



## Back On Track Research

Focus Group Report

December 2015 – Updated March 2016

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# Objectives

To investigate the attitudes, perceptions, and needs of former SBCC students who left the college without obtaining a degree or certificate.

- 1 Understand former students' original motivations for attending SBCC, initial goals, and experiences as students
- 2 Explore the factors that impacted former students' decisions to discontinue their SBCC education
- 3 Determine their degree of interest in returning to SBCC and what, if any, roadblocks exist that are preventing them from returning
- 4 Identify ways SBCC could help encourage former students to finish their education and how to support them once they've returned

# Methodology



Frank N. Magid Associates was retained by Santa Barbara City College to conduct four focus groups with former SBCC students who left the college before completing a degree or certificate. Groups were one hour in length and composed of four to eight participants. A total of 25 former students participated in the research, inline with industry standards for qualitative research. *Note: Key findings were very consistent across all four groups.*

Participants were recruited via email blast from SBCC lists of former students to meet the following criteria:

- Men and women, aged 18-45
- Former SBCC students with original goal of degree or transfer, completed 9 or more units at SBCC
- Have not completed a degree elsewhere; not currently enrolled elsewhere



The groups were conducted on SBCC's campus on December 1, 2015.  
Moderator: Molly Ludwig, Vice President

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# School Must Fit With Returning Students' Lives

To encourage former students to return, SBCC needs targeted programs and support systems

- The majority of former SBCC students had a very positive experience at the college
  - They appreciated engaged teachers, a friendly atmosphere, and the beautiful location
- They chose to discontinue their education before completing a degree for a variety of reasons
  - “Life happened” – time and/or financial pressures, personal illness or tragedy
  - Personal challenges with focusing on and prioritizing school
- Most want to return to complete their degree, but significant barriers exist
  - Lack of available time overall, fear classes they need won't be available/accessible
  - A variety of financial challenges and the overall opportunity cost of returning to school
  - Anxiety about developing an action plan and not believing SBCC will have the adequate counseling services available to support them in this
- The single most encouraging thing SBCC could do to reengage former students would be to reach out with an offer to meet with a returning student counselor to develop a clear and actionable plan to complete their AA degree; additionally, the following are very appealing:
  - Ongoing and easy access to a dedicated counselor who knows their personal situation
  - Priority registration for needed classes at the times that will work with their schedules
  - Expanded options for the customization of majors



# KEY FINDINGS

# Motivations For Attending SBCC Were Varied

SBCC's location and reputation were strong drivers of interest

- Former students initially chose to attend college for a variety of reasons:
  - Interested in going to a 4-year university, but didn't have the grades to get in, didn't want to accumulate as much debt, and/or didn't know what they wanted to focus on yet
  - Going to college was what parents and friends "expected" them to do
- They specifically chose SBCC because:
  - Close to home (many are Santa Barbara natives), had friends also attending
  - Santa Barbara itself is a beautiful place to live
  - SBCC's strong reputation among community colleges
  - A specific program (culinary arts, early childhood development, etc.)
  - Had a significant other already in Santa Barbara (working or attending UCSB)
  - SBCC allowed them more flexibility to explore different types of classes and interests without a big price tag – they could afford to take some time to figure out what they wanted to focus on



# Initial Goals Were To Figure Out Life

SBCC seemed like a relatively safe and inexpensive way to explore their options

- Many former students enrolled at SBCC with the goal of simply figuring out what they wanted to do with their lives
  - For some, this was coupled with a desire to prove themselves to others

*“My goal was to show everyone that I could make my own choices.”*

- Several were purposefully interested in getting their AA degree
  - A few planned to eventually transfer to a 4-year university, though most had not firmly set their eyes on that target
- As they took different classes, came upon different opportunities, and tried to narrow their focus, many say they adjusted their goals accordingly

*“My goals changed as I went through.”*

- A handful of former students admit they didn't have a well-defined goal when they enrolled and agree this ultimately contributed to why they ended up leaving



# Student Experience Was Very Positive Overall

Former students speak very highly of their time at SBCC, but there were some drawbacks



- The first thing former students say about their experience at SBCC is how enthusiastic, engaged, and dedicated most of their teachers were
  - “Once I decided on my major, I was really supported by the whole department. It was a great community.”
- Most also agree that the atmosphere on campus is generally very friendly and welcoming
  - A few were annoyed by juvenile-acting students

- Former students did experience some negatives at SBCC, however
  - Ineffective counseling services – no sign-ups, limited hours, lack of personalization
  - Class enrollment process very frustrating and cumbersome
  - Not enough night classes to fit working students’ schedules
  - Inflexible class requirements, lack of ability to customize own major, felt stifling

*“If I have a full time job, I can’t wait for four hours to meet with a counselor.”*

*“There is so much stuff in way – classes you have to take that I don’t need, but I have to take to get to the ones I want, that will help me in my life.”*

# Reasons For Leaving Fall In Three Key Buckets

Life happened

## 1 Work, school life balance too much

At the core of this issue are time and money. Getting classes that fit their work schedule was hard. The cost of classes and books was high. Financial aid was insufficient. Many needed to support family members. Some had babies.

Some started businesses or got good jobs and felt they didn't need to finish school.

Working and making money took over as priority.

## 2 Lack of focus and/or assistance

The bottom line is that these students didn't know what they wanted to do with their lives and felt school wasn't helping them figure it out.

They had a hard time motivating themselves to go to class.

Many didn't know SBCC offered help for their problems or found it too hard to ask.

*"I was tired of fighting – I wasn't doing well in my classes, so working was better."*

## 3 Personal trial or tragedy

In this scenario, unforeseen circumstances negatively impacted students' ability to continue their education.

Their own sickness, a sickness or death in their family, or a need to care for their parents became a priority over going to school.

In several cases, these students fell through the cracks – they had to drop classes, lost financial aid, and felt they had no options.

# Additional Detail On Key Reasons For Leaving

Three specific issues are raised time and again among former students

- **Scheduling classes** became unwieldy
  - Many experienced a lot of trouble getting the classes they needed
  - It got to a point for many that they just gave up
- *“The fewer classes I needed to finish, the harder and harder it got to get into them and make them fit with my schedule. It started feeling like it was going to take forever to finish up.”*
- **Counseling offerings** came up short for most former students
  - Nearly all express frustration over “impossible” appointment scheduling/timing
  - Many say the counseling advice they received was ineffective because the short, rushed appointments did not give them enough time to formulate real plans and not having the same counselor each time meant no counselor really understood their unique situation
  - Former students who had been in the EOPS program or were student athletes tell a much different story about counseling – they valued their assignments to individual counselors who were almost always available and knew the students personally
- Students **want more flexibility** to customize their course of study
  - Students are interested in designing their own major and focusing on classes that they are truly passionate about

*“Gen Ed destroyed me ... the prereq classes were boring and hard and took my focus off of what I was really interested in learning. So I focused on partying instead.”*

# Most Have Intentions To Return At Some Point

Former students want to get their degree or certificate and most want to do it at SBCC



- Nearly all want to complete their AA
  - It would be a personal sense of accomplishment
  - They want to prove to themselves and others that they can do it

*“I want that piece of paper on the wall.”*

- Most think it will have little impact on their current employment or a future job
  - They say that most jobs are looking for a Bachelor’s degree, not an AA
- Most are not interested in going for a Bachelor’s degree at this point
  - It is too hard for most to see that happening

*“I’m past that point in my life.”*

- A few do have a Bachelor’s as a goal, and it seems like a very far path to get there, but they express a stronger motivation to get there

# However, Significant Barriers To Return Exist

Reasons for not yet returning to school are clear and consistent

- **Available time** – They need to be able to fit school into their work and family schedules and they know this will be hard to do
  - **Anxiety** about how long it will take, will they make the right class choices, etc.
  - **Concern** it will be too hard to get the classes they want, at the times they need them

*“I need to be in a place where I can juggle my family while working and going to school.”*

- **Financial challenges** – All are working full-time and going to school is both a hard cost and an opportunity cost
- **Focus** – Many express concern about being able to do what they need to do to succeed in school, pass the hard/boring classes, and identify what they really want to study

*“It will take me having confidence in myself that I can get through the tough stuff.”*

*“First I need to figure out what I’m going to do with my life.”*

- **Lack of assistance** – Many have the sense that they are on their own in this endeavor – they don’t see SBCC as having the necessary resources to support their return

*“I need to be able to make school a priority – I don’t know how to study and ‘do school’ – I need the courage to ask for help and have it be there.”*

# Profiles Of Prospective Returning Students

These composite personas represent the key types of potential returning students



## Almost There Alex

The “Almost There” former student is very close to completing all of his coursework.

- This former student is so close to graduating that it almost hurts ... he regrets not finishing, in spite of the circumstances at the time
- He has considered returning, but has found the proposition intimidating
- He is afraid he will experience a lot of difficulty getting the few classes he needs at the times he needs to fit his schedule, thereby further drawing out the process
- He would appreciate help getting those few classes scheduled



## Lack Of Focus Laura

The former student with a lack of focus still has a ways to go to complete her degree.

- This former student is intimidated by the idea of going back and facing the same hard/boring classes she left
- She still doesn't necessarily know what she wants to do with her life, but now that she's been in the “real world” for awhile, she is more motivated to figure it out – but she's going to need a lot of help
- She needs a serious counselor to review her transcript, give her solid advice, and follow-up regularly to make sure she's on track



## Waiting It Out Will

The former student who has already decided he will be returning to school, but has something to take care of first.

- This former student is more motivated and diligent. Returning to school is a part of his plan for the future and he is confident it will happen
- He needs for his wife to finish up her degree first, while he works, then it will be his turn
- He will need less convincing to return, and likely less help, but support once he returns will likely be appreciated.

# SBCC SUPPORT FOR RETURNING STUDENTS

# New Scheduling Options Fit With Work Lives

Potential returning students like the flexibility built into many of the new ideas

**Of the ideas for scheduling options presenting, potential returning students are most interested in and motivated by the following:**

1. 16-week classes that meet once a week in the evening
  - This is appealing because it can easily be fit into many work schedules

*“I could work during the day. Once a week would not be overbearing.”*

2. Hybrid classes that meet in-class and have an online component
  - For some, combining this with the idea of having the classes scheduled on a Friday or Saturday is appealing

*“It’s not as long in-class and you don’t have to be in person all the time.”*

*“Saturday classes would be great for those kids – someone can always be with the kids.”*

3. 8-week session, taking one or two classes at a time
  - Some like the idea of the truncated schedule, while others fear it could be too intense

*“I love it – you don’t have time to forget anything.”*

*“You would be fried with so much compressed – it would feel like you were going full-time.”*

# All Of The Proposed Support Services Appeal

The combination of these would help returning students feel more confident in their re-entry

1. **Access to an individual counselor** is the most appealing of the ideas
  - This could address the serious issues former students had with SBCC counseling and make them feel like someone was on their side, focused on their success

*“Assistance with the whole process – streamlined for the returning student.”*

*“I would hope I could restart with a clean slate.”*

2. **Financial aid** will be very important for most returning students
  - Many say that their full-time work incomes disqualify them from significant financial aid, but they will need it because cost of living in Santa Barbara is high and they will likely have to give up some working hours for school

3. **Career counseling and internship opportunities** are exciting because they could help returning students find their focus and make relevant class decisions

*“This could help you get your foot in the door.”*

4. **A support group for returning students** could help them feel they are not alone in this and give them an opportunity to share ideas and resources

5. **Access to affordable childcare** is appealing in concept, but not relevant to many of the focus group attendees, who don't have young children (this doesn't mean there isn't a population out there for whom this would be relevant)



# MESSAGING

# A Slight Variation On The New Tagline Works

The new tagline fits with student experiences and perceptions of SBCC

- Former students were presented with the following proposed tagline:

Providing the education you need for the life you want.

- While they like the overall idea of “the life you want,” many take issue with the feel of the statement “you need”
  - They say it feels like they are being told what they need to do, rather than it being their own decision, and prefer this version:

Education for the life you want.

*“It’s positive and says it’s your choice – you choose the life you want to live.”*

*“It fits with SBCC ... being here led me down my path.”*

- The former slogan, “The smart and affordable choice,” fails to inspire former students because of its focus on cost, rather than the quality of the experience most feel they had at SBCC
  - Additionally, it fails to ring true because living in Santa Barbara is not “affordable,” and goes hand-in-hand with attending SBCC



# IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

# Recommendations: Counseling

**Significantly Improve The Structure Of The Counseling Offerings:** The scheduling of counseling and quality of the counseling experience are failing to meet student needs and are a roadblock for many students considering returning to SBCC; consider the following combination of adjustments:

- **Former students agree that the quality of the counseling is poor because appointments feel rushed and they are not receiving a personalized experience** – To address this, assign returning students a specific counselor so they can have a more personalized and consistent counseling experience – they need to feel their counselor is their advocate, on their side, and actively engaged in their education path
- **Train these counselors on the specific needs of returning students, specifically:**
  - How to help them identify their goals and objectives
  - How to create a clear and comprehensive plan to help them achieve their goals in the most time-efficient and cost-efficient manner
  - How to utilize all of the resources available to them to improve their chances of success (financial aid, career counseling, internships, tutoring, support groups, etc.)
- **Allow students to schedule counseling appointments** at specific times so they don't waste what little free time they have available waiting around to meet with a counselor
- **Facilitate and encourage students to contact their counselors** via telephone and email to make communication more efficient and frequent
- **Expand the hours of availability** of counselors to fit with working students' schedules

# Recommendations: Support

**Facilitate Class Scheduling:** Many former students are hesitant to return because they don't think they will be able to get the classes they need, at the times they need them; consider:

- For returning students with just a few classes remaining to complete their degree, provide priority access to the specific classes they need to graduate
- Offer more evening and hybrid online/in-person classes to fit with work schedules

**Explore Major Creation Options:** Many former students who are not close to graduating are interested in a more customized education experience

- To the extent possible, work with potential returning students to give them the feeling that they are creating their own personal course of study, while still maintaining a clear path to graduation

**Investigate Ways To Reduce Text Book Costs:** Many former students, especially younger ones, feel the price of text books is exorbitant and cite this among other reasons they are hesitant to return to school

- Explore ways text book costs can be reduced (either through existing or new programs) and communicate these clearly, early, and often to prospective returning students

# Recommendations: Outreach

**Develop Targeted Outreach To Former Students:** If any or all of the above recommendations are implemented, develop emails and mail pieces that clearly communicate it all and identify it as an effort to encourage former students to return and complete what they started

- The tone of all communication should be positive, encouraging, supportive, and future-looking
  - SBCC cares about you as an individual, understands your specific needs as a returning student, and is prepared to work with you in a focused and direct way to set a clear path to help you achieve your goals
- For students very close to degree completion, consider including a phone call from a dedicated counselor who has reviewed their transcript and is prepared to give advice and lay out an action plan for degree completion
- For those not close to degree completion, consider incorporating a “clean slate” tone in all communication materials – they have anxiety about how their past performance at SBCC may impact their future efforts and need reassurance
- Keep in mind that many potential returning students are not necessarily interested in transferring/getting their Bachelor’s degree at this point in their lives
  - This should not be an emphasis of initial outreach to former students, though it may become more appealing to them once they return to school and get used to it
- Additionally, be aware that most returning students will also be working full or part-time while attending school – simply acknowledging this and expressing empathy about how challenging that can be may help alleviate some anxiety and communicate that SBCC gets it

# Recommendations: Messaging & Retention

**Messaging:** Former students find the tagline “Education for the life you want” most appealing of those discussed

- This message is the most positive and empowering, without being overbearing
- Nearly all do not like the tone of the “Education you need” statement – they don’t want to be told what they need to do, they want to decide for themselves
- Any messaging should focus on the positive elements of the student experience and how students will get the tools they need to achieve their goals by attending SBCC

**Retention Strategy Implications:** The experiences of former students provide valuable perspective on the SBCC student experience that can be applied to the development of retention strategies:

- Clearly and consistently educate students on the full suite of student support services and when and how to engage them
- Educate all teachers on the full suite of student support services and encourage them to proactively reach out to students they identify as potentially being in need of assistance
- Consider the possibility of assigning all students to specific counselors so they can have a more personalized and consistent counseling experience
- Develop a more effective way for students to schedule counseling appointments (preferably online) so they can make more efficient use of their time

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