“Nearbie” Student Focus Group Report

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"Nearbie" Student Focus Group Report  
Former Students with 45 or More Credits and No Degree

Executive Summary

Connecting What Matters, Oakton’s new strategic plan, includes an objective to increase the number of certificates and degrees awarded. In Fall 2012, the Office of Research conducted a focus group as part of a continuing study* of “nearbies,” which we defined as former students who had not enrolled since the 2010-11 academic year, who had earned 45 or more credits at Oakton, who had a “C” average or higher, and who not earned an Oakton degree or certificate. The larger study of nearbies included students who had transferred, but the focus group targeted nearbies who had not transferred after leaving Oakton. Understanding more about students who are successful at completing significant amounts of coursework yet who fail to complete certificates, degrees or transfer may help the College improve rates of attainment with relatively small investments of resources and effort.  

A focus group is a one-time group interview typically involving five to ten participants who are led by a moderator to discuss a particular topic. This qualitative technique is designed to uncover new perspectives or avenues for exploration rather than statistically significant results directly applicable to a large population. A total of five nearbies participated in this two-hour focus group discussion of their college choice processes, initial college goals, campus experiences, definitions of success, reasons for leaving the College and likelihood of returning to complete a certificate or degree or to transfer. The purpose of this focus group was to learn what these students thought helped or hindered them in their efforts to earn a credential or transfer. We were also interested in hearing what nearbies thought the College might do to encourage former students to return and complete college certificates and degrees. While each of the focus group participants expressed some different perceptions of Oakton, a number of common themes emerged.

- **Reasons for choosing to attend Oakton.** Dominant reasons nearbies gave for attending Oakton were related to the affordability, proximity to home, and the opportunity to accrue credits for transfer to a baccalaureate program. Other less influential reasons included the good reputation of the institution and encouragement from peers or relatives.

- **Advising.** All nearbies asserted that accurate, timely academic advising was essential and all reported mixed experiences with Oakton advising. Early confusion about interpreting assessment test results and making the most effective selection of courses needed to earn a degree or transfer was common. Even though nearbies acknowledged that the College provided related explanations in print and online materials, they reported being intermittently frustrated by not knowing where to look or what questions to ask until it was too late - thereby wasting precious time and resources.

- **Defining success.** Most nearbies measured their success at Oakton against their estimation of the economic or personal value of a degree or transfer rather than the number of courses completed. An associate’s degree was generally seen as essential either for advancement in the workplace or for personal fulfillment or both – and most nearbies said they felt unsuccessful as a student at Oakton.

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* Findings from previous descriptive and survey phases of this study are summarized in the March-April and May-June, 2012, issues of *In the Abstract*, respectively. *In the Abstract* is the Oakton Office of Research’s bi-monthly bulletin. It is available at [http://www.oakton.edu/about/officesanddepartments/oir/research/abstract.php](http://www.oakton.edu/about/officesanddepartments/oir/research/abstract.php).
without completing a degree. At the same time, they did not express a sense of urgency about returning to Oakton to complete their studies or urgency to transfer.

- **Reasons for leaving the College before earning a degree or transfer.** Two or three of the following reasons for not completing a degree or transfer were cited by each of the nearbies: (1) Having a degree was not considered necessary to improve work or life circumstances; (2) Past mistakes in choosing classes slowed academic progress and added to a sense of frustration; (3) Unnecessary technological barriers interfered with content mastery, especially in online courses; (4) Nearbies were unsure about what exactly remained to be done to earn a degree or transfer and wary about wasting precious time, money and energy; and/or (5) Increasing pressures of work or family squeezed out time, money and/or energy needed to complete a degree or transfer.

- **Interest in completing a degree.** Focus group participants said they would like the College to tell them exactly what courses they needed - except for one nearbie who said she had already completed all coursework required for three certificates and an associate’s degree. She did not want to pay fees associated with receiving the official degree. All were interested in finishing a credential if the College offered the last six credits for free.

What do results of this focus group tell us? First, students’ voices about the need for accurate, accessible advising are clear and virtually unanimous. Some of this need may be satisfied by a new and more comprehensive orientation process recently introduced at Oakton. In addition to future evaluation of these new orientation procedures, the college could consider whether or how additional mentoring opportunities could be built into post-orientation campus life. Their comments also suggested the importance of providing advising on an ongoing basis, not just when a student first enrolls at the College.

Second, group participants said they felt less than successful without a degree. Even those nearbies lacking a related career goal said that the feeling of personal achievement represented by earning a degree was a motivating factor. If perceived obstacles to returning and completing necessary classes could be minimized, nearbies might return to complete credentials or transfer processes. These participants were interested in a possible College offer to inform each student of the shortest route to a degree (or transfer) and in a College offer to allow participants to take the last six credits for free. At the same time, while nearbies voiced desires to complete, they did not also indicate a sense of urgency in doing so, or the willingness to reduce other commitments while they returned to complete.

Third, it is important to recognize that as rich and informative as a focus group discussion can be, it represents the perceptions of a small number of students. Therefore faculty, administrators and staff should consider what these students tell us and at the same time understand many of their messages are mixed or incomplete. No single research approach or project tells the whole story: Maintaining a comprehensive research agenda and building a culture of evidence to inform decision-making remains the best way to develop and improve programs and services that improve student outcomes.
Introduction and Purpose

The Office of Research conducted a multiphase study during 2012 to learn more about students we call “nearbies” – those who completed a minimum of 45 credits with a 2.0 (“C”) grade point average at Oakton and left after the 2010-2011 year without earning a certificate or degree. Understanding why these seemingly successful students fail to complete credentials may help community colleges improve rates of attainment – especially when relatively small investments of College resources and effort may be required to encourage completion.

- The first part of this multiphase study involved a descriptive examination of demographic and academic progress data from the student information system. This study identified a population of 834 “nearbies.” Some relevant findings from this study are presented later in this paper and complete details are provided in the March-April issue of In the Abstract.

- The second part of this larger study further identified 359 of the 834 alumni who had grade point averages of 2.0 or higher, who were not part of a Spring survey of Career and Technical Education alumni and, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, had not transferred to another college or university after leaving Oakton. Of these, 77 responded to a survey. Some relevant findings from this part of the study are described later in this paper and the full results are summarized in the May-June issue of In the Abstract.

Some nearbies have earned more than enough credits – though perhaps not in the right distributions, to complete a credential or transfer. Before embarking on an initiative to improve nearbie completion rates, however, we wanted to hear their views about what had helped or hindered their progress at Oakton and why they left before completing a credential or transfer.

- This third part of the multiphase study is a focus group composed of five nearbies who had not completed a bachelor’s degree prior to attending Oakton. Findings from this group discussion include references to college choice processes, academic goals, college experiences, reasons for leaving before earning a degree and recommendations for improving College support for future degree completion.

The project was guided by a focus group team, whose members came from across the College, including faculty, staff and administrators. Pam Schuetz, a community college researcher from Northwestern University, served as the group moderator. Building on the previous descriptive and survey studies, the team worked together to shape the project, observe the focus group and help analyze results. Team members were:

- Trudy Bers  Director of Research
- Leana Cuellar  Assistant Director of Student Success
- Jim Holderfield  Research Analyst
Methodology

Method
A focus group is a qualitative method involving a moderator who uses a set of questions to loosely guide a small group of participants in discussion of a particular idea or concept. By nature of its small size, a focus group does not promise “hard” statistics or results that are statistically applicable to a larger student population. Instead, the strength of a focus group lies in developing new insights from participant comments that suggest innovative interventions or identify pertinent questions that might otherwise be left out of future quantitative studies. This focus group is designed to explore perceptions and experiences that a small group of experienced students (nearbies) say influence their decisions to leave the College before completing credentials or transfer. The group discussion format offers the opportunity for participants to build on one others’ responses and to share subjective information that may not otherwise surface.

Recruitment
Participants for this focus group were drawn from lists of those identified in two previous studies of nearbies. In the first descriptive study, the Office of Research identified 834 former students who had completed 45 or more credits at Oakton, who had not earned a certificate or degree, had not transferred to another college or university nor re-enrolled after Spring 2011. The second study, a survey, drew 77 respondents from among the 359 of the 834 students who also had grade point averages of 2.0 or higher, were not part of a Spring survey of Career and Technical Education alumni and, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, had not transferred to another college or university after leaving Oakton.

We developed a telephone screening guide (see Appendix 1) and contracted with an external marketing agency to recruit focus group members from the list of 359 eligible former students. The marketing agency reported that recruitment was proceeding more slowly than expected, hampered by a combination of missing or outdated telephone numbers, difficulty catching students in person and a lack of response to telephone messages. Therefore, we supplemented the original list of potential focus group members with approximately 300 additional students who had last attended Oakton in 2011-12 rather than 2010-11, but otherwise qualified as “nearbies.”

A total of 14 nearbies agreed to participate in the focus group. However, only five arrived at the scheduled time and place for the focus group (7 p.m. on a Thursday evening at the marketing agency office in Skokie, Illinois). Accepted practice for a mini-focus group allows five or six participants (rather than the eight to ten common in a regular focus group) and we decided to conduct the mini-focus group. Participants included one woman who had last attended in Spring 2010, three women who had last attended Oakton in Spring 2011 and one male who had last attended in Fall 2011.

The final definition of “nearbie” therefore includes former students who had not earned a bachelor’s degree prior to enrolling at Oakton and who left the College before Spring 2012 with
45 or more Oakton credits with a grade point average of 2.0 or higher but without earning a degree, certificate or transferring to another college or university.

**Moderator Guide**

To ensure conversations touched key topics the team wanted to explore, a moderator guide was prepared (see Appendix 2). As with most focus groups, the guide served as a reminder to the moderator about what subjects to cover, not as an interview schedule to be followed in lock-step order. A key value of focus groups is that when conversations flow naturally the moderator can probe for additional responses to uncover deeper meaning or to capitalize on comments that generate discussion related to the overall topic but not necessarily included on the moderator guide itself.

**Analysis approach**

One of the richest aspects of a focus group is to have observers, individuals who listen and watch the conversation in real time. Observers sit in a separate room behind a one-way mirror. In this case, several Oakton administrators, faculty and staff acted as observers for the nearly two hours that the group was in session. While participants are told there are interested individuals observing the group, they typically forget about this. This focus group discussion was also video and audio taped by the vendor that recruited participants and hosted the focus group. After the group concluded and participants left, observers debriefed with the moderator.

There was consensus in the debriefing with observers that the students felt comfortable and were willing to talk candidly as the focus group proceeded. Comments were gathered from the observers and broad themes extracted from the audiotape along with verbatim responses to illustrate key findings. Pam Schuetz took the lead on writing this section of the following report.

Finally, a summary and synthesis of findings was prepared collaboratively by Pam Schuetz and Trudy Bers. The final report reflects their perceptions as well as the analysis of audio tapes and group feedback.

### Findings

This focus group was conducted by Office of Research in Fall 2012 and was based on two previous studies of nearbies. The first study involved a descriptive analysis of Oakton enrollment records which identified students who had completed a minimum of 45 credits and had left the College at the end of the 2010-11 academic year without earning a certificate or degree. Findings from this first study included:

- Nearbies are successful students, completing an average of 62 credits at Oakton and a mean cumulative grade point average of 2.85;
- Just over half (51 percent) of the 834 identified nearbies failed to earn a certificate or degree from another institution or transfer to another college or university after leaving Oakton;

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1 See the March-April issue of *In the Abstract.*
A subset of 13 percent (n=108) earned 75 or more credits, and three percent (n=25) earned 100 or more credits;

Not a single student in a random sample of 20 nearbies whose transcripts were examined had completed the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) general education core curriculum before leaving Oakton. No pattern was detected in the type of core coursework left uncompleted (for example, mathematics or speech).

The second nearbie study involved a survey that was conducted in May 2012. The Office of Research identified 359 of the 834 alumni from the first study who had grade point averages of 2.0 or higher, who were not part of a Spring survey of Career and Technical Education alumni and, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, had not transferred to another college or university after leaving Oakton. Seventy-seven responded to a survey, some directly online and others through a telephone survey, Findings from the second study included:

- Fifty-four respondents said they did not have a bachelor’s degree. Only 16 (30%) of them remember a faculty or staff member talking with them about the importance of completing a degree or certificate.
- The top two reasons respondents cited for leaving without a degree or certificate were that they didn’t see a value of staying at Oakton to earn the associate degree (17%) and they were not doing well academically (15%).
- Thirty-four (70%) say they planned to continue their educations, whether at Oakton only or at Oakton and another college or university. Twenty-six (75%) of these planned to return to Oakton,
- Twenty-nine (54%) are interested in learning what courses they need to complete an Oakton degree or certificate and another four may be interested.
- Thirty-seven (69%) say they would be very likely to return to Oakton if the College were to allow them to take the last six credits in an associate degree program without having to pay tuition or fees or receive financial aid.

In November 2012, the Office of Research conducted a third study, a focus group composed of five nearbies - students who had not earned a bachelor’s degree prior to enrolling at Oakton and who left the College before Spring 2012 with 45 or more Oakton credits and a grade point average of 2.0 or higher but without earning a degree, certificate or transferring to another college or university. Findings from this focus group included:

- Variety and stability of academic goals. Nearbies reported a variety of early academic goals including accruing credits to transfer into a bachelor’s program, earning an associate’s degree without any intention to transfer and completing courses to master content without intentions of securing the related credentials. Some reported sticking with their initial academic goals while other nearbies changed their fields of study (for example, from law enforcement to accounting) in response to interest in course content and work experience.

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2 See the May-June issue of *In the Abstract.*
3 We did not screen to determine whether nearbies might have earned a bachelor’s degree before last attending Oakton; this additional criterion for identifying nearbies will be included in future studies.
• **Time sensitivity.** Several nearbies reported starting college on a full-time basis as a recent high school graduate in response to parental pressure or by following the example of their high school peers. Several described dropping to part-time attendance or stopping out altogether in order to maintain a full-time work schedule, to take on additional family responsibilities or to avoid “missing out” on social activities with peers. All said they would advise new students to finish college as soon as possible even if it seems difficult to do so because external responsibilities of work, family and/or social life will increase over time, making completion ever more difficult.

• **Advising.** Nearbies expressed dissatisfaction with restricted access to advising, citing long waits and a lack of depth and quality of information garnered from formal advising experiences. Formal advising was often experienced as too brief or generic to be of much benefit: “It’s a hassle to get counseling…and the 10 or 15 minutes that [academic advisers] spend with you – how are they going to help guide your path for your future?” However, some nearbies agreed that advising on the Skokie campus was more accessible and useful than on the Des Plaines campus.

Nearbies said that information about college practices and policies took time to sink in and that they did not always understand implications of course or program choices right away. They wanted the College to do a better job in determining which services and information are best provided when. Most said they benefited from (or wanted) more personalized guidance when they first arrived on campus. Early engagement with College faculty, advisers, staff or even more experienced peers bolstered their confidence during the transition to college. As one student said, “One warm encounter could change the whole experience of the school.”

• **Perceived value of a college degree.** Nearbies agreed that the current labor market was very difficult to break into and that a college degree is increasingly required to get a good job. Those who reported having worked their way up to a good job without earning a degree still thought a degree could be useful. For example, one nearbie had been terrified to find upon being laid off from a banking job she had worked her way up to over ten years that - outside her narrow area of expertise - she was competing with 18 year olds for fast food or retail jobs that paid too little to meet her living expenses. The group consensus was that while a degree did not guarantee a stable, high-paying job, it made “getting a foot in the door” for an interview more likely. Nearbies agreed that any degree conferred some advantage, regardless of whether the degree conferred specific job skills.

• **Quality of instruction and faculty.** Participants noted that quality of instruction and faculty expectations for student learning were not uniformly high. Several cited evening courses taught by older part-time faculty “who mostly liked to brag about their experience” rather than teach useful content. Nearbies reported using “RateMyProfessors.com” – an informal collection of online student evaluations of faculty – to inform their choices of courses and instructors.

• **Definitions of success.** Nearbies almost uniformly equated college success with earning a degree. Even after acknowledging they were successful students in the sense of having completed more than 45 credits, none said they felt entirely “successful” without completing
a degree. The personal sense of achievement at completing a degree was valued as well as its perceived career value. Listening to others describe the personal significance of earning a degree, even a participant who started the session by saying that she had completed all the course requirements but didn’t want a degree (just the knowledge) remembered that her father had always wanted to finish high school and said she might now submit the required paperwork and fees for her degree as a sign of respect for his aspirations. Paradoxically, while nearbies said it was valuable to complete a credential, none expressed a sense of urgency in doing so.

- **Embedded obstacles of technology.** Several nearbies reported that all online and some in-person classes embedded multiple technological barriers to course mastery and completion. “Your text book is online and you have to get the key from the book to access homework assignments and then figure out how to turn in assignments online. Sometimes there are four or five different online sources or quizzes to do for one assignment. Tests are on a different key…You have to be technologically strong [and] put in at least twice the time [compared to courses without online components]… by the time you get there, where you’re ready to do the work, you’re so frustrated! Professors can’t even tell you how to do it.” Nearbies said mastering technological proficiency requirements – which varied from class to class – was often more difficult or frustrating than mastering the course content.

- **Interpreting placement test results.** Students do not always interpret placement test scores correctly to avoid unnecessary developmental coursework. For example, one participant knew she was good at mathematics but scored just below the cutoff score. She followed the College recommendation to register for a developmental mathematics course, not understanding that this was a non-credit “practice” course. A friend showed her the place in the related College brochure indicating that her assessment score was very close to qualifying for a credit course. With her friend’s encouragement, this nearbie refreshed her math skills (“learned a few formulas”) and took the placement test again. This time she placed into a college-level course and avoided taking a non-credit course she did not truly need.

- **Increasing wariness.** Many nearbies are stretched thin, working part- or full-time while enrolled in classes. They describe a greater sense of wariness about the college experience as time goes on, an aversion to investing time and energy in choices that they may later find do not count toward expected credentials or transfer. The sting of perceived “wasted time and money” along with a sense that they could easily make similar mistakes again contribute to a weaker sense of enthusiasm for taking on the continuing challenges associated with completing college credentials. When asked, “How would you feel if Oakton invited you to an event?” the almost unanimous nearbie response was “skeptical.” They looked askance at this offer, saying they would need details confirming that the event “not just a waste of time” meant for a group of people in the same major” but focused on their specific and personal interests or needs.

- **Interest in completing a credential.** Nearbies are interested in receiving a personalized list of courses required to finish a college degree. Nearbies are especially interested in completing an Oakton credential if the College offers them the last six credits for free.
• **Recommendations for improvement.** Several possible areas for increasing nearby engagement and completion rates emerged from the focus group – including orientation content and tone; advising that anticipates their questions and highlights needed information quickly and consistently; better explanation of placement test results and differences between vocational and liberal arts transfer paths; more connection of programs of study with real world career opportunities; and better cell phone reception at Des Plaines to keep up with external responsibilities of work and family while between classes.

### Discussion

The qualitative focus group research we present here adds to previous descriptive and survey research involving “nearbies” - former students who last enrolled at Oakton in 2010-11, earned 45 or more Oakton credits, and did not complete an Oakton degree or certificate. The survey research as well as the focus group further narrowed the nearby population to those who had not transferred after leaving Oakton. Understanding why students who are successful in completing significant amounts of coursework fail to complete certificates or degrees or to transfer may help Oakton to improve rates of attainment – especially where relatively small investments of resources and effort may be required. While this focus group sample was too small to offer definitive findings across all student populations, the following key findings arose during the discussions.

The main reasons nearbies gave for choosing to attend Oakton rather than another college or university included affordability, proximity to home, and the opportunity to accrue credits for transfer to a baccalaureate program. Most said they arrived on campus not knowing what questions to ask much less how to make use of the masses of information provided in printed and online formats. While nearbies agreed that completing an associate’s degree was necessary to feel successful as a student at Oakton, they were often confused about the most effective steps to take to complete a degree. They wanted the College to anticipate their questions and provide them with information more quickly and consistently.

Nearbies definitely wanted more accurate, timely academic advising to help them choose which courses to take when they first arrived. However, they also wanted these early decisions to make sense later, to fit into a larger picture that they may not have been able to formulate or articulate when they first arrived on campus. How do vocational and transfer programs differ in terms of academic timelines and coursework? What kinds of real world career trajectories – including job duties, salaries and opportunities for advancement - are associated with finishing one program versus another? To what extent can program options be kept open until students learn more about what opportunities are associated with different types of credentials? Nearbies wanted advisors to help them identify which of these sorts of questions were important for them personally and then show them how to find answers.

Later in their academic careers, nearbies sometimes reported that they became aware of making mistakes in their selection of early coursework, which then delayed completion of programs. While not absolving themselves of responsibility, nearbies perceived that the College – the acknowledged expert on academic progress - could and should have intervened to help them...
avoid making poor choices of classes or programs. Some nearbies described frustration over perceived waste of time, effort and money because of poor choices earlier in their college career. This frustration seemed to erode trust and undermine nearbies’ enthusiasm for returning to college to complete a degree. An eroded sense of trust or interest in Oakton was apparent in their skeptical response to the question “How would you feel if Oakton invited you to an event?” They said they would be unwilling to attend unless its benefit was made clear to them personally—rather than to a group of students, even in their same major.

On the other hand, “…one warm encounter could change the whole experience of the school.” Nearbies agreed that some “personal handholding” or a one-on-one mentoring relationship early in their college careers with College faculty, advisers, staff or even knowledgeable peers encouraged a greater sense of belonging and engagement—factors that are associated with higher rates of course and program completion. All nearbies in this group were interested in finishing a credential if the College offered the last six credits for free. Furthermore, most said they would like the College to tell them exactly what courses they needed to complete a degree.

Interestingly, some thought they already knew exactly what they needed to complete a degree but their descriptions suggested otherwise: For example, one nearbie who was only a few classes short of a degree in 1987 thought after completing these same few classes she could still earn an associate’s degree in a single term. Apparently, she did not realize that requirements tend to change over time and that she would need to investigate further to determine requirements for completing a degree. Another nearbie reported she had already earned over 80 credits at Oakton and after another term spent finishing general education requirements for transfer, she would only need one more year at a four-year university to earn her bachelor’s degree. Since a bachelor’s institution rarely accepts community college credits in place of upper division requirements, it is unlikely this nearbie will spend less than two years at her transfer institution before earning a bachelor’s degree. That these kinds of basic misunderstandings persist after these students spent more than eight calendar years in college is a testament to the depth and tenacity of misunderstandings that nearbies can bring to their college experiences.

This focus group explored why nearbies chose to leave Oakton and what the College might do to encourage them to return and complete degrees or certificates. The strength of this focus group lies in the opportunity to probe ambiguous or overlooked questions and dynamics from the students’ perspective. Findings suggest that the College may need to find clearer, earlier and more ubiquitous ways of communicating key information to beginning students about placements and remedial courses, program and degree requirements, and connections between programs and related career opportunities. Indeed, the literature defines motivation as an orientation toward a goal—a source of energy that is responsible for why learners decide to make an effort, how long they are willing to sustain an activity, how hard they are going to pursue it, and how connected they feel to the activity. It is possible that nearbies may be motivated to complete a degree if the College more clearly communicates why the effort is worthwhile, how long it will take a particular student to complete the degree, how the college will help students handle the inevitable difficulties associated with completing a degree and how students can feel more connected to the College.
Appendix 1: Telephone Screening Guide

OAKTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOCUS GROUP  
FALL 2012  
RECRUITMENT GUIDE

Complete this section when student commits to attend

Oakton College Focus Group, November 1, 2012, 7-9 p.m.  
Fieldwork Chicago, North, 5750 Old Orchard Road, Skokie, Suite 500  
Phone 847-413-9040

Participant 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 former Oakton students. Would you be willing to answer a few short questions? There are no right or wrong answers.

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.

1. When was your last term at Oakton? If you cannot remember, exactly, can you give me an estimate?

_____________________________________

IF LATER THAN SPRING 2011- DISCONTINUE

2. Did you transfer to another college or university after you last attended Oakton?

( ) Yes, what colleges did you attend?________________________________________

(IF YES, RECORD COLLEGE, THANK AND DISCONTINUE)

( ) No…………………………………….. CONTINUE
3. Have you earned an associate’s, bachelors, or master’s degree, either before or since you left Oakton?

Yes……………………………….... CONTINUE TO 3a.
No……………………………….. CONTINUE TO 4.

3a. If yes, from what college did you receive your degree?

NOW DISCONTINUE

4. 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

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

( ) Very comfortable.......................... CONTINUE
( ) Somewhat comfortable..................... CONTINUE
( ) Somewhat uncomfortable.................. DISCONTINUE
( ) Very uncomfortable........................ DISCONTINUE

6. Do you typically like to hear other people’s opinions?

( ) Very much..................................... CONTINUE
( ) Somewhat..................................... CONTINUE
( ) Not very much............................... DISCONTINUE
( ) Not at all...................................... DISCONTINUE

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 former Oakton students. We are interested in learning about your experiences at Oakton, and how we can serve students better. There are no right or wrong answers.

- GIVE DATE / TIME / LOCATION / DIRECTIONS
- EXPLAIN INCENTIVE: $50
• ADVISE STUDENT:
  o ADDITIONAL $50 LOTTERY AMONG PARTICIPANTS WHO ARRIVE TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE TIME
  o NO REPLACEMENTS
  o NO CHILDREN
  o FRIENDS CANNOT PARTICIPATE
  o IF RESPONDENT ARRIVES AFTER GROUP HAS BEGUN, HE/SHE WILL NOT BE PAID
  o DINNER 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: Moderator Guide

Focus Group Interview – Non-Completer Student Group
Discussion Guide
October 2012

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 this focus group with former Oakton students who earned at least 45 credits. We 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 in any reports.

Guidelines we’ll follow during conversation
● There are some people from the College observing our conversation; they’re behind the mirror. Whatever you say here is OK—they are interested in all of your ideas.
● 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;
● Do you have any questions before we begin?

Warm-up
Let’s begin with an easy question. Think back to when you first came to Oakton. About how long ago was that? What prompted you to come?

Expectations of Oakton
Think about what you expected Oakton to be like. What did you expect? Where did these expectations come from?

[PROBE TO FIND OUT FAMILY, FRIEND, OTHER INFLUENCES – only if group is cold]

In what ways have your expectations been met or not met? What have you experienced at Oakton that you didn’t expect?
Core of Focus Group Questions
We’re trying to better understand how students set their educational goals and how the College could better support goal completion.

Initial college goals
When you first came to Oakton, how did this college fit into your bigger educational or life plans? [What did you want? Did you have a particular major or degree goal in mind?]

How did you choose your educational goal(s)? Did you ever change your program or degree goals after you started classes? (Why did you change? Did changing goals solve (or create) any problems for you?)

IF NOT ALREADY DESCRIBED, ASK WHETHER/HOW COLLEGE GOALS CHANGED FROM INITIAL EXPECTATIONS – WHAT INFORMATION OR EXPERIENCES ENCOURAGED THEM TO CHANGE OR ABANDON GOALS?

[Give participants blank note cards and pencils] Thinking about your experiences at Oakton – please jot down what made you feel most /least like you belonged at Oakton? What made you feel most/least committed to your goals? Can you think of any specific examples?]

Where are you now?
Where are you now? [If not described: Where are you now with respect to college?]

What were the primary reasons you left? (PROBE ABOUT LIFE OUTSIDE SCHOOL OR EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL; FINANCES, ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES, NOT ENOUGH TIME/FLEXIBILITY; OTHER)

Are you considering going back to ANY college in the future? [Specific program, transfer or degree goals?]

Why no Oakton certificate or degree?
We know that lots of students who start college don’t necessarily finish a degree…

Did you feel like a successful student at Oakton? Why or why not?

Was there anything the College could or should have done to help you finish a certificate or degree? [Do college certificates or degrees have value? Oakton certificates or degrees?]

How do you feel about having left Oakton before getting a certificate or degree? (e.g., bad I didn’t finish goal, happy because I got what I needed…)

Do you think having stopped attending Oakton before getting a certificate or an associate’s degree has affected your future in any way?

Help with college goals and success
Let’s talk about your experience at Oakton – was there something you wanted from the College that you didn’t get?

Based on your experiences, what general advice about how to succeed in college would you give a new student coming to Oakton?

Did Oakton make a difference in your life – good or bad?

**Future goals and what might bring students back to Oakton**
Where do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years? [Will you need more education to get there? What kind? e.g., just more classes, certificate or degree from community college? 4-year college?]

Would you be interested in hearing from Oakton about which classes you need to complete a degree?

Would you be interested in finishing a degree if Oakton offered you the last 6 credits for free?

**Hindsight**
If you had to do it over again, would you do anything differently at Oakton? (e.g., ask for advice about programs and jobs; figure out my goals faster; join more study groups; etc.)

What do you know now that you wish you had known when you first started at Oakton?

Can you think of anything else Oakton could do to help you?

**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 confidential.
- If you think of something you forgot to say, feel free to email research@oakton.edu
- Do you have any questions?
THANK EVERYONE FOR PARTICIPATING. [Debrief]