



# **Student Focus Groups Report**

**Spring 2009**

**Oakton Office of Research**

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**[www.oakton.edu/resource/oir/](http://www.oakton.edu/resource/oir/)**

## Executive Summary

In Spring 2009 an Oakton team implemented a focus group project to explore students' perceptions about their experiences at the College. Three groups of recent high school graduates were convened one for African American / black students, one for Hispanic students, and one for students identified in neither of these populations. A total of 29 students participated in the groups. Moderators, matched to each group by race/ethnicity, explored a number of themes, including college choice, expectations of Oakton, engagement of students at the College, feelings of comfort and fit, and definitions of success.

While each group expressed some different perceptions of Oakton, a number of common themes emerged.

- **Reasons for selecting Oakton.** Dominant reasons for selecting Oakton were related to the College's affordability, proximity to home, and promise of permitting students to accrue credits for transfer. Few students were drawn to Oakton because of programs offered, faculty quality, or the institution's reputation. Indeed, a number of participants in all groups noted that Oakton was perceived as a place for students who were not prepared academically for college, although some noted they knew people who had good experiences at Oakton. A number of participants had been accepted at four-year institutions, some had even attended them before returning to Oakton. Cost seemed the primary reason these individuals chose Oakton over the four-year alternative.
- **Advising.** Almost all students expressed in one way or another the importance of advising to them, and they reported mixed experiences with advising. They noted especially their desire to have help with selecting courses for transfer and obtaining accurate information. Because most students plan to transfer, this is of particular importance.
- **Involvement.** Involvement at the College varied among focus group participants. Most seemed to be aware that Oakton offered activities and opportunities for out-of-classroom engagement, and cited lack of time as a primary barrier for participation. Some stated they were simply uninterested, viewing Oakton as a place to accrue credits but not a place in which to invest energy. African American / black students, in particular, emphasized the value of affiliating with other African American / black students.
- **Feelings of security.** A number of respondents commented on their feelings of safety and security at Oakton, and expressed very different perceptions about Public Safety in particular. African American / black students agreed they felt watched, with Public Safety intervening when the students were having fun but talking somewhat loudly. They expressed the view that they were subject to

- extraordinary scrutiny. Hispanic students reported positive experiences with Public Safety, and many students in the Other group weren't even aware Oakton has a security force or office.
- **Fitting in.** Most students said they felt relatively comfortable at the College and found employees were generally friendly and helpful. African American / black students' concerns about being watched are an exception to this view, though they had a number of positive comments as well.
  - **Academic expectations.** Students had mixed views about the academic rigor and expectations of faculty with respect to their performance. African American / black students, in particular, noted that some faculty express surprise when they do well, and many participants across the groups implied that faculty expectations are not uniformly high. This perception may reinforce the pre-college idea that Oakton is a school for less academically prepared students.
  - **Improving Oakton.** Participants had a number of recommendations for how Oakton might improve, ranging from providing accurate advising, making services more available, and creating opportunities for students of similar backgrounds or discipline interests to interact. They value small class sizes and those that reported being engaged with faculty or other students seemed to value this.
  - **Characteristics of ideal colleges.** Participants identified a variety of attributes they thought characterized ideal colleges. While they used many different words or phrases, several key themes emerged. Ideal colleges should provide strong and accurate advising; be affordable, with financial assistance and modest costs; have a sense of excitement, fun, and a variety of activities; have small classes and a range of academic options; provide support services; and be welcoming.

What do results of these groups imply for action? First, students' voices about the need for high academic expectations coupled with support services, accurate and even prescriptive advising, and a welcoming environment for diverse populations are clear and virtually unanimous. *Change Matters* goals related to WISE Student Services and Academic Excellence are especially germane. Students' perceptions align with what respondents on the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) indicated as well. The clear message suggests Oakton might accelerate implementing new and more comprehensive advising and orientation approaches and launch efforts to build an even more welcoming environment.

Second, results indicate uneven perceptions of Oakton and the view that it is a College for less qualified students remain strong in the community. Finding ways to emphasize academic quality and student achievements, especially transfer for traditionally aged students, might remain key priorities for community information.

Third, it is important to recognize that as rich and informative as focus group discussions are, they represent the perceptions of a small number of students. Thus faculty, administrators and staff should consider what these students tell us and at the same time understand many of their messages are mixed. Finally, no single research approach or project tells the whole story. Oakton's research agenda and building a culture of evidence to inform decision-making need to remain part of the College's fabric, lest programs and services be created and delivered in a vacuum and presumptions of effectiveness replace evidence.

## Introduction and Purpose

In Spring 2009 an Oakton team implemented a focus group project to explore students' perceptions about their experiences at the College. A driving force behind the study was the College's growing concern about issues of diversity and the recognition that students of color are not succeeding to the same extent as are other student populations. Before embarking on initiatives to improve success, we wanted to hear students' views about what helped or hindered their progress at Oakton. This project concentrated on traditionally aged students. Subsequent focus group projects may draw older students.

Team members came from across the College, including faculty, staff and administrators. Working together, they shaped the project, recruited participants, conducted the groups and analyzed results. Team members were:

Trudy Bers	Director of Research
Carlos Briones	Associate Professor, Philosophy and Humanities
Michele Brown	Director of Admission and Enrollment Management
Danielle Cargo	Admission Specialist, Minority and Adult Recruitment
Leana Cuellar	Coordinator, TRiO Program
Maya Evans	Manager of Research
Erica Gonzales	Specialist, Minority Transfer/Advising
Krissie Harris	Coordinator of Student Activities
Jim Holderfield	Research Analyst
Pat Miller	Research Assistant
Donna Younger	Director of the Learning Center

## Methodology

### *Recruitment*

Three focus groups were convened, one comprising African American / black students, one Hispanic students, and one students who were in neither of these groups. To ensure students were traditionally aged and had more than a few months experience at Oakton, the Office of Research generated a list of students who graduated from high school in 2007 or 2008, had attended Oakton for at least one fall or spring semester prior to spring 2009, and were enrolled in spring 2009. Each student's racial/ethnic identity, based on self-reports on the Oakton application, was drawn from the Oakton student information system.

Because we wanted to hear from students who were likely to be broadly representative of 'regular' students, we circulated the list of potential participants to the Director of Athletics and Manager of Career Services to identify athletes and student employees. They were deleted

***Three groups were convened, one comprising African American / black students, one with Hispanic students, and one with students who are in neither of these groups. All participants were recent high school graduates..***

from the list, as were active TRiO, student activities and student government participants.

To determine whether groups should be scheduled at the Des Plaines or Skokie campus, we checked the location of students' courses. We found more attended classes in Des Plaines so we scheduled three time slots in the afternoon, one for the African American / black, one for the Hispanic and one for the Other group. Using the edited student list, several team members and Admission and Enrollment Management staff called and emailed students to invite them to participate in a focus group. The script used to screen and recruit participants is included as Appendix 1. Note participants were offered refreshments and a \$25 cash honorarium. Reminder phone calls and emails to students who said they would attend were made the day before each focus group.

A total of 10 African American / black students committed to the group, and 10 attended; 13 Hispanic students said yes and 10 attended; and 12 Other students said they would participate and 9 did so. Focus groups normally include from 8-12 participants, so our groups were well within acceptable sizes for this type of research.

When they arrived, participants signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix 2). They were given their \$25 at the conclusion of the conversation.

***Moderator, Note takers and Observers***

Team members served as focus group moderators, and other team members were note takers at sessions. In addition, conversations were audio taped, although the tape malfunctioned during the group with Other students. One additional observer from the team sat in on the Hispanic and African American / black groups. Both the note taker and observer were as unobtrusive as possible to avoid giving reactions to participants that might direct their answers. Moderators, note takers and observers were:

<u>Group</u>	<u>Moderator</u>	<u>Note taker</u>	<u>Observer</u>
African American / black	Maya Evans	Danielle Cargo	Krissie Harris
Hispanic	Leana Cuellar	Carlos Briones	Erica Gonzales
Other	Donna Younger	Michele Brown	

***Moderators and note takers were of the same race/ethnic population as students in the focus group.***

***Moderator Guide***

To ensure conversations touched key topics the team wanted to explore, a moderator guide was prepared (see Appendix 3). As with most focus groups, the guide served as a reminder to the facilitator about what subjects to cover, not as an interview schedule to be administered in lock-step order. A key value of focus groups is that when conversations flow naturally and the moderator has the requisite skills, the moderator can probe responses to uncover deeper meaning and also capitalize on comments that generate discussion related to the overall group topic, but not necessarily identified on the moderator guide itself.

Broad themes included in the guide and explored in the focus group conversations were:

- College choice. What prompted the selection of Oakton? Was Oakton the first choice? Did students go elsewhere before Oakton?
- Expectations of Oakton. What did students expect Oakton would be like? How did they develop these expectations? Have their expectations been met? In what ways? What did they experience at Oakton that was not expected?
- Engagement. How did students choose to engage, or not, at Oakton? In what ways were they involved; e.g., services, activities?
- Feeling of fit. Did students feel comfortable and welcome at Oakton? Did they feel they fit in
- Success. What does success at Oakton mean for these students? How does Oakton help or get in the way of their success? What can Oakton do better?

*Focus group conversations explored several broad themes, including college choice, expectations of Oakton, engagement of students at the College, feelings of comfort and fit, and definitions of success.*

### ***Analysis Approach***

The entire team met to discuss the focus group experience and their initial assessment of the conversations. There was consensus that students appeared comfortable and willing to talk candidly, especially when the audiotape was turned off (the African American / black group). Team members agreed that having moderators, note takers and observers from the same race/ethnic group as participants helped to create a comfortable atmosphere.

Audiotapes from the African American/black and Hispanic student focus groups were transcribed and supplemented with notes from the note takers. Because the tape did not function for the Other group, notes from the note taker were the basis on which the analysis was done. Transcripts and notes were read multiple times and broad themes extracted, along with verbatim quotations to illustrate key findings. Draft analyses were circulated to those present at each group to seek input as to the accuracy of the report of that group. Maya Evans took the lead on writing this section of the final report.

Finally, a summary and synthesis of findings was prepared collaboratively by Maya Evans and Trudy Bers, and circulated to the team for comment and feedback. The final report reflects their perceptions as well as the analysis of transcripts and group notes.

## Findings

### *African American / Black Focus Group*

Some students said they were uncomfortable with the term African American and preferred the term black. They said they were not from African descent and did not associate with that group. Consequently, we use the term African American / black to refer to this group.

#### **Expectations of Oakton (African American / black)**

In addition to their own desire to go to college, all participants expressed that their parents were the primary influence on their decision to go to college. All of the participants expected that they would go to college and said they were prepared to transition into college by the end of their senior year. Oakton was not necessarily their first choice; all of the participants had applied to and been accepted at four-year institutions. One focus group participant started at a local four year college, but found that tuition was unaffordable for his family and he did not perform academically at the level that he expected. He transferred to Oakton with the intention of taking his general education requirements and then returning to that school. Overall, students were initially discouraged from attending Oakton by family and friends. They were told that four-year institutions were better than Oakton, that they were too smart for Oakton, and that Oakton was the type of school that people with no education should attend.

*Parents were the primary influence on African American / black students' decisions to go to college; all had been accepted at four-year institutions.*

What changed their mind and made them choose Oakton? Students found that Oakton was a good fit for them despite outside pressures that stigmatized community colleges.

- **Cost:** Considerations of the cost of a college education was one of the main reasons why students chose to attend Oakton instead of the four year institutions to which they had been accepted. They found tuition and fees to be more affordable at Oakton, and they found it more possible to work and attend Oakton than if they attended a four-year school.
- **Readiness:** In addition, students questioned their readiness for a four-year school. For example, one student who was new to the country thought that a community college would allow her to learn how to navigate the higher education system in America and give her additional English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.
- **Attention:** Participants found that the smaller class sizes and more opportunities for help in their coursework at Oakton would give them a good head start and plant the seeds for future college success.

- **Diversity:** Students found that the racial and ethnic diversity of Oakton would provide them with a rewarding experience both inside and outside of the classroom.
- **Convenience:** Oakton was the closest and most accessible college, which was a particularly important factor in a “sea of other colleges.”
- **Reputation:** Several participants had relatives and high school teachers who attended Oakton and encouraged the participants to attend as well.
- **First Impression:** The majority of the participants visited Oakton before deciding to attend the college. They found that the physical appearance of the college—“it resembled a college campus”—gave some legitimacy to the school when comparing it to four-year institutions. The visits provided assurance that they had access to the same help, resources, and programs as four-year schools.

Despite the advice participants received about attending Oakton, they did not have any expectations of the college before they arrived and did not necessarily think that they should expect the college to provide them with anything (in terms of quality of education, resources, activities, etc.). The participants only expected that Oakton would expose them to the college experience.

What was their view of the college experience? Students shaped their views of Oakton, before arriving on campus, based on their high school experience and what others told them. They thought that Oakton would be for students who did not take high school seriously and they thought there would be strict disciplinary procedures at Oakton. While some participants were told that there would be no requirement to attend class and they would have the freedom to turn in their work and leave the classroom, others had teachers and parents who described Oakton as strict, a place where the level of work expected of students would be much higher than high school, and a good place to then transition into a four year school. With many focus group participants from one particular high school, many students expected that Oakton—specifically, the Skokie campus—would be an extension of their high school experience.

Students were mixed on whether their actual experience at Oakton met the few expectations that they had. Some participants found the workload to be more than what they expected, some found that they received less work than they expected, and others found that their expectations were met. Participants were surprised to find that Oakton gave them the freedom to be an adult and to not be told what to do. One of the greatest things that students found at Oakton that they did not expect was the number of events, activities, and clubs, including the Black Student Union.

### **Involvement with the College (African American / black)**

Overall, the majority of the participants were not very involved at Oakton. They said this was because they were not aware of all of the activities and opportunities when they arrived at the college and so they have had a slow start at getting involved. They do have the desire to be more involved at Oakton, but several barriers impede their involvement, including work responsibilities, family responsibilities, and not knowing the people in the group.

Focus group participants held a lengthy and insightful conversation about the role of the Black Student Union for black students at Oakton. While some participants addressed the desire to have more culturally centered groups at Oakton (particularly groups for black students), other participants asserted that students should seek out groups based on interest and not culture. The latter group felt that the need that the other participants felt could be addressed by bringing more students into the existing Black Student Union and making the organization more productive. In other words, despite the existence of the organization, there is not a sense of community among black students at Oakton. The value of having such a community, participants believe, is that it can encourage them to graduate or transfer, provide a support system and opportunities for networking, and provide information about scholarships and activities at the college. Ultimately, participants felt that having a sense of community among black students and an organization to promote it would make them more comfortable at Oakton.

*Participants said there is little sense of community among African American / black students at Oakton*

### **Feelings of Fit (African American / black)**

Focus group participants reported that Oakton provides a small enough environment where they feel comfortable, recognized, and known in positive ways. Students were split evenly on whether they felt Oakton was a welcoming place for them and say that their experience varies from class to class and depending on the professor. Participants did not agree when asked if the majority of their professors made them feel welcome in the classroom. Several students reported classroom incidents where they felt targeted as a “racial authority” by either the professor or the student. One participant found that they took on the burden of speaking loudly and frequently in class just so they could “make my race look better.” Another student found that a classmate’s repeated reference to black Americans as “your people,” without intervention by the professor, egregious enough to drop the course after the incident. Participants reported that there are few faculty and staff at Oakton (in their words: “people with authority”) that they know and feel comfortable talking to when incidents like this occur.

The participants largely believed that there are preconceived notions about black students at Oakton, in which many believe that they are Oakton because they have to be and not because they want to learn. Some students felt that this affected the way that they were treated in the classroom and expressed that students of other races and ethnicities are treated better—for example, one participant expressed that other students get more comments back on their essays. They find that the perception that black students are not at Oakton to learn

comes from faculty, staff, and other students—but that it is a larger societal perception as well. Black students feel that there is a sense of surprise, by both faculty and students, when they raise their hand in class. Some students felt that they were treated this way more so at Oakton than in high school, while the others felt that their in-classroom treatment had gotten better since high school.

No focus group participant reported having a black professor while at Oakton. Several students did not even know that there were black faculty at the college. They found that in their past experiences with black teachers, these teachers made them feel more welcome. They see value in having black professors: black teachers brought in culturally relevant lessons, created a classroom environment conducive to productive, inoffensive discussions about controversial topics, and encouraged black students (who are often the only students of their racial group in the classroom) to participate in these discussions. Academically, focus group participants reported that black professors have higher expectations of them and treat them with respect.

Participants did not just express concerns about negative perceptions of them in the classroom. They felt that large groups of black students receive unwarranted attention from staff, particularly when large groups of students of other races and ethnicities do not. Students reported incidents during which public safety officers have approached them in the cafeteria for being too loud and then will return moments later and order them to disperse. They feel that other gatherings of students who are equally loud are not reported to public safety and, therefore, other students are left alone. Participants expressed that there is an assumption by staff that they need to be “observed” or “monitored” and that this monitoring happens on a regular basis. Students also feel that this “monitoring” carries into the hallway when they are gathered with a number of other black students. Participants also reported comments made by other students, for example during the 2008 presidential election, which they found to be offensive. Focus group participants concede that they may be bringing their experiences in from the larger society, but nothing at Oakton shields them from this negative treatment.

*African American / black students feel comfortable at Oakton, though they were split about whether Oakton is a welcoming place and whether their treatment in the classroom is comparable to the treatment given to other students.*

### **Success (African American / black)**

Focus group participants used several factors to define life success, including being financially stable and meeting their needs, establishing a career, being happy in their career, not living above their means and staying out of debt, being independent, and knowing their priorities. At Oakton, they defined success as leaving Oakton on good terms, leaving Oakton with a degree, transferring to a four-year institution, passing their classes, being awarded scholarships, having good friends and meeting new people, and networking with people within one’s major. Participants feel that by the time they leave Oakton, they should have a solid idea of their major and desired career.

Participants said that Oakton helps them succeed by providing them with opportunities (i.e., scholarships, independent research, internships), resources (e.g., the Learning Center), and activities. In order to better help them succeed, participants would like more supportive teachers who challenge them more. One participant distinguished help (in the form of opportunities and resources) from support and asserted that, while Oakton provides much help to students, there is a dearth of support. As participants had placed no expectations onto Oakton to provide them with an experience or education of a particular quality, students feel that Oakton has done everything it could possibly do, and success from here forward is their responsibility.

### **Ideal College (African American / black)**

Focus group participants were asked to describe the perfect college and to then select the attributes that described Oakton. Bolded attributes are ones that students thought also described Oakton.

#### **Ideal College**

- Ability to transfer in two years
- Acceptance
- Accepted, rather than targeted, as a black student
- Accessible
- **Accredited**
- Affordable tuition
- Big
- Black professors
- Comfortable classrooms
- Conference rooms for students to have meetings
- **Decent, affordable food**
- Dedicated teachers
- **Discussions and dialogues**
- Dorms
- **Friendly environment**
- **Goals**
- Good financial aid
- **Great educational opportunities**
- **Help in classes**
- **Help for first generation college students**
- In-class discussions
- Internship opportunities
- **Job opportunities**
- Large classroom sizes
- **Learning**
- **Learning Center**
- Little animosity between students
- “No one left behind”
- **Online access**
- Peaceful ambience
- Positive teacher-student relationships
- **Quality education**
- **Racial diversity**
- **Resources**
- **Scholarships**
- **Smaller classes**
- **Sports teams**
- **Student activities**
- Support systems
- Unity
- Unlimited resources
- Welcoming

## *Hispanic Focus Group*

### **Expectations of Oakton (Hispanic)**

Six students reported that Oakton was their first choice and two started elsewhere. Oakton was not the first choice for all of the students. Several students were intent upon attending a four year but did not for several reasons (including cost and a lack of citizenship papers which barred them from loans and scholarships) and others began at a four year and then transferred into Oakton.

Cost appeared to be the key consideration for students in the focus group when selecting Oakton. Students either began at Oakton or transferred to Oakton from a four-year because of cost considerations. Even students who did not rank cost as a determinant of where they would go to college found it more economical to attend Oakton while they sorted out their post-high school plans. Along these lines, students did have other motives for attending Oakton, in particular, sorting out what they wanted to do academically and career wise.

*Cost was a key consideration driving Hispanic students to Oakton.*

Students had outside influences who discouraged them from attending Oakton, including parents. Students also had outside influences, like high school counselors and parents, who encouraged them to attend Oakton. Why did they encourage them to attend Oakton? Students noted these reasons: cost considerations, a jump start after graduating from high school early, time to determine their future plans, and they convinced them that Oakton offers a serious, quality education.

### **Feelings of Fit (Hispanic)**

Students had many expectations of Oakton before they arrived at the college. Some students expected it to be like many four year institutions: a bustling campus, a lot of students, and large class sizes. Others expected it to mirror high school—"the thirteenth grade." These students expected a good quality education, but they expected to be in classes with many people from high school and therefore expected the campus to be divided by social cliques. Some students did not expect the same resources or student activities as four-year institutions. Several students reported negative perceptions of Oakton at their high schools—e.g., students who attended Oakton had poor high school grades, could not be admitted at another school, could not afford another school, or simply were not "college material"—and it made them apprehensive about attending Oakton. Students reported that these perceptions were false and tended to be held by their wealthier counterparts in high school. But overall students thought it would be a good school to begin their college education at and then keep going.

Students who planned to attend four year institutions or who began there found that Oakton did not quite meet their expectations, and coming to Oakton was an adjustment for them. They expected a more social and fun experience. They also expected a more bustling campus with more students. But, students who expected to attend Oakton largely found the

campus what they were looking for and that it even exceeded their initial expectations. They found the campus physically attractive and the people they met in their initial visits to the school to be friendly and welcoming. One student who transferred from a university had positive impressions of Oakton, particularly the friendly atmosphere and the willingness of people to help students.

### **Involvement with the College (Hispanic)**

Many students expected their coursework at Oakton to be easier and of poorer quality than they found it to be. Students also find the extracurricular activities at Oakton to be better than at other colleges, and they find ample opportunities to get involved and be engaged at Oakton. They found that the quality of education at Oakton surpassed their expectations. At the same time, though there are many activities for students at Oakton, they expressed disappointment that so many students choose to not participate and enhance the social atmosphere of the school. They feel that student activities at Oakton need better promotion. They find it difficult to make new friends and socialize at Oakton. Students believe this is the nature of a commuter school. Several students commented that the distance between work and school and limited transportation options keep them from being involved. But, they wish that they had better avenues to form friendships with their Oakton classmates. Some say it is difficult to build lasting friendships at community colleges because they are a revolving door. Once the friendship gets ready to blossom, the person leaves. However, other students say that the onus should not entirely lie on student activities. They find that the classroom also provides an opportunity for students to become familiar with each other, but faculty must desire to create this classroom environment and they typically do not see it as an integral part of the classroom experience. One student commented that students have to make the experience valuable for themselves and actively seek out these relationships.

*The quality of education at Oakton surpassed the expectations of Hispanic students.*

Students noted many positive qualities about Oakton. Among them:

- **Advisors at Oakton care:** Students find that advisors ask that they want to do in life and then direct them to the courses that relate to that line of work
- **Professors at Oakton care:** Small class sizes, personalized attention, and accessibility distinguish the Oakton experience from large colleges and universities.
- **Students at Oakton care:** When students have been able to forge relationships with their peers, they have found them very rewarding. Students find that their classmates are helpful and the environment is social outside of the classroom.

Students feel that they need more information about the resources and student activities available at Oakton. They also lack knowledge about the transfer process. They want independence in navigating the system, but they also want direction about with whom they should talk. They also want more clarity: they tend to find that course transfer

information they are given at Oakton conflicts with information given to them by the transfer institution.

What keeps students from getting involved? Students find that their work schedules conflict, as some work full time while attending Oakton. Some students expressed that they had no desire to become involved at Oakton: their mission is to transfer and start their careers and they see engagement with other students and faculty as an unnecessary distraction. For the most part, students find that they are engaged with faculty and they have had positive encounters with staff, including Public Safety, the Cashiers Office, the Bookstore, maintenance personnel, and the Division office staff.

Students find their experiences at the Skokie and Des Plaines campuses to be comparable. They noted that the number of physical spaces for socializing is limited, and the cafeteria separates students who know each other from those who do not.

Students do report positive experiences with advisors. They said advisors approach them positively, even if their academic performance has been poor. Advisors provide them with advice on doing better, encourage them, and display an active interest in students. Not all students have had positive advising experiences, however. Some students reported misinformation and poor interpersonal experiences with advisors. Students found that having Admission staff who spoke to them and/or their parents in Spanish made them feel welcome and comfortable with the choice of Oakton.

*A variety of reasons keep Hispanic students from becoming involved at Oakton, although students say they are engaged with faculty.*

### **Success (Hispanic)**

Students defined success as accomplishing any goals they set and having higher educational attainment than their parents. Several students had parents who did not necessarily encourage them to go to college, but who still encouraged them to have a fulfilling work life. Students also defined success as having a good standard of living and expressed a fear of student loan debt and living in poverty.

Oakton helps students achieve success by giving them a good education, exposing them to the world, offering a variety of classes that will allow them to gain knowledge and experience, providing an affordable education, and having teachers who are interested in student learning. On the other hand, students find that some area schools offer better programs in certain departments, many of their courses will not transfer, there are not many resources available to help students plan their exit from Oakton, they need more help with scholarships and internships and more specific help in guidance with course selection (particularly which courses will transfer, which courses relate to what the students want to do, etc.). They want more advisors who are genuinely interested in them and offer clear help. Students find that advisors repeat information that students can obtain themselves on the computer and they want more personalized guidance instead of feeling that the advisors are following a script. Students would also like personalized guidance when seeking career help.

### Ideal College (Hispanic)

Students would like to see more discipline-specific wings at Oakton that would group similar classes together and allow students to meet others with similar interests. They would like the library to have extended hours, play an active role in their education, and have more popular and updated books. Students would like more courses at the Skokie campus and more exposure to the campus, as all of the students did not know it exists.

Students would like Oakton to continue having helpful teachers, small class sizes, festivals and activities, and nice facilities like the Art Gallery. They believe the following can improve the campus environment: a common area, more up-to-date fiction books in the library, couches in the cafeteria, a more aesthetically pleasing environment (more murals, less gloomy halls), and a website for discussion.

Focus group participants were asked to describe the perfect college and to then select the attributes that described Oakton. Bolded attributes are ones that students thought also described Oakton.

#### Ideal College

- **Active**
- Advertising programs
- Art
- **Athletic**
- **Available**
- **Available financial aid**
- Choices
- Clubs/activities with different hours
- **Communication**
- Creative
- Different programs
- Different “wings”/buildings for departments
- **Diverse**
- Eco-friendly/green campus
- Exciting
- Facilitated socialization
- **Fair**
- Far away
- **Fun activities**
- Global
- Guidance
- **Good communication**
- **Good facilities**
- **Good professors**
- Independent
- **Intimate**
- **Involved**
- **Kind**
- Knowledgeable
- Lively
- Lots of students
- Many different classes
- More available classes
- More classes at different times but same days
- More involved teachers
- More programs
- More special education services
- New
- **Nice**
- **One-on-one**
- **Open/open-minded**
- Outdoor patios
- **Productive**
- **Resourceful**
- **Responsible**
- **Small classes**
- **Social/social events**
- Supports ideas

- **Help with grants/FAFSA, books**
- Helpful advisors
- **Helpful staff and teachers**
- Helpful to your future
- Hobby/skill activities
- **Teachers that dedicate one-on-one time**
- Transfer information
- **Very good library**
- **Welcoming environment**
- **Willing to help you find a job**

### *Other Students*

#### **Expectations of Oakton (Other)**

Focus group participants had several reasons for attending Oakton. One student attended a large public university and then transferred to Oakton after the first year. The majority of students reported that they came to Oakton to take general education courses before transferring to a four year university. The main reason why students chose to come to Oakton was to save money, but students also came here to have a new experience away from family, friends, and their high school classmates.

Overall, the students had low expectations of Oakton before arriving. The general perception was that Oakton is a school for students who cannot be admitted into four year schools or who had no hopes of going to college at all. Students relayed negative descriptions of the school. One student stated that “Oakton is for losers.” Another student felt “in the gutter” since all of their friends attended four year schools. Participants found classes to be easy in the beginning and described Oakton as an extension of high school.

Students did report more positive experiences once they arrived at Oakton. They find that teachers cultivate a positive and often humorous classroom environment. Professors encourage classroom participation by asking students for their opinion. Students largely did not expect to be challenged academically while at Oakton. Participants also did not expect that events and activities that are held at Oakton.

#### **Feelings of Fit (Other)**

Students feel that Oakton is a good place for them to set their goals. They have found that meeting new people has been a nervous, uncomfortable experience at times. At the same time, they have had rewarding classroom experiences and have developed good relationships with faculty members. They find that small classroom sizes facilitate these positive experiences and teachers provide a comfortable pace during the semester. Students seek better interactions with student services offices. Though the staff are friendly, they particularly are concerned that they are given the wrong information by student employees. Students enjoy their interactions with advisors, particularly the ability to walk in and see an advisor. Many students reported that they don’t feel physically safe at the college: there is a lack of awareness about where

*Students had low expectations of Oakton before beginning at the College, and report that once enrolled their experiences were more positive than they had expected.*

Public Safety is located and who Public Safety officers are; there are no picture identification cards and no way of restricting who has access to the campus; and if something goes wrong, students do not have instruction about what they should do.

Overall, all of the students find that Oakton is welcoming. They believe that a welcoming tone is established during Orientation and this welcoming, helpful spirit continues throughout their time at the school.

### **Involvement with the College (Other)**

Most of the students were involved at Oakton. Students who are involved find that it is easy to find out what activities are taking place at the college. They report that they have made friends at Oakton through their involvement, and their social life has improved since high school. Those not involved cited various, including a desire to just attend classes at Oakton and not get involved because they would be transferring soon, as well as outside commitments—including work and family—that keep them from finding the time to be involved.

### **Success (Other)**

Students offered many definitions of success, including: getting good grades and a high GPA, graduating with an Associate degree, transferring from Oakton, setting and meeting their goals, having an active social life and a positive college experience, and being happy. Students mainly pointed to their academic experience when reflecting on how Oakton helps them succeed. Office hours provide them with the opportunity to meet with faculty and understand course material. Resources, such as the Learning Center and the library, supplement the classroom experience.

Students find that Oakton interferes with their success because the school lacks a serious academic mentality. Students do not have to try hard to succeed at Oakton and, if they fail, the school gives the student the perception that is acceptable to just take the course again. The affordable cost of an Oakton education makes it even easier for students to not put forth a serious effort on their first try. Students also expressed a fear of spending time at Oakton unnecessarily—“getting stuck in Oakton quicksand.” They find that many students lose a sense of purpose at Oakton as they float between high school and college.

*Students define success at Oakton largely as success academically; some fear “getting stuck in Oakton quicksand”—i.e., spending time at Oakton unnecessarily.*

Focus group participants cited many areas of improvement for the college. They found speaking with student employees in Registration, Financial Aid, and the Cashier’s Office about personal financial and academic concerns to be uncomfortable and unprofessional. At the same time, they appreciated that employment is available on campus to students. They also cited areas of improvement to the physical space of the college. While they like the airier design and outside appearance of the Skokie campus, they found the interior of the Des Plaines campus needed updating and a more aesthetically pleasing

color scheme than the current brown and green colors. They also felt that more student parking is needed. Students encouraged the college to offer more sports teams and offer better publicity of groups or clubs, particularly using existing social networking websites. In the classroom, students thought that having a Blackboard connection for each course would enhance their experience. They desire a more standard process for teacher evaluations, as all teachers do not distribute evaluations and do not appear to welcome feedback. Students also requested that hours for online registration be extended past 11:00 PM. Students desire a greater connection between Oakton and four-year schools, including scholarships to attend four-year schools, campus visits, and opportunities for engagement with the schools and their students.

### **Ideal College (Other)**

Focus group participants were asked to describe the perfect college and to then select the attributes that described Oakton. Bolded attributes are ones that students thought also described Oakton.

#### **Ideal College**

- Action
- Approachable staff
- Challenging
- **Cheaper book cost**
- **Comfortable environment**
- Convenient
- Discipline
- Diverse clubs
- Easy access to resources
- Educational
- Engaging
- Enjoyment
- Excitement
- **Extra help available**
- Financial aid
- Flexibility
- **Free will**
- **Friendly people**
- Friends
- Fun/fun activities
- **Future stepping stone**
- Goals
- Good education
- Good teachers
- Large student body (diverse)
- Less strain on your wallet
- Moderately strict
- Paintball team
- Parking
- Parties
- Pleasure
- **Prestige**
- Simple, easy communication with teachers
- **Small class sizes**
- Social
- Stimulating
- Strictness
- Support
- Welcoming
- **Well-rounded**
- Wrestling team

## Discussion

Students expressed a variety of perceptions about why they chose Oakton, their experiences at the College, and how Oakton could do better. Some were engaged with faculty, staff and / or other students, while others viewed Oakton as a temporary stop on their way to a four-year college or university. While students voiced different ideas about the College, some common themes emerged.

- **Reasons for selecting Oakton.** Dominant reasons for selecting Oakton were related to the College's affordability, proximity to home, and promise of permitting students to accrue credits for transfer. Few students were drawn to Oakton because of programs offered, faculty quality, or the institution's reputation. Indeed, a number of participants in all groups noted that Oakton was perceived as a place for students who were not prepared academically for college, although some noted they knew people who had good experiences at Oakton. A number of participants had been accepted at four-year institutions, some had even attended them before returning to Oakton. Cost seemed the primary reason these individuals chose Oakton over the four-year alternative.
- **Advising.** Students reported mixed experiences with advising, and almost all of them expressed in one way or another the importance of advising to them, especially with respect to selecting courses for transfer and obtaining accurate information. Because most students plan to transfer, this is of particular importance.
- **Involvement.** Involvement at the College varied among focus group participants. Most seemed to be aware that Oakton offered activities and opportunities for out-of-classroom engagement, and cited lack of time as a primary barrier for participation. Some stated they were simply uninterested, viewing Oakton as a place to accrue credits but not a place in which to invest energy. African American / black students, in particular, emphasized the value of affiliating with other African American / black students.
- **Feelings of security.** A number of respondents commented on their feelings of safety and security at Oakton, and expressed very different perceptions about Public Safety in particular. African American / black students agreed they felt watched, with Public Safety intervening when the students were having fun but talking somewhat loudly. They expressed the view that they were subject to extraordinary scrutiny. Hispanic students reported positive experiences with Public Safety, and many students in the Other group weren't even aware Oakton has a security force or office.
- **Fitting in.** Most students said they felt relatively comfortable at the College and found employees were generally friendly and helpful. African American / black students' concerns about being watched are an exception to this view, though they

*Students view advising as of significant importance, especially because most plan to transfer.*

had a number of positive comments as well.

- **Academic expectations.** Students had mixed views about the academic rigor and expectations of faculty with respect to their performance. African American / black students, in particular, noted that some faculty express surprise when they do well, and many participants across the groups implied that faculty expectations are not uniformly high. This perception may reinforce the pre-college idea that Oakton is a school for less academically prepared students.
- **Improving Oakton.** Participants had a number of recommendations for how Oakton might improve, ranging from providing accurate advising, making services more available, and creating opportunities for students of similar backgrounds or discipline interests to interact. They value small class sizes and those that reported being engaged with faculty or other students seemed to value this.
- **Characteristics of ideal colleges.** Participants identified a variety of attributes they thought characterized ideal colleges. While they used many different words or phrases, several key themes emerged. Ideal colleges should provide strong and accurate advising; be affordable, with financial assistance and modest costs; have a sense of excitement, fun, and a variety of activities; have small classes and a range of academic options; provide support services; and be welcoming.

*Students have mixed views about academic rigor at Oakton and expectations of faculty.*

Results of the student focus groups indicate that Oakton is a college of promise, drawing students for a number of reasons but with affordability and proximity being paramount. Students come to Oakton with mixed expectations, in part because the College does not enjoy a strong reputation for excellence in their communities. Once here, students' experiences seem to be more positive than they had expected, but not always. They want guidance and advising, and perhaps more prescriptions for exactly what courses to take than the College normally provides. Nearly all say they plan to transfer, and the credibility and transferability of courses are of great importance to them. They have mixed views about engaging with the College outside the classroom, with some seeking more engagement and others not wanting to participate beyond what is required of them in classes. They have mixed views, as well, about the extent to which Oakton is welcoming, with more feeling welcome than not. Many stated or implied that faculty do not expect much of them academically, perhaps reinforcing their pre-college notions that Oakton is a place for the academically less-prepared. African American / black students in particular want to see more African American / black faculty and staff; most were not aware Oakton has African American / black faculty members.

*Students say ideal colleges should provide strong and accurate advising, be affordable, have a sense of excitement, have small classes and a range of academic options, and be welcoming.*

What do results of these groups imply for action? First, students' voices about the need for high academic expectations coupled with support services, accurate and even prescriptive advising, and a welcoming environment for diverse populations are clear and

virtually unanimous. *Change Matters* goals related to WISE Student Services and Academic Excellence are especially germane. Students' perceptions align with what respondents on the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) indicated as well. The clear message suggests Oakton might accelerate implementing new and more comprehensive advising and orientation approaches and launch efforts to build an even more welcoming environment.

Second, results indicate uneven perceptions of Oakton and the view that it is a College for less qualified students remain strong in the community. Finding ways to emphasize academic quality and student achievements, especially transfer for traditionally aged students, might remain key priorities for community information.

Third, it is important to recognize that as rich and informative as focus group discussions are, they represent the perceptions of a small number of students. Thus faculty, administrators and staff should consider what these students tell us and at the same time understand many of their messages are mixed. Finally, no single research approach or project tells the whole story. Oakton's research agenda and building a culture of evidence to inform decision-making need to remain part of the College's fabric, lest programs and services be created and delivered in a vacuum and presumptions of effectiveness replace evidence.

**Appendix 1**

**OAKTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOCUS GROUPS  
SPRING 2009  
RECRUITMENT GUIDE**

**Complete this section when student commits to attend**

<input type="checkbox"/> African American Group 1-2:30 Thursday, Feb. 26 Room 2500, DP Campus	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic Group 1-2:30 Friday, Feb. 27 Room 2500, DP Campus	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Group 1-2:30 Wednesday, March 4 Room 2500, DP Campus
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Student name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Work \_\_\_\_\_ Cell \_\_\_\_\_

Recruited by \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Time Recruited \_\_\_\_\_

Hello, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ with Oakton Community College. May I please speak to [NAME]?

[NAME], my name is \_\_\_\_\_, from Oakton. We are conducting a short survey of Oakton students. Would you be willing to answer three short questions? There are no right or wrong answers.

Note: if you know the student, vary your introduction appropriately.

1. Do you consider yourself to be the type of person who is outgoing and talkative, or do you tend to be very quiet and reserved?

( ) Outgoing / talkative

**CONTINUE**

( ) Quiet / reserved

**DISCONTINUE**

2. In general, how comfortable are you in expressing your opinions in groups of people you don't know?

( ) Very comfortable

( ) Somewhat comfortable

**CONTINUE**

( ) Somewhat uncomfortable

( ) Very uncomfortable

**DISCONTINUE**

3. Do you typically like to hear other people's opinions?

( ) Very much

( ) Somewhat

( ) Not very much

( ) Not at all

**CONTINUE**

**DISCONTINUE**

RECRUITER: PLEASE USE YOUR JUDGMENT AS TO WHETHER THIS PERSON WOULD BE A GOOD RESPONDENT - IS HE/SHE ARTICULATE, EASY TO UNDERSTAND, WITH A GOOD LEVEL OF INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM? - IF SO - CONTINUE, IF NOT – **DISCONTINUE. JUST SAY THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.**

**EXTEND INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

The reason we have asked you all of these questions is that we would like to invite you to participate in a focus group discussion with other Oakton students. We are interested in learning about your experiences at Oakton, and how we can serve you better.

- GIVE DATE / TIME / LOCATION / DIRECTIONS

African American Group  
1-2:30 Thursday, Feb. 26  
Room 2500, DP Campus

Hispanic Group  
1-2:30 Friday, Feb. 27  
Room 2500, DP Campus

Other Group  
1-2:30 Wednesday, March 4  
Room 2500, DP Campus

- EXPLAIN INCENTIVE: \$25
- ADVISE STUDENT:
- HE/SHE MUST ARRIVE TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE TIME
- NO REPLACEMENTS
- NO CHILDREN
- FRIENDS CANNOT PARTICIPATE
- IF RESPONDENT ARRIVES AFTER GROUP HAS BEGUN, HE/SHE WILL NOT BE PAID
- LUNCH WILL BE SERVED

We are inviting only a small number of people to be part of this research project, so your participation is very important to us. Let me assure you that this research project does not involve sales of any kind. We are only interested in your opinions. Will you be able to join us?

(IF STUDENT AGREES TO PARTICIPATE, FILL OUT THE TOP SECTION OF THIS RECRUITMENT GUIDE.

**Appendix 2****Focus Group Interviews – Student Groups  
Discussion Guide  
February 2009**

NOTES FOR THE MODERATOR ARE IN CAPS

**Introduction**

- Welcome everyone
- Introductions
- Statement of purpose for focus group

We are interested in hearing about your experiences at Oakton. We're holding a number of focus groups with Oakton students from different cultural backgrounds, and will use what you tell us to help improve the College.

- We'll be taping the group so we can remember what you said, but we won't use any real names or identify you.
- Guidelines we'll follow during conversation
  - There are no right or wrong answers;
  - You don't need to speak in order or talk about every topic we discuss;
  - Sometimes exchanges get excited - please try not to jump in;
  - One person speak at a time;
  - I may need to step in and redirect our conversation because our time is limited;
  - My role today is to moderate the focus group, not to actually participate in the conversation;
  - NAME is here to take some notes about our discussion. No names will be used; results will be summarized in general terms only;
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Warm-up**

Let's begin with an easy question. Think back to when you were a senior in high school. What were you thinking about going to college?

What prompted you to come to Oakton?

Was Oakton your first choice?

Did you go somewhere else before coming to Oakton?

**Core of Focus Group Questions**

- Expectations of Oakton

Think about what you expected Oakton to be like. What did you expect?

Where did these come from? PROBE TO FIND OUT FAMILY, FRIEND, HIGH SCHOOL INFLUENCERS

In what ways have your expectations been met or not met?

What have you experienced at Oakton that you didn't expect?

- Involvement

We're trying to better understand students' involvement with the College. How would you describe your involvement?

How did that come about?

IF NOT ALREADY DESCRIBED, ASK IN WHAT WAYS ARE YOU INVOLVED? WITH WHOM? PROBLEM TO FIND OUT HOW INVOLVED WITH FACULTY, STAFF AND STUDENTS.

What's gotten in the way of your being involved?

- Feeling of fit

Let's talk about some specific experiences at Oakton that have made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable. Can you describe an experience?

Thinking about your friends at Oakton, do you think they feel comfortable? Let's talk about some specific experiences they've mentioned that made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable.

Would you say that Oakton is welcoming? In what ways?

- Success

We know that success means different things to different people. Thinking about your future, what does success mean for you?

What does success mean for you at Oakton?

In what ways does Oakton help you to succeed?

How does Oakton get in the way of your success?

What can Oakton do better?

- Ideal college

Think about an "ideal" college. I'm giving each of you a card. Take a couple minutes and write down the words you'd use to describe an ideal college. Don't put your name on the card. GIVE A FEW MINUTES

What words did you write? GO AROUND THE TABLE AND ASK EACH PERSON TO READ ONE WORD UNTIL ALL WORDS HAVE BEEN READ. ASK IF OTHERS HAVE WRITTEN DOWN ANY OF THE WORDS ALREADY READ. THEN USE YOUR JUDGEMENT ABOUT WHICH WORDS TO PROBE AND ASK WHY THAT WORD WAS CHOSEN AND WHETHER OTHERS IN THE GROUP AGREE.

Now think about Oakton. Do these words describe Oakton? Why or why not?

**Summary and Wrap-up**

- Suppose you had one minute to talk about what you'd like Oakton to be sure to continue doing or to change. What would you say?
- MODERATOR GIVES 2-3 MINUTE SUMMARY. Then ask: "is this an adequate summary?" "How well does this capture what was said here?"
- Have we missed anything?

**Closing**

- Your responses remain anonymous.
- If you think of something you forgot to say, feel free to call or email me. Here's my card. HAND OUT YOUR CARD.
- Do you have any questions?

THANK EVERYONE FOR PARTICIPATING.

HAND OUT ENVELOPES.

### Appendix 3



## OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH PARTICIPATION AGREEMENT

**Project:** Student Focus Group, Spring 2009

Thank you for agreeing to be part of a student focus group at Oakton. We want to be sure you understand this project before the conversation begins.

**1. Purpose:** The purpose of this project is to help Oakton faculty and staff understand students' experiences at Oakton.

**2. Procedures:** We will have an informal discussion, led by a moderator, who will ask you some questions about why you came to Oakton and your experiences here. There are no right or wrong answers. Our discussion will last about 90 minutes. The conversation will be recorded on audiotape to help us remember what you said. As backup, we'll also have a note taker in the room.

**3. Potential Risks and Discomforts:** We will ask you to speak freely about your experience at Oakton. Your comments will remain anonymous. You do need to be aware, however, that other members of the focus group might share your responses with other people even though they will be asked not to. There will be no physical or psychological risks.

**4. Incentives:** We will give you \$25 in cash at the end of the focus group as a thank you for participating. We'll ask you to sign a receipt acknowledging that you received this cash.

**5. Anticipated Benefits:** There are several potential benefits of your participation. First, you will have an opportunity to reflect on your experiences at the College and to learn whether others share these experiences. Second, you will be helping the College improve programs and services for students.

**6. Right to Withdraw or Not Answer. :** Participation in this focus group is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any particular question without penalty or costs.

**7. Assurances of Privacy and Confidentiality:** All information from the focus group will remain confidential. Your identity as a participant will not be disclosed to any unauthorized persons; only the researchers will have access to the research materials. The audiotapes will be transcribed into a manuscript for use by Oakton's Office of Research. We will not use your name or any references that could give away your identity as we write a report of the discussion. Audiotapes will be destroyed or erased at when the project is finished.

**8. Additional Information:** Your focus group leader can answer other questions you may have, or contact staff in Oakton's Office of Research:

- Trudy Bers, Executive Director, Office of Institutional Research, 1600 E. Golf Road, Des Plaines, IL 60016; Ph: (847) 635-1894; E-mail: tbers@oakton.edu
- Maya Evans, Manager of Research, Office of Institutional Research, 1600 E. Golf Road, Des Plaines, IL 60016; Ph: (847) 635-1973; E-mail: mevans@oakton.edu

Consent: *I agree to voluntarily participate in this research.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_