

## **Students' Perceptions of Oakton: Focus Groups with Traditionally Aged Students**

In Spring 2009, three student focus groups explored students' perceptions about their experiences at the College. The groups comprised recent high school graduates, with one group 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 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, participants in all groups noted that Oakton was perceived as a place for students who were not prepared academically for college, although some said they knew people who had good experiences at Oakton. A number of participants had been accepted at four-year institutions-- 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. Most students 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.
- **Fitting in.** Most students said they felt relatively comfortable at the College and found employees were generally friendly and helpful.
- **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.

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 the need for a welcoming environment for diverse populations are clear and virtually unanimous. 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, should 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. 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.

A full report will soon be available on the Office of Research web site, <http://www.oakton.edu/resource/oir/research.htm>.