) seeking an associate’s degree or transfer to a four-year program
- **For an indication of financial need or challenge:**
 - Students who have qualified for need-based financial aid (beyond student loans)
 - Students who have previously accessed non-academic student support services (e.g., emergency funds, food pantry, transportation services, and child care)
 - Students flagged in the college’s early alert system
- **For a mix of student backgrounds:**
 - Students representing the student population mix at the college, including by age groups, racial/ethnic background, gender, and campus

- **For voluntary consent purposes:**
 - Students who were not under the age of 18 or dual-enrolled

College staff developed a pool of students using administrative student data to ensure that they have met the target criteria. Not all colleges track student services in the same way or have an early-alert system, so the application of the criteria looked slightly different at each institution. Based on the experience with the MI-BEST online focus groups during 2021, a college should anticipate a low uptake on participation and reach out to all the students who fit the criteria.

Outreach

Every college is a little different in how they communicate with students, but institutions should use their standard approaches to reach students. Typically, these modes of communication include college emails and/or the college's text messaging system. Because people use multiple platforms to receive communication daily, it is a good idea to use more than one method to invite students in order to expand your reach and recruit those who are interested. When appropriate, academic advisors, counselors, mentors, or other college staff could also provide outreach more directly.

College teams also need to be very clear in the messages included in the student recruitment communications. In addition to the registration and logistics information, these materials should incorporate the rationale for why the college is engaging students on the given topic. The language in the communications needs to be clear of jargon and make a strong case for why student perspectives are vital.

Reminders are often needed to get students to sign up for focus groups. If the groups have not hit their capacity (see below), issuing two reminders about the invitation about three days apart is good practice.

Importantly, the team will need to decide what incentives will be used to attract participants. The incentives need to be large enough to be appealing to students and flexible enough that they find the incentive compelling. Some examples for incentivizing students may include cash, gift cards, or college-specific prizes or products. If circumstances warrant, a college might also consider providing transportation or child care options (if possible) to help minimize barriers to participation. Offering refreshments or a light meal food during in-person focus groups is also a good incentive. The focus group invitation should mention any incentives to promote interest.

For MI-BEST, active recruiting began three weeks before the focus group dates set by PPA and the colleges. Colleges were responsible for the primary outreach to students. Once the pool of students was identified, college teams sent an email communication with an invitation and a promotional flyer. Some colleges also sent text messaging. The incentive for students who participated in the MI-BEST focus groups was a \$40 VISA gift card. PPA mailed the gift cards to students after the sessions. The PPA-provided sample recruiting materials, which can be found in Appendix D.

Registration

Pre-registration, as opposed to a just-show-up event, offers several advantages for focus group planning. It tells the organizers how many students to expect at a group and whether additional outreach is needed to get more students. A basic registration should include the student's first and last name, email, and phone number for sending a confirmation and reminders of the upcoming group. Colleges will want to monitor registration often during the two to three weeks the registration period is open.

As part of the recruitment process for the focus groups, colleges may choose to gather additional information about the students who sign up. Depending on the topics covered, it may also be helpful to ask the students a handful of relevant questions at registration to help inform the focus group dialogue, or if certain information would not otherwise be known to the college or the focus group facilitators, such as the sources students are using to pay for college or employment status. Collecting this information from students also provides more context about sensitive information students may not feel comfortable sharing in a group setting. The registration form can also serve as a consent form, with the proper language.

PPA used SurveyMonkey to set up and monitor registration. An online form like this serves both to identify which students are signing up for a particular focus group and to collect all the additional profile-type information that may be needed. The groups were filled on a first-come, first-serve basis. The profile questions used by PPA are available in Appendix C.

The MI-BEST registration process capped registration per group at 14, and over 150 students were recruited at each of the four colleges. A challenge with the MI-BEST focus groups was getting students to attend the sessions. Despite the incentive and reminders, PPA found that these groups had a high no-show rate. To address this issue, we recommend increasing the registration cap, anticipating that only about half to one-quarter of students will actually participate in a group. The low participation rate could have had been related to the pandemic (e.g., students may not have honored session commitments on Zoom given the volume of online classes they were already taking).

Recruitment Monitoring Tip

If you are offering two focus groups for different times, be sure to monitor the distribution of students for each date selected so there is an equal balance of students for each session. Depending on what you hope to gain out of the groups, balance will be important so that students are comfortable participating and there is a mixture of perspectives to help guide the discussion.

FACILITATION

CONSIDERATIONS

Having arrived at the point when the focus groups are going to occur, college teams need to consider how they will facilitate the sessions. For MI-BEST, the PPA team, which is well-practiced in conducting focus groups, facilitated the virtual sessions for the participating colleges. This section provides some best practices to help colleges conduct their focus groups in the future. As noted earlier, the Center for Community College Student Engagement has developed a focus group guide and toolkit that provides some useful materials that colleges can also reference. This section simply highlights some key considerations.

1. **Identify a skilled facilitator for the focus group.** The facilitator's job is to be a guide that helps advance the conversation without conveying their own opinions or observations. The facilitator should ensure everyone speaks and no one individual dominates the conversation. The facilitator is primarily responsible for building a positive group feeling, such as by acknowledging contributions and smiling often. This person should be comfortable speaking in front of others and skilled at facilitating dialogue. The facilitator should not be someone close to the program or services being discussed, such as a counselor that delivers student services if those services are the topic of the groups.
2. **Determine a notetaking process.** One approach to capturing notes from the focus groups is to have a notetaker typing notes as people speak during the groups, as was done for the MI-BEST focus groups. This person should be fast at typing and able to capture near-verbatim comments from students. The notetaker should be familiar with ethical concerns of the focus groups and also not directly involved in delivering the services that are the topic of discussion. Another approach is to record the session and use a transcription service, which takes an audio or video recording and produces the notes. Carefully select the transcription service to ensure that the resulting notes will capture different speakers accurately.

When relying solely on a recording for generating notes, facilitators should also do a secondary recording in the event that the primary source fails. Making an audio-recording of focus groups is also recommended when there is a notetaker to ensure quality and complete notes. When audio or video-recording, always inform participants and obtain their consent.

3. **Build trust.** At the outset of the session, it is helpful to ground the group with a brief overview of the purpose and how the information gathered will be used. The goal at the outset of the group is to create a trusting setting so the students share their honest opinions. It is critical to convey that their comments will be kept anonymous and have no impact on their grades or standing at the college. (These messages should be noted in the focus group instrument.) This is also the time to review ground rules for the session.

4. **Make introductions.** To create a more inviting environment, all the participants, plus the moderator and the notetaker (if present) need to introduce themselves. Using a warm-up question to find commonalities among the group is also a good idea to help the group build rapport. This question should help people get to know one another yet still be neutral, like “What do you like best about _____ college?” and focus on a commonality.
5. **Follow the instrument.** To ensure that the goals of the focus group are met and there is consistent information gathered across different sessions, it is critical for the facilitator to closely follow the interview questions. If students naturally move into a different set of questions, the facilitator should follow their lead, but will need to return to any skipped questions as smoothly as possible.
6. **Respect the time of the participants.** When conducting focus groups, facilitators should know approximately how much time they have to move through the questions. Time estimates are not rigid, but in the end the group must end on time having addressed all the questions without being rushed. Focus groups should end on time and close with a thank-you to the participants. It is okay if the session ends earlier than planned, as long as all of the questions were addressed sufficiently. The timing of any given session may vary depending on the number of participants and the depth of the discussion. Participants should receive their incentives in an organized and timely manner.

ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

ANALYSIS

Careful planning and question writing, good facilitation, and accurate notes all lead into the preparation for analysis and reporting. If these are done well, student focus groups can be expected to generate a variety of insights for colleges that can be used to inform service and process improvements.

Professional researchers use software designed for analyzing qualitative data, such as NVivo, but that may not be available to everyone. The low-tech way of coding notes involves using different colored highlights and/or sticky notes to mark different themes or ideas, either electronically or on paper.

The analysis approach should reflect the intent of the focus groups and the line of questions asked of the students. The most direct approach to making sense of focus group notes is follow this three-step process:

1. Make sure the student comments in the notes are associated with each question that those comments address, regardless of when they came up. For instance, if students were asked about the food pantry on campus, any comments about the food pantry should be clustered under that question.
2. Look more closely at what was said in response to each question. Identify themes in the comments, such as positive versus negative, where students shared similar experiences or opinions, or the different ideas for improvements. Some themes may emerge that were unexpected and those should be marked too.
3. Quantify the coding to the extent possible to help with sense-making and to ensure a strong voice does not outweigh more numerous, quieter voices. For instance, how many students had positive things to say about Program A?

For the analysis of the MI-BEST focus groups, the profile data gathered from students who participated in the focus groups were exported from SurveyMonkey into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Focus group notes from each session were analyzed using NVivo and coded by question. Emergent themes from the discussion were also coded and reviewed for interpretation. Each of the topics from the focus group instrument was then summarized for each college separately and later combined for an analysis looking at overall themes, across colleges.

SHARING RESULTS

The goal of student focus groups is to gather information about how students are experiencing some aspect of their college journey. This information is only useful if it is presented concisely with findings and recommendations that are actionable for the intended audience. Any report of this nature should protect student privacy and avoid presenting any data or information in a way that would allow the participants to be identified.

A report or presentation of results should include basic information about the groups conducted, the demographics and other pertinent information about the student participants, and a summary of the student needs and views that were expressed most commonly, as well as any important outliers. These details provide the basis for the report's recommendations.

To be most influential, a focus group report should be distributed to those who can effect change. It should be shared broadly with program/services staff most directly impacted but also with other stakeholders at the college and possibly external partners. In some cases, sharing results (and the changes they generated at the college) with students is also appropriate.

The findings and recommendations from the MI-BEST focus groups can be found in the PPA report entitled *MI-BEST Student Focus Group Report: Cross-Cutting Findings*.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – MI-BEST Sample Recruitment Schedule

Appendix B – MI-BEST Focus Group Interview Protocol

Appendix C – MI-BEST Focus Group Student Profile/Registration Questions

Appendix D – MI-BEST Sample Communications Materials

MI-BEST STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

Recruitment Schedule

Table 1. Timeline for MI-BEST Student Focus Group Recruitment

Action	Done By	Timing	Exact Dates (TBD)
Set dates/times for groups and confirm with college	PPA	Early January	
Finalize the details in the recruitment materials for each college; program the registration forms online	PPA	Mid to late January	
Pull a sample of students based on the criteria in the Recruitment Plan; update PPA on sample pool	College	Late January	
Recruiter(s) send out invitations; notify PPA of process details and completion	College	3 weeks before focus group dates	
Monitor registration and provide updates to the colleges	PPA	Weekly during recruitment period	
Issue invitation reminders; notify PPA of completion	College	1 week and 1.5 weeks after recruitment begins	
Issue confirmations to focus group registrants	PPA	Within the week of registration	
Send notices to overflow registrants (as applicable)	PPA	Two weeks after registration begins	
Provide one-page list of college supports for focus group participants to PPA	College	Two to three weeks before the first focus group date	
Send reminders to focus group registrants	PPA	2 days prior to focus group	
Conduct focus groups; report participation to college	PPA	As scheduled in February/early March	
Issue incentives to focus group participants	PPA	Within 2 weeks of focus group	
Conduct analysis; prepare report	PPA	April-May	

MI-BEST STUDENT FOCUS GROUP INSTRUMENT

00:00-00:15 Introduction

[PPA opens Zoom meeting. Enter welcome message in the chat.]

Welcome to the focus group. I'm _____ from Public Policy Associates, a research firm in Lansing. My colleague _____ is also here today to help guide the discussion and take notes. [Note taker says hello.]

Thank you for joining us to discuss experiences with [college]'s supports for students. By supports we mean those services that [college] provides directly or refers students to that help them to keep on track and complete their programs of study. Today, we're focused on those supports that are non-academic, like emergency funds, food pantries, help with transportation, etc. (Academic supports are things like tutoring and career advising).

[College] is looking to better understand what you've experienced, how you perceive the supports the college offers, and what more they can do to help students like you to succeed in your goals. We'll cover several topics today: affording college, challenges you face, the supports you find helpful, and suggestions for other services.

There are no wrong answers; you may have different needs or experiences from someone else in the group and that's okay. We want to hear from everyone. Some ground rules for today:

- Please keep your audio muted when you're not speaking to reduce background noise.
- Feel free to turn off your video when you need to.
- Do not share any information from this group with others.
- Join in as you have something to share. Try to avoid interrupting someone else.

As the moderator, I'll be asking questions, but you should feel free to talk to each other, not just me; this is a group conversation. I will try to keep us on topic and on schedule.

Before we start the discussion, we want to confirm that you are voluntarily participating in the focus group and are willing to be recorded. Your participation and answers will not have any affect on your grades, standing at [college], or other rights to which you are entitled. Public Policy Associates will not share the recording with anyone or use your name in any report without your prior written consent. We are recording the session to help make sure we have accurate notes. Do you consent? [Need affirmation from each participant. If all okay, note consents and start recording.]

Let's do quick introductions. Please tell us how long you've attended [college] and what you like about [college]. [Moderator calls on each person using first name.]

00:15-00:25 College Goals

1. What goals do you hope to accomplish while attending [college]? What do you plan to do after you've reached these goals? [Ask of each participant.]

00:25-00:35 Financial Concerns

2. One of the things people consider when attending college is affordability. How sufficient are your financial resources to cover all the costs associated with attending college, including tuition, housing, food, transportation and other costs that are necessary for you? Are all your needs met comfortably? [Sources of income are collected in student profile/focus group registration.]
3. Did you have a need in the last few months you were unable to purchase because you did not have the funds available?
 - a. What did you do to address the situation?
 - b. How often does this happen?

00:35-00:55 Awareness of Non-Academic Student Supports

Sometimes students need help with needs that they don't have the money to pay for themselves or they need help finding solutions to personal problems. This can include challenges like housing, transportation, child care, mental health issues, legal issues, and food.

4. Where do you normally go for information when you need help of this kind (e.g. friend, financial aid office, particular website)? *If college's website, probe for which page(s).*
5. What resources are you aware of that [college] offers to help students with these issues?
6. How did you learn about the resources available from [college] to address these kinds of challenges?
 - a. Where and when did you get this information? *Probe for source of information (e.g., orientation, advisor, faculty member, self-directed), time of year, and format of communication.*
 - b. Was this information timely for you? If not, when would have this information have been most useful?
 - c. How do you prefer to hear about student supports available? *Probe for format of information (e.g. email, text, flyers, presentations, TV and radio ads) and frequency (e.g. weekly, monthly, as information becomes available).*

00:55-01:05 Non-Academic Student Supports on Campus

7. When you've had a need for non-academic help (the kind of issues we mentioned earlier), where did you go on campus? Who did you turn to?
 - a. How satisfied were you with what [college] offered you?
8. In normal times (when campus access is not limited because of COVID-19), which campus do you visit most for help with non-academic needs?
 - a. (As applicable) What differences in the supports available have you noticed between the campuses?

01:05-01:20 Student Supports in the Community

9. Some services are available directly through the college, and other times staff will refer a student to services available in the community. How do you feel about any referrals you received to services *off campus*? [Note: Bay community has very limited resources, such as niche services addressing homelessness.]
 - a. How well did the referral process work for you?
 - b. What can the college staff do to improve the process of connecting students with supports in the community?
10. What services offered in the community do you think would really benefit students if offered on campus? *Probe for explanation.*

01:20-01:35 Overall Satisfaction with Non-Academic Student Supports

11. Overall, how easy is it to get help from [college] with non-academic issues? How well do you think the college is doing at helping students with non-academic issues? Why?
 - a. How could [college] make it easier for students to get help?
 - b. How could the college help students feel comfortable asking for assistance, if they need it?
12. If you have attended another institution, how do the services provided by [college] compare?
13. What do you think is missing from the college's non-academic student service offerings?

01:35-01:45 Conclusion

Any final thoughts? [Ask each participant.]

Thank you all for your participation today.

As our thank-you for your time and contributions, we'll be sending you each a \$40 gift card in the mail over the next couple of weeks.

We will also be giving you a list of resources the college has provided us to pass along to you. Feel free to share this information with other students.

Good luck with school! [End recording, save chat, and close Zoom session]

MI-BEST Focus Group Student Profile/Registration

[Programmed into SurveyMonkey by PPA; different collectors for each college]

Thank you for your interest in participating with the MI-BEST student focus group. Your contribution will help inform decisions on how to strengthen non-academic supports for college students. Please take a moment to tell us a little about yourself so we can better understand your current situation as a student.

First Name:

Last Name:

Preferred group date/time: [choice of 2]

Can you attend either group if your preferred group is full? Yes/no

What is your current student enrollment status?

Full-time student (enrolled at least 12 credit hours this semester)

Part-time student (enrolled 11 credit hours or fewer)

Do you use any of the following to pay for college? (Check all that apply)

Student loan(s) I have taken out myself

Student loan(s) my parent(s) have taken out

Pell Grant and/or other grants

Scholarship(s)

Work/study employment

Other employment

Personal savings

Credit card(s)

Financial contributions from family

Veteran's benefits

Do you provide financial support for any of the following?

Spouse

Partner/boyfriend/girlfriend

Child or children

Other family member(s)

Other person(s)

Do you currently pay for child care?

Yes

No

Not applicable

What is your current employment status?

Full time (35 hours or more per week)

Part time (34 or fewer hours per week)

Unemployed, searching for work

Unemployed, not searching for work

**In the past 30 days, how many of the following statements were true for you?
(Check all that apply)**

The food that I bought just did not last and I didn't have money to get more.
I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.
I have skipped meals because I did not have enough money to purchase food.
I have been hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough food.

**In the past 12 months, how many of the following statements were true for you?
(Check all that apply)**

I had difficulty paying for my rent or mortgage.
I had difficulty paying my utility bills (phone, electric, water, etc.).
I moved in with other people due to financial problems.
Since starting college, I have been homeless at least once.

What do you currently use for your main source of transportation?

I own a motor vehicle.
I borrow a vehicle from family or friends.
I use public transportation (bus system, taxi service, train system).
I own a bicycle or other non-motorized vehicle.
Friends or family pick me up and take me to the places I need to go.
I walk where I need to go.

Please rank the following categories from 1 to 9, that are currently a challenge for you, where 1 equals the most challenging and 9 is the least challenging:

[all categories include and "NA"; add "other" to write in]

Housing
Transportation
Child care
Food
Employment
Time management
Mental health care
Physical health care
Legal issues

What is your date of birth?

(mm/dd/yyyy)

What gender do you identify with?

Male
Female
Non-binary
I prefer not to answer

What is your race/ethnicity?

European, Caucasian, or White
Asian
African, African American, or Black
Pacific Islander
Latinx or Hispanic
Native or Indigenous

Middle Eastern, North African, Arab, or Chaldean
I prefer not to answer.

Please provide your email address:

We are asking for your email solely to communicate with you about the focus group.

Please provide your mailing address: [separate lines for address, city, state, zip]

We are asking for your address in order to mail you a \$40 gift card after you participate in the student focus group.

Thank you! Public Policy Associates, Inc. will be in contact with focus group details. We appreciate your time and look forward to talking with you soon!



Student Online Focus Group

You're invited to join in on one of the following dates:

February X or February X

Time

Time

Sign up here:

[insert link]

We want to hear about what non-academic on-campus supports and community resources can help you to be successful at [college]!

What's in it for you?

- You will receive a \$40 gift card
- Your experiences will inform [college] of existing or new student needs
- Knowledge of student needs will help [college] build better supports for student success

Please contact [NAME] if you have any questions at: 555.555.5555 or email@school.edu

MI-BEST STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

Email Invitation

Subject: You're invited to participate in a focus group

Dear [student first name],

The staff and faculty at [college] know these times are difficult. Our hope is to help support your needs in order to reach your goals at this college. To do this successfully, we value your perspective so we can align our services to meet your needs.

[College] is working to better understand what is necessary for students to be successful, beyond academic supports and financial aid, like help with transportation, food, or emergency expenses. I am inviting you because your experiences will give us a better picture of the kinds of support that are important and needed.

The online focus group(s) will be held [date] at 3 p.m. and [date] at 6 p.m., conducted by Public Policy Associates, a research firm based in Lansing. The focus group will take place virtually via Zoom. You will receive a \$40 gift card for your participation.

Your participation in the focus group is voluntary. There will be no penalty to you if you chose not to participate, and the nature of the feedback you provide during the group discussion will not affect your grades, standing at [college], or other rights to which you are entitled. Your name will not be attached to your responses in any reports.

To register for this event, please follow the link below:

[insert link]

Please respond promptly as slots are limited. If you have any questions about the focus group, you may contact Public Policy Associates at [toll-free phone number] or email [address].

We appreciate your time and look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

[Recruiter Name]

[Attach or embed flyer]

Text Message Invitation

We want to hear about what non-academic resources can help you to be successful at Bay College. Join in a focus group and receive a \$40 gift card! Click the link to register. [insert link]



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