

**Student Appreciation from a Student Point-of-View**

**Qualitative Highlights  
from  
Focus Groups  
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**Prepared For:**

**Oakland Community College  
Orchard Ridge Campus**

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## Background and Introduction

Students are a vital part of any college community. Often times, however, students feel they are just pieces in an educational puzzle and that the college does not appreciate that they have educational choices. At the direction of the Oakland Community College (OCC) Orchard Ridge campus president, focus groups were conducted with students to gauge the sense of community they feel on the Orchard Ridge campus. In addition, the college wanted to learn ways to show students that they are valued and an important part of the college's success.

Three focus groups were conducted, one each with: "traditional" students (18-24 years of age), "adult" learners (students 25-60 years of age) and "international" students (those whose country of origin is outside of the United States and possess a good command of the English language). Donna Taglione developed the screener used by the recruiters in the Office of Institutional Research. She also created the moderator's discussion guide that was approved for use in each focus group, moderated each session and wrote this report.

## Research Limitations

Focus groups are utilized to give qualitative insight and understanding, and, as such, are not representative of the population from which they are taken. The reader is cautioned to remember that this summary is based on the comments of twenty-two (22) students across three groups. This may or may not have a bearing on results.

## Conclusions

- **The college needs to do a better job of disseminating information of all kinds to students of all types.**
- **Most students want to feel like they are a part of the OCC community, especially outside of the classroom. Lack of awareness of clubs, activities and events is proof positive that they do not know enough about what is offered to them as students on the Orchard Ridge campus of OCC. Communication is lacking.\***

\*This moderator has worked on issues such as these for the college for the past 5 years. Never has the issue of "lack of communication" been expressed as unanimously or as vocally as it was in these groups.

## Key Findings

- To feel like they are a part of the college community, students want some form of new student literature. They suggested either a welcome packet or a section in the front of the catalog distinguished by colored pages that says 'here's what we are providing you.' This material would identify buildings by letter and occupant. It would spell out places to eat, drink, relax and study. It would list all clubs on campus with a contact name, telephone number and email address. It would list all major activities scheduled for that semester. It would instruct the students to use the web site.
- The web site should be kept up-to-date and in working order (i.e. links connecting). Students suggested that students in computer classes/web page design should be responsible for updating the web site and periodically checking it to be sure it is performing properly.
- Nearly all think there should be a mandatory new student orientation session. This session does not have to be long and can be scheduled 3 or 4 times over a two-day period. During this session they would be shown an overhead map of the campus and learn what departments and services are in what buildings. They would learn about clubs, event and activities, sign up for their library card, receive an I.D. card (this identifies them as part of the OCC community and the community at large) and generally feel like they are more than a source of revenue for the college.
- There appears to be adequate knowledge about study areas and help rooms among students mainly because teachers inform students of these areas as part of their classroom orientation not because the college makes students aware.
- To stay on campus between classes students want more places to relax – a place to watch TV, perhaps play chess or checkers, maybe an air hockey or foosball table. They also want affordable food. They leave campus to get what they cannot find on it – a place for less expensive, yet decent food in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. Nearly all are aware that other colleges have "deals" with fast food restaurants to operate on-campus. "Why not here?" they ask.
- The college needs to address the issue of lighting and security. Students want to see police presence not sense it because there is an empty police car parked near a building.

## Summary of Findings

- The *reputation* of Oakland Community College is different from the *reality* of Oakland Community College especially for “traditional” students. Among high school peers attending other institutions of higher learning, OCC is known as “Only Chance College” with some insinuating it’s “a stupid school.” Most students claim they don’t care about this misconceived image citing cost savings, not being ready to go away and other practical reasons for attending OCC. The majority agreed: “It’s a good place to start.”
- International students do not associate any stigma with the college. Many use it as a way to assimilate in to the culture of the United States and improve their language skills. They are more likely to compare it to other university experiences they may have had in their own countries or in other countries where they have lived.
- Adult learners have different motivations for attending college than traditional students. Many have attended college elsewhere. They attend OCC to change careers or retrain after a life-altering event (like a divorce or loss of a job). The economical and practical benefits offered by OCC outweigh any imagined stigma associated with going there.
- The Orchard Ridge campus is thought to be “the best” or “tied” with Auburn Hills as the best campus in the Oakland County Community College system. It has the most “campus like” feel to it, is clean, and classes are liked because, for the most part, they are well taught.
- Early in the discussion, students were introduced to the concept of “student life.” They were told the term encompasses everything OCC has to offer students including academics, the campus environment and the activities available to them. For the most part there was no complaint in any group with the academics at OCC. All student groups began by saying some version of “classes are good.” In fact, some bragged that they were doing more in their classes than friends at four-year universities.
- There was some discussion in the traditional student group about “condescending teachers.” Those who cannot or refuse to learn names and point at students saying “you” or refer to the color of their clothing “red shirt, what do you think?” Students find this demeaning.

- Of the three groups of students in these discussions, International students had the least difficulty finding out about services because they work directly with the office that handles foreign students. Here they can receive one-on-one assistance and get most, if not all, of their questions about classes or campus answered.
- International students also appreciate the rapport between faculty and students. They like the fact that their teachers are approachable and willing to direct them to helpful services.
- The biggest frustration facing International students is when dealing with administrative departments outside of the international office. Several have encountered staff whose attitude is: "Do it this way. End of discussion." Since they do not understand why they are being asked or told to do things in a certain way, they need a more detailed explanation.
- Regarding the environment, on the whole students felt the campus was clean and there was adequate, albeit far away, parking. For most, parking is only an issue during the cold winter months. As one student said: "No one complains about the walk on a nice spring day."
- However, traditional students and adult learners did complain about "the up close teacher lots that are at least half empty after 6:00PM." "I'd pay to be able to park there," said one female night student. Others (male and female) agreed. At the very least students felt handicapped students ought to have more favorable parking access. "When you think about it, they get to park up close in a lot that is still far away. I watch some of them and I wonder what I am complaining about. They have it tough."
- Some were critical of the visibility (or lack thereof) of building signage. Several wondered why the letters identifying the buildings were not on signs at eye level. They questioned why in addition to letters there was not a listing of primary building occupants on the exterior of the buildings. For example: Building G – English/Computers, Building A - Math, Building K - IIC, Library. "It's like you're somehow supposed to know what's in each building." Several noted that once in the building each floor is labeled but that outdoor labels are inadequate.

- Campus lighting is a concern primarily for female night students but was also noted by two male students. One, a law enforcement officer by day, said he was concerned because there are so many places on campus where “detrimental things” could happen (between poorly lit buildings, for example). A female noted that other university campuses have call boxes where if you push a button a light flashes or an alarm sounds.
  - “At night I come out the back way by the book store and it slopes off down a hill. Well, I have to walk back there at 10:15 and unless I’m with another student, that’s just a prayer and song that someone doesn’t come out and grab me.”
  - Another said, “if campus cops are going to be around making sure I don’t park in the one-hour parking I would think that they should have a few that sit out in the main student thoroughfares when they know students are coming and when they are leaving. There are empty police cars in front of M building most nights. Empty cars don’t help.”
  - A male participant noted: “I took a class at Southfield campus last semester. It is about one-third the size of this campus. You can’t be anywhere there without noticing security present. I’ve been here four weeks and have not seen one police officer not even in the office.”
- The start time of evening classes is a concern for many adult learners. Rushing for a 5:30 class is difficult when coming from their full time jobs. It sometimes requires asking permission to leave their jobs early. It requires guesstimating how traffic will be on any given evening. Teachers who deduct points for tardiness really irritate students. “If the only reason I get a ‘B’ in a class is because I got held up in traffic on three occasions doing the best I could to get here, well, I am not going to be a happy camper!” Several wondered, “why can’t they simply start class a half hour later?”
- Students in all groups described some aspects of student life as “stressful” due in large part to a lack of communication on the college’s part. “The school is not disseminating information to students about where to study, where to get a cup of coffee. There is no welcome packet. No this is where you park. Give me a map or something. No, they took my money and that was that, I was on my own.”

- Others agreed. "There are things on this campus I never would have found if I had not taken the 1 credit counseling class," said one male. "Stuff they told me is not listed anywhere in a catalog."
- "Then why," asked one student, "isn't there an orientation for new students? Look at all the things we just named that some of us knew absolutely nothing about. On the first three days of each semester use that beautiful theater, make the session short and to the point. Schedule it three or four times each day and make it a pre-requisite for new students. Have people walk you through it. Use an overhead map. Tell us: this is the IIC, this is what it does. Here's the Library in this building. Here's where you can eat. Here's the gym. You can take one credit classes here...you can try out for the \_\_\_\_\_ sports team, etc."
- International students would like a welcoming orientation where experienced students are paired with new students. These could be other experienced international students or students from the U.S. who would be patient and willing to work with students new to the culture.
- Many students feel the majority of information is hit or miss, that there is no one place to get information. There is not one bulletin board that's kept up to date. There's "stuff on billboards as you are rushing through to get to your class, but who has time to read then?"
  - "They have to find a way to market student life especially to the part-timers. I come from work, go to class. I'm tired by the time I get home. I go to bed and I get up in the morning and go to work and get to do it all over again. If OCC wants me to come back here to do something outside of class - #1: I need to know what it is, #2 ; I need to know when it is and how to get there, #3 I need to have that in my face. I am running to class so I am unlikely to read a bulletin board so I need a note, or I need an email or something smack dab right in my face that says we're having a play this week. Tell me that and I might actually make time."
  - "I always find out about stuff two days after. You see a flyer somewhere and you say to yourself 'Oh, that sounds pretty neat' then you realize, "Rats, I missed it.' It doesn't cost a dime to send an email, not even for paper. If I get a notice that says English Department speaker on such and such a night. I need to schedule. It's not like I can just come here on my day off. I don't have a day off."

- Students study in a variety of places on campus. Most mention the lounge in 'A' building. Some study in the coffee shop. Others use the area in C or D building. A few love the resources in the IIC. Still others prefer the individual areas of study in the Library.
- A few wish for an area to relax ... "to not think about class."
  - "You're on a break, you want to feel like you're on a break. That's why I like the coffee shop. More things like that would be great."
  - "An area to sit and just watch TV. A foosball table would be fun, a pool table area, air hockey. Things to do. This would be a place to hang out."
  - "An area set aside to play chess or checkers would be nice," said one Indian student. "TV would be helpful, too."
- "Speaking of study areas, this campus lacks a wireless network where you can sit anywhere and use your own laptop. You go to any coffee shop or Starbucks, golf pro shop or bar almost anywhere and you can get on the internet. The IIC is great and the computers are nice but it's a classroom environment. Why can't I go into the coffee shop on campus, turn on my own computer and access the internet? It's not that hard. I'm so leary of using public computers. Theoretically, if someone knew what they were doing, they could go to any computer on this campus and pull up at least 5 papers for any given class, put one on a disc and 'voila' assignment done."
- Traditional students are disappointed with the lack of clubs on campus, or perhaps a more accurate description would be with the lack of *knowledge* of clubs on this campus. For those who took the initiative and searched out information, some found activities they were interested in. For many others, without a list of clubs, sports or activities in the college handbook or passed out via flyer at the beginning of the semester they will not know about or learn about those campus events.
  - One student said: "I've never heard of a club here. Now that could be lack of effort on my part cuz I never checked into it. I just thought clubs were more like high school stuff."



- "I found out about a really important one only after I started asking other colleges about transfer credits. One school asked if I was a member of PTK – I was like what in the world is that. I went to the college catalogue and it had a brief paragraph – no numbers to call, no web address to go to. How do I know what this is? Had to search the web site for it and I find out you can get scholarships for being a part of it ... I would have joined it first semester. You really have to go out of your way here to see if there's anything."
- "Or, I think you have to really, really active around here to know anything. I was at a meeting and someone said, 'well, you have to be careful you don't want this to contradict OCC's talent show.' What talent show? I didn't know there was a talent show. Not a clue. Did they have auditions? When is it?"
- "I guess for information, there's like that little red box that flickers and if you catch it you catch it and if you don't, you don't. Unless you stand there in the ice cold, going OK, let me get all the messages until it repeats. Why can't there be signs on the doors. Everyone has to use a stairwell at least once a day."
- "There's bulletin boards all over campus but it doesn't look like there's any school related information on there. You can buy a used car, or used books, or used stereo equipment but there isn't one that coordinates activities."
- "For a community college it doesn't seem to be very community like. Students interact in classes but no one knows what the IIC is or that help is available or that it's free. There's all these things available but no one knows about them at all."
- "The web site is terrible. It's a conglomeration of all 5 campuses. The web will say such and such discussion. No idea which campus its at ... or if its already happened. It's very general."
- Very few of the students who participated in these focus groups eat on campus and expense was the overwhelming reason why. "It's sooo expensive here," said one girl. "I can buy meals for me, my mom and my brother for less than it costs for a muffin and a drink here. It's ridiculous and it's not even good!" "Tell me," said another student. "A sandwich and a pickle costs \$7.49. I can drive home and back for that money!" "Lots of schools have small places – a small Wendy's, Subway, Pizza Hut – that would be real good."

- International students are disappointed with the food on campus as well. Citing the expense to buy a slice of pizza or a muffin or the fact that there are no vegetarian choices in the cafeteria, most students from other countries opt to eat at home. A few will buy beverages from the Studio Café or buy crackers from the vending machine.
- In each group a list was generated of clubs, events, places and activities that students were aware of. Below is the combined list from all three focus groups.
  - Band
  - Choir
  - Theater
  - Tutoring
  - IIC
  - PASS (assigned to you through a teacher)
  - Gym/Fitness Center
  - Ridgeway Café/Coffee Beanery/Cafeteria
  - Library
  - Bookstore
  - Basketball games
  - Phi Theta Kappa
  - Math Club
  - French Club
  - International Club
- International students were most aware of the study areas and help areas on campus. No one mentioned any kind of activity associated with a social function.
- Students in all three groups were convinced there had to be a newspaper on campus, they just didn't know about it or know where it is. One thought it was called "*The Witness*" but no one could recall actually reading it. All agreed that it would be an excellent source of information about campus activities as long as it was published and distributed weekly.
- Near the end of each group, respondents were asked: "Does OCC make you feel like you are an important part of this campus community?" Responses varied.
  - "I guess I never thought about it like that. I don't know."
  - "There's nothing really to keep me here. I don't know what they do offer to know if they should fix it."

- "The difference between a community college and other colleges is the only time you see students here is in the classroom. So rather than go eat an expensive muffin in the cafeteria by myself and look like a schmuck, I'll go to McDonald's. If you don't know anyone there's no comfort level."
- "There is a Student Day that is nice but it is only a day. An end of the semester dance with music would be fun."
- "Community around here is all word of mouth and if you don't know anybody, word of mouth doesn't work!"
- No, it's not really personalized. I have no idea who the dean is here or the top guy. I think there are like five of them that they work like on a committee."
- "I think when you are accepted to come here and pay your money you should receive a letter from the head person in your department welcoming you to the college like a 'we're glad you're here' type of thing. Then in that letter they could tell you specific things about the department you need to know. Like in culinary they could tell you about the uniform you need instead of having the lady in the bookstore do it. Each department could tell you if there is a club specific to them that you should know about. They probably already know about guest speakers they have lined up, they could tell you about that. That would make you feel like you were a part of the college."
- "I think this place is a great little melting pot. They get all sorts of different cultures here. Good acceptance here but it lacks unity and a sense of community." [Probe: How do you make one?] "I guess it has to come from the higher ups. As students, we as individuals can do very little. Maybe we could get a commission together or a think tank but I think the deans have to do something about that first."
- "You need a meeting like this one on a bigger scale like in the theater."
- "In the classroom and outside the classroom is two different things for me. In class is a lot more personal that what I was expecting a college class to be like. I'm very impressed in class. Outside of class there's nothing going on."

- There should be something like a rec room with pool tables or ping-pong where students can actually hang out and do something. You can only play pool in bars and I can't hang out in bars I'm only 18 and there's no where fun to hang out here."
- Students said the campus lacks a focal central place either a meeting place or a place to get information. One suggested placing a kiosk filled with brochures on clubs and activities at both entrances. "Everybody is either going to pass G or M building from this way of they pass A from the other way. I have friends that didn't even know there was a parking lot by M. The school would make a lot more money if they made stuff more obvious."
- One student suggested a monthly CD/record swap in the cafeteria as a way to get students to intermingle. "They tried something like that last October," said one. "They had a concert and free food." "I knew there was free food," said another. "I just didn't know why." Students heartily agreed there should be more activities like that. Free food does not have to be offered all the time. They want the opportunity to meet and get to know each other. They want to find other like-minded students. That's why it is important for them to know about clubs or seminars. Several liked the idea of seminars better. Clubs require commitment. Seminars imply a one time only meeting on a specific topic.

Student  
Relax

## Student Appreciation Initiative

- I. Introduction OR F conduct  
FA '83
- A. Moderator introduction
  - B. Brief explanation of process; why here
  - C. Review of group "rules" and audio taping 6
  - D. Respondent introductions (name, age, major, FT or PT student)
- II. Student Activity 0
- A. What's the reputation of OCC Orchard Ridge? <sup>2</sup> Tell me what it's like to be a student here.
  - B. OK, let's try another way ... describe a typical day on campus for me ... be sure to include classroom activities and extra-curricular activities.
  - C. I'm going to throw out a term - "student life." "Student life" encompasses everything OCC has to offer including your actual education, the environment on campus and the activities you are involved in. How would you describe "student life" at OCC? What's the environment like at OCC? At Orchard Ridge? [If differences - Why?]
  - D. Where do you study on campus? Where do you eat? Where do you hang out?
  - E. Let's make a list of all the activities/clubs/events that you can think of that are offered at OCC on the Orchard Ridge campus. (EASEL)
  - F. What activities do you participate in?
  - G. What activities/events/clubs do you want that are not currently offered? Why those?
  - H. How are activities communicated to students on this campus? How do you find out about the stuff that goes on around here?
  - I. What would be the best way to get information to you?
- III. Student Appreciation
- A. Does OCC make you feel like you are an important part of the Orchard Ridge campus community? If yes: How? If no: Why do you feel that way?
  - B. What services/activities/events are currently offered to make you feel appreciated as a student at OCC? (LIST) Do you take advantage of them?
  - C. Earlier I asked you about where you study, eat, and hang out. Are improvements needed in these areas? Would this be another way of making students feel like they are an integral part of the OCC community? Why/why not?

- D. What could OCC do to place additional emphasis on putting students first? What types of services or events or activities could be provided?
- E. In your honest opinion, would students participate in these events/activities?
- F. By a show of hands, how many of you participate in the Student Appreciation Days held in Fall and Spring? What's offered? What do you get involved in? Why/why not?
- G. Are there better ways to let students know they are appreciated? Does it have to be a special event or would it be better to be some ongoing kind of thing? Give me some ideas/let's make a list. What would make you say "I'm glad I came here?"

#### IV. Student Life

- A. Is orientation part of student life? Should it be? Why/why not?
- B. Are there other "educational" type things needed to make you feel more like you are a part of the OCC community?
- C. What's needed? Why?
- D. What about other "social" type things? Honestly, would additional social activities make you feel more like you are a part of the OCC community or don't those things matter to you?
- E. What about the "physical plant" here? What areas of campus – could be improved? (PROBE: parking, getting around, studying, lounging, eating, even smoking if it comes up.)
- F. Is student life an important factor in deciding to attend OCC or in deciding to stay at OCC? Why/why not?