GQ: What do successful students have in common?

What is your definition of a “successful” student?

The general consensus among the faculty was that successful students should be able to clearly engage themselves in school activities, think outside of the box, finish their degree, and find a job.

Furthermore, the faculty unanimously agreed that there is a divide between students who are engaged in their coursework and those who are not. The students who are engaged and participate in their education are generally more successful than those who are less engaged.

Overall, there are different expectations for undergraduate and graduate students. For example, when an undergraduate nursing student graduates he/she is expected to pass the licensing board exam. However, as a graduate student, he/she has to pass the certification examination to be a clinical specialist or a nurse practitioner.

What does SF State do to help students succeed? What doesn’t SF State do?

The group agreed that the financial burdens of attending the university make it particularly challenging for students. According to the participants, these financial hardships make it difficult for students to focus on their degrees. Some students are forced to work full-time jobs in addition to their education, just to make ends meet.

The participants also expressed their dismay in the growing threshold on enrollment at SF State. Due to the budget cuts, class size has been increasing significantly over the years. Consequently, the quality of education has declined because there is less time and attention given to individual students.

As one participant said, “When class sizes goes up, the quality of instruction diminishes.”

What factors are the most relevant when students do not do well in your classes (program and/or major)?

The general concern amongst the faculty participants was their students’ overall lack of proficiency in English and math. One participant expressed her concerns by using a nursing example, “[Some students] cannot write a [proper] sentence, and they are in the hospital documenting patient care.”

Another participant provided some insight into the students’ diminishing math skills: “Student’s basic math skills are not up to par when they come in. However, it’s not just the skills, it’s their attitudes. When they come in, they say, ‘I hate math, I can’t do it.’ The students come in with a really bad attitude.” As a result, many students are setting themselves up for failure.

Additionally, students tend to lack adequate study and examination skills. One participant stated: “The students don’t know how to budget their time or know active/passive understanding. They listen to me, but they can’t reproduce what I say.”

One participant theorized that some students’ lack of dedication could be attributed to their perceived lack of expectation. In this participant’s estimation: “It’s something that the university isn’t doing well - the culture of high expectations. Just because we’re not Stanford, doesn’t mean we don’t have high expectations.”
Lastly, the participants discussed the hardships experienced by international students. On this topic one participant stated: “Those poor students have to fill out so many applications every semester. It’s a real barrier, and I don’t have time to go learn it. The student always has to justify why she has to stay.”

Overall, it seems, there is plenty of pressure for both teachers and students.

**If you could change something the university does to deal with these problems (i.e. barriers to success), what would it be?**

The faculty agreed that students have a difficult time retaining information from one semester to the next. As one participant averred, “The students have a dump-truck mentality, as soon as the semester or test is over, they forget everything.”

Another area of frustration for the faculty is that some students fail to listen constructive feedback. During the discussion, one of the faculty up offered an example: “[A paper] is handed in and graded, and you spend diligent hours writing hours of comments, the paper gets picked up and they ignore the comments…in the end no one learns to write. The writing needs to improve, there has to be a feedback loop.”

**GQ: Are our remediation efforts successful?**

In the college of education, student teachers have performance assessments. It’s a one week class where they do all the planning. These classes are videotaped for the purpose of self-evaluation. This exercise helps prepare student teachers for the ever-changing role of an educator.

**GQ: Have student’s educational goals changed?**

**Do you think the goals of students today are different from the goals of students 10 years ago? 5 years ago?**

The group agreed that, for the most part, the students’ educational goals have been the same throughout the years. Each student usually expects a job after they graduate. Some students believe that at the end of their education there will be a job waiting for them. Unfortunately, that isn’t always the case and as a result the students often blame the university. Although the teachers want to do help, ultimately, there is only so much they can do.

**GQ: What could we do to ensure that more students are successful?**

**What challenges do students experience meeting their goals at SF State?**

One of the biggest issues for many students at SF State is lack of adequate financial resources. In some cases, students have to work demanding hours while going to school. Some students go to school full-time and work full-time. This balance between work and school generally has a negative impact on a student’s coursework.

The recession has also made it difficult for students after they graduate. Many graduates are unable to find a job. However, the recession is out of the university’s control.

One of the faculty suggested that advising be required for all students. This would ensure that students talk to counselors in order to better facilitate their educational path.

“We strive for success, want our students to succeed, and at the same time we do not see resources available to facilitate this path.”
GQ: Upon leaving SFSU, do students feel prepared enough and able to achieve their academic, career goals?

Do you think SF State prepares undergraduate students to pursue higher education?

The faculty concurred that a majority of their students have the knowledge and ability to pursue higher education. Many of the participants mentioned that they would not have a problem writing a letter of recommendation for most of their students.

One of the participants stated: “Students need some advising, that can be easily done as long as they express interest. They should always find a faculty member that will guide them and show them what they need to do, telling them not to limit themselves...”

GQ: What are the current learning styles and preferences of the students?

Students now use more electronic communication (Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc.) than ever before.

Students have short attention spans in general, and they use electronic communication to keep themselves entertained. Many cell phones have internet capabilities as well as texting, and these are causing distractions in the classroom. Some students believe that they can do multiple things at once, but in reality, paying attention to both things at once is difficult.

On the other hand, the internet is a good resource for graduate students because it allows for more thorough investigation on research projects. However, one participant suggested that undergraduate student should not rely on the internet exclusively. In her opinion, instant internet solutions can create laziness in a student. Furthermore, it makes the instructor’s job more difficult because they have to stay one step ahead of students who are looking for easy answers.

What are your experiences using classroom technologies in general?

A majority of the instructors said they like to use film to engage their students. However, often times the library doesn’t purchase the film in time or fails to process the instructor’s request. As a result, the instructor ends up buying the films out-of-pocket.

The instructors also agreed that online discussion forums are a positive resource because it allows students to conveniently interact with each other. This discussion makes for very good learning environment. It also allows more participation, especially for the quiet students.

A few of the participants claim to have had horrible experiences with technology at SF State. One participant said that, “the equipment breaks down all the time…it feels deteriorated.” Often times, a classroom is not properly set up for technology. One instructor expressed embarrassment because she teaches computer science, but is unable to get a wireless connection in her classroom.

Classroom setups are also difficult - the projection screen takes up more than half of the board. One teacher said that she likes to show her problems on a power point slide and then do the problem on the board, but because the screen is almost as big as the board, she has to constantly move the screen out of her way, which gets irritating.
Another participant who teaches in the basement has a difficult time accessing the internet. There is a LAN port, but it’s 50 feet away and the teacher has to use long cords to access it. This creates a tripping hazard for the students and the teacher. Further, the instructor is constantly worried that a student will trip over the cord and knock her laptop to the floor.

**GQ: Changing attitudes toward teaching, professional achievement, service?**

**How does your department define “professional achievement and growth”?**

A majority of the teachers have to publish 2 – 5 publications per year, get a grant, and supervise graduate students. Further, they are judged based upon student evaluations.

One participant expressed that one potential problem with student evaluations is that good teachers that are but tough graders often times “get graded down by students because they are not getting the grades that they want.”

**Do you think the RTP process in your department, college and university is consistent?**

The teachers agreed that the RTP process is consistent but yet mysterious because after a certain point in the process they aren’t sure what happens.

The instructors also feel pressured to do external research because it helps bring in money.

**Are you getting the support you need to meet the changes in the university’s RTP expectations?**

The instructors expressed some problems with RTP expectations, particularly due to budget constraints.

A nursing teacher, her department took too long to do RTP revisions, and they told her to work off of a different school’s. As a result, the teacher was getting frustrated because it felt like she was working off of nothing.

The instructors also claimed that they were promised things that they couldn’t get. For example, one teacher was promised a lab renovation which she did not receive.

**GQ: What are the economic trends that have shaped the university?**

**Given the limited resources available to us, how important are these factors to you and your teaching:**

The only participant who responded to this question said that labs at the school are in a pathetic state. She suggested that building a new lab would provide a better learning environment for graduate students.

**How important are these factors to your professional growth and/or creative activities?**

A junior faculty member expressed the importance partnerships with senior faculty. Many of the participants said that without senior faculty’s help they wouldn’t be where they were today. Senior faculty has definitely helped the junior faculty out a lot.

**Did you use the faculty club when it was open?**

The faculty club was opened for a short amount of time, but teachers felt that it was good to have a place to interact with other faculty members who aren’t in their department.
GQ: What is an especially memorable or exciting teaching experience you have had at SF State?

One teacher had a terrible student, who failed the class. In the summer, the student had an epiphany and came back to school with a whole different attitude. The student re-took the class ended up passing. The student also had friends in the class who complained that the class was useless and difficult. However, the student reassured his friends that the class was “extremely awesome.”

Another teacher had a student with an attitude problem, and after many heart-to-hearts, the teacher felt satisfied because the student began to change her attitude.

Another teacher had a master’s student who had her work published in UC Davis’s journal of library. The student has become very successful and the teacher is very proud.

Conclusion

From this focus group it is apparent that teachers try to help students as much as they can. However, there are often barriers to helping students. The faculty have their own things to worry about - such as getting tenured, grants, dealing with the budget crisis, broken equipment and etc.

Getting tenured, grants and helping students are very important to the faculty. All of these activities can create opportunities for teachers. However, there are many things that tend to get in the way - such as the budget crisis and broken equipment. Those things can negatively affect the quality of education. This focus group was very thorough. All of the teachers had helpful responses.