GQ: What do successful students have in common?

How would you define “successful” student?

Do you see yourself as a successful student? Why, Why not?

The first question our student was asked during her interview was, “How would you define a successful student?” The student said that a successful student invests in their own success by applying what they learn, and getting A’s. The student said that she applied herself and tried to get information, “I can use in life, and not just applied to a degree.” Further, she was doing things to enrich her overall college experience, “I took a year to study abroad.” Although the student provided numerous examples contributing to her education she did not feel that she was a successful student by definition, saying, “No, not quite”, and, “I would like to always have A’s, and that’s defined as a successful student.”

Personal factors Prompts – work/school balance – personal study skills and habits (e.g., time management, note taking)

When asked about her work/school balance and other factors that affect being a successful student, she said that she worked and didn’t “always have time to study because of work.” She admitted: “I’m only taking 12 units and this is my most challenging semester. Leisure doesn’t enter the picture”. The student considered leisure to be “taking a walk” to help her with “stress management” and studying.

– Being College ready in mathematics – Being College ready in written English?

The student was then asked whether or not she felt ready for college level English and math to which she replied, “For math I did not.” And for English she said she could “remember struggling in freshman English classes.” The student did take a remediation course in Math, but for English, a course she was not required to take a remedial course, she still felt as though she was not ready.

Think about the advisors on campus – Did you get an advising here?

The student was then asked if she received advising. She voiced that she was unhappy with her level of advising before switching majors saying, “There was no one working with me.” In her current department she felt like she found the right advising saying, “almost every instructor in the department serves as an advisor.” The student recalled her feelings after changing majors saying, “I got the support I needed.” And “I feel like people want to hear my story and help me get to where I’m trying to get.”

What are your study habits? – How did you develop them? Do you know where you would go on campus to get help with your study skills?

Are you happy with your study skills?

The student was asked about her study skills and if she knew where to go to get help on campus. When asked if she was happy with her study skills she said, “No, not really.” She knew of several resources on campus saying, “I live in Learning Assistant Center (LAC), I go there once a week…and Campus Academic Research Program (CARP).” She described different study skills she has implemented to increase her study time including, listening to classical and gospel music, and using a desk in her closet as a study space.

Do you participate in any extracurricular activities? (e.g., clubs, sports)

Extracurricular activities that the student noted involvement in were, Bible studies, feeding the homeless and church.
GQ: What could we do to ensure that more students are successful?

Can you identify any barriers to success that you faced at SF State?

When asked about barriers to success she discussed how it was discouraging for her that she was not able to get certain classes due to an impacted major.

Did available financial aid opportunities provide you with enough support? – If not, what would have been beneficial?

When asked if financial aid opportunities provided her with support, the student said that she had received financial aid and it was very helpful, and enabled her to work fewer hours. In addition she has received scholarships which provided support and motivation, “I think that’s really good and in some ways it has driven me…to keep my grades up.” When asked what ways the university could offer financial support to other students she suggested that the university find more scholarships to bring into the university and to make them more accessible to students that have GPA’s below a 3.0.

Does the university provide support in the classroom?

When asked if the university provided support in the classroom, the student happily described her experiences within her department saying, “We do group and peer reviews,” “we have open forums”, and that her classrooms are “community based.”

Does the university aid students in their goal towards their graduation? If not, what would help?

Topics – clarity of degree requirements – course registration process?

The theme of university support was continued with the question, “What can the university do to ensure more students are successful?” Once prompted, the student agreed that clarity of degree requirements would be helpful, “It would have been so great to have some clarity.” She went on to say, “It should be explained in a way that makes sense.” Although she attended orientation she felt that receiving “information that I might not have thought of” rather than just “answers to my question” would be more helpful. The student agreed that online registration was convenient saying, “I think that’s great, it’s easy.” However, the student did find it frustrating in terms of split registration and creating a cohesive schedule, “I hate that you have to register for 6 units here, 6 units there.”

How long did you expect it would take for you to graduate?

Do you think you are going to meet your expectations? Why or why not?

When asked how long she thought it would take to graduate she responded quickly with “4 years.” She was then probed further regarding barriers to attaining her 4 year expectation. She noted that studying abroad delayed her a bit, “I felt like my department should have worked with me more [because] nothing at all counted.” Other obstacles, according to the student, were the inability to take classes concurrently and summer school “which they are not offering financial aid for.”

GQ: Are our remediation efforts successful?

Do you think these courses were effective in preparing you for your required courses?

Do you feel more prepared or ahead after taking these courses?

Were these courses you were required to take too easy or redundant (e.g., felt like a repeat of high school)? If so, what do you think would have been more beneficial?

When asked whether her remedial math course prepared her for further math courses the student said “No” and that she “never utilized that information again.” When probed further the student felt that “not studying for the SATs” or “anxiety” may have been the reason she scored below college level on her exams.
GQ: What are students’ expectations/ hopes coming into the institution and are they being met?

What expectations did you have about SF State? Are they being met?

Expectations of San Francisco State from the campus to the faculty were then discussed. She expected “more school morale and school spirit.” She thought “it would be a good school” and she “didn’t think it would be as diverse as it is.” She was impressed with the physical appearance, “The campus is nice and clean, manicured” but “outside, not inside.” She discussed more of her current impressions rather than past expectations, but was also glad that some classrooms are being updated as well as the library.

What type of extracurricular activities do you think should be available?

When asked about extracurricular activities available, she seemed aware of available organizations but wasn’t interested in the club activities themselves, saying that she hasn’t seen anything that has “sparked her creativity.” She stressed her desire to see more community involvement in student organizations rather than social gatherings, “One of the greatest things you can do is involve community into whatever is going on, that’s how you build a community”

What about faculty, did you have any expectations about faculty at SF State?

When asked about her expectations of faculty and classrooms she responded with a rhetorical question, “There’s an old African proverb, ‘it takes a village to raise a child, so what does it take to have a student succeed?’” She went on to say that she expected “smaller classes,” teachers that help students “continue to think,” rather than simply regurgitate information. She also had hoped for “more engaging” classes. When asked about course counseling she said, “At SF State they leave a lot up to you and you can do well, you can succeed.”

What about technology, what did you expect or hope would be available or used at SF State?

When asked if she had any expectations of technology at SF State the student didn’t recall any.

GQ: Upon leaving SFSU, how prepared do students feel they are to be able to achieve their academic, career and/or life goals?

When you leave SF State will you feel prepared to pursue a post-graduation education (e.g., credential, MA, MS, MBA, PhD, professional school)?

What are the sources of that preparation here at SF State?

The moderator asked if the student felt ready for any post education after SF State. The student was hesitant and said, “I don’t really know yet, I have to research what’s required of me.” Probing further the moderator asked what would help her feel more prepared. She recalled a motivating experience with a professor during which she was able to discuss her future, “By discussing it with him and him telling me how he got to that point and encouraging me with my grades, how passionate he can see I am about my program, he instilled a little more in me.”

GQ: What are the technological, economic, environmental, political changes that have shaped the University?

Consider a typical day when you are at SF State. How do you spend your time on campus, outside of the classroom?

The student was then asked how she spends her time on campus outside of the classroom. She said she tried “to be outside as much” as she could, go to “tutoring at LAC,” and find nice places to study because “when I’m in nice places it fosters it and becomes a privilege.” She stressed the need for more food vendors other than in the student center, for students “on-the-go,” as well as more indoor study rooms.
GQ: Have students’ educational goals changed?

What resources have you used to further/achieve your educational goals?

When asked what resources she used to further achieve her educational goals she listed the tutoring center LAC, CARP and EOP, and alternating office hours with her professors to seek advising.

– Internships – mentorships?

The student said that she was not aware of any internships or mentorships available outside of school, but she was aware of internships inside her department. Probing further, the moderator asked of peer mentorships, which she said she would be interested in. The moderator also asked if she considered attending Health Education Student Alliance (HESA), but the student said she didn’t feel comfortable talking with the HESA students, saying that they felt “unattached.”

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

Many people now use more electronic communication (Facebook, Twitter, texting, etc.) than ever before. How do you think this affects how you study and learn?

The student was then asked how electronic communication affects the way she studies and learns. The benefits of electronic communication described were, the ability to “listen to some of the audios,” and to see “visuals” to supplement material. She felt that Internet can be a distraction and she tries “to take away these things that I feel like are becoming a distraction.” For many classes, however, students need to use the Internet to complete assignments. The student mentioned that she appreciates when teachers allow her to electronically turn in assignments.

Have you ever taken an on-line course? If so, why and if not, why not?

Transitioning from electronic communication to online courses the student was asked if she had taken any online courses, and if so, what her impressions of those courses were. The student said that after returning from studying abroad she took whatever classes she could to qualify for financial aid because she couldn’t come to school every day. As a result she took some online courses. When asked how the courses worked for her the student said that while she found them “pretty interesting,” she “didn’t really learn from it at all,” and “didn’t do the readings thoroughly” as she would have if she were attending a class. She further commented on her level of engagement saying she utilized the forum because she “wanted to get something from it, which [she] normally would get from engaging with students in class.”

Have any technologies in the classroom enhanced your learning experience?

When asked if technology enhanced her classroom learning experience she restated that visual media is “very good” for her learning style.

GQ: To what degree is the University prepared to support all students?

Is the University prepared to support all students?

When asked if the university is prepared to support all students she replied, “No, and the reasons why are because class sizes, inadequate funds, and teachers are not as available.” She went on to say that the school is not “implementing programs that can handle the students.”

Prompt Question Are there certain populations that we fail to support?

When asked if the university fails to support any certain populations she didn’t want to generalize but said that she felt supported, “As far as being female I haven’t experienced anything that I’ve felt was hindering me or making me feel like I couldn’t achieve what I wanted to through the university.” She said, “Being African American - not really.” When prompted to discuss financial and counseling support the student
said she figured things out on her own, and felt that you have to take out loans because the amount of free aid is not enough by itself.

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

**Has the budget cuts affected your experience at SF State? – Plans for your future? – Quality of education?**

The final questions asked were regarding the budget cuts. The student was first asked if the budget cuts have affected her experience at SF State. The student noted that it currently effected the “instructor morale,” “morale of the school,” “instruction of teachers,” and that there is “less leniency” with regards to “W’s and credit/no credit” and “number of chances for remedial classes.” This she said created a “stressor and a fear factor” for students. As far as budget cuts effecting her future plans she said, “If I don’t get into this class, this semester, it will delay me another semester” said the student. When asked about the quality of her education, she said that “definitely, you are trading my quality”.

**Has anything positive come from the budget cuts?**

When asked if she could identify anything positive that has come from the budget cuts she said “No.”

**Additional Analysis**

Many of the student’s responses were very emotionally charged, and while answering most questions thoroughly, she had to be probed several times before offering responses. The student seemed uncomfortable with ambiguous questions where she was required to answer with her own definition. It seemed as though the student felt there was a right and wrong answer – this was especially apparent when asked if she considered herself a “successful student.” The student had a tendency to go off topic, so the moderator tried to summarize her responses and bring her back to the original question, without leading or biasing her responses. The student had trouble differentiating between current experiences at SF State compared to previous expectations, a trend seen in the group 1 - successful student group as well. The student seemed deeply involved in her community through church and very passionate about her Health Education major and her “3.0 GPA.”