

# ATD Focus Group Summary

## Academic Advising

Calhoun Community College is participating in the initiative Achieving the Dream. As a part of these efforts, small focus groups were conducted for the purpose of identifying any major concerns from students about Academic Advising.

Two focus groups were conducted on the Decatur and Huntsville Campus. Both focus groups consisted of the following students: 4 African American females, 2 white males, 3 white females, a Hispanic female and one American Indian Male. This group was a mixture of first time and current students, pell and non pell recipients, students who had taken developmental courses and students who were college level ready at the time of signing up for classes. Most of the participants were in the age ranges of 30-45.

One major finding with the students who participated with the advising center focus group was that most of the students only visited the center less than 5 times during their tenure at Calhoun.

Several questions were asked and the students responded accordingly. The students reported that their experiences with the advising center were an overall positive one as evidenced by students stating that the advisors were 'nice and friendly.' A few of the participants did state that they met with several different advisors and felt as if they were not given a set of classes to take and when to take them. As a result of this, the student felt as if they took classes they did not need. Many of the students in this focus group stated that advisors should be assigned to specific majors and be knowledgeable about those areas. The interesting theme overall for both focus groups was that a majority of them would prefer an assigned advisor. They stated that they feel going to the same advisor allows the professional to know their situation and because of that they feel the advisor would be more invested in their success.

When asked what expectations they had of advisors a few students stated that they would like to have someone who cares about them like a "mom" which was stated by an African American Female and American Indian male. One male participant reported that meeting with different advisors does not allow them to know him and cannot build rapport, therefore he feels as if the advisor does not have an invested interest in his success. Other participants reported that they expected their advisor to tell them which classes to take and when.

When asked how they selected their classes and when to take them several of the participants reported that they looked the catalog. One participant reported that they did their own research. Another participant stated that they went in blind when it came to scheduling their classes.

The students were asked if they believe Advisors should help with anything else besides academic planning. One participant stated that they don't need an advisor to

## ATD Focus Group Summary

help them with career planning because they already know what they want to do as a career. They need more academic planning which means what classes they need and when.

There were two clear differences in the focus groups between Decatur and Huntsville. Most of the students in the Decatur Campus focus group were students pursuing an Associates of Applied Science degree. The students on the Huntsville Campus were all pursuing their Bachelors level degrees or higher.

The Huntsville Campus focus group had a consistent theme in their feedback which was advisors need to be resourceful and know about activities, job fairs and anything that could help assist the student with getting connected to their career field as evidenced by the students stating that they would like for advisors to “recommend internships, provide networking opportunities and anything that could benefit the student.” They stated that they wanted the advisor to be invested in them. The Huntsville Campus students reported that they really utilized advisors as resources as evidenced by them stating that when they came to the advising center it was for help with resources or teacher issues. The students in the Huntsville Campus focus group stated that advisors should be well rounded and know about different career fields. They believe it should not be that hard for advisors to know career information and should consistently participate in things that can help them develop in their knowledge. For example, one of the students recommended that the advisors attend the Criminal Justice career fair to learn about the different careers in that area.

The students were asked what else could an advisor do to help them besides academic planning and a few of the transfer students recommended that advisors contact their students more often. They stated that an email from their advisor would make them feel like Calhoun cares about them as students.

They were asked what questions do they believe students should ask the advisor and the transfer students mentioned that students should ask about the fees they will accrue.

One consistent theme across both focus groups was that all students believe all first time freshmen should have to take Orientation to College. Most of the students reported that Orientation to College should be taken when a student first begins college.

# ATD Focus Group Summary

## **Developmental Education**

Two focus groups were conducted in Decatur and Huntsville for the purpose of assessing students concerns pertaining to Developmental Education.

The focus groups consisted of 3 African American males, 4 African American females, 2 white females. The groups were a mixture of students who were first year students to students who had already completed an Associate's degree.

Students were asked to share their experiences in the subjects of math and English in high school. More students reported that they had better experiences with English versus math and more students reported to have had taken developmental math.

The students reported that their bad experiences with developmental classes had more to do with the teachers technique of teaching as evidenced by the students stating that "Their teacher talked to much about her personal life and not enough teaching." Another student reported that their teacher "could not explain the math the way they could understand it." Two students referred to their teacher as being "sweet" but learned more from the software used for the class. The students expressed that their good experiences had to do with the teacher making the students feel comfortable and instructors being clear in their expectations.

When asked to explain some of the challenges with developmental education and what should be improved, the consistent them among the students was that Calhoun should "observe the instructors before allowing them to teacher and should hire teachers who have a passion or love for teaching. We should find competent teachers who can engage the students." One student stated that teachers should not use PowerPoint slides and just read from the textbook. Another student stated that classes should be hands on and not so much lecture.

A few students reported that they did enjoy the Math Bridge program and Calhoun's Mathlab.

# ATD Focus Group Summary

## Teaching and Learning

Two focus groups were conducted for the purpose of assessing student concerns in the area of teaching and learning.

Students were asked to describe a good teacher. The consistent theme among the students responses were the following: Students reported that they want their teachers to have clear expectations as evidenced by multiple students stating that “The teacher needs to make sure what is covered in class is on the test.” Another student reported that “Tests should be clear and the student should know what to expect. Student’s don’t mean easy but the standards should be clear.” Other students reported that a good instructor is one who “engages” the class as evidenced by the teacher using real world applications and bring the subject to life. Many students reported that a good instructor possess the following qualities: They care about and respect the students opinions, they are “down to earth and not know-it-all”, they take time for students outside of class, is flexible and approachable.

Students were asked how fast they expect their instructor to answer when they send an email. The majority of students reported that they expect their teachers to email them during their office hours within five minutes as evidenced by a student stating “If I email you at 6:30, I want an answer by 6:35.” Other students reported that 24 hours during the week, 2-3 hours during business hours, and 48 hours over the weekends. A student suggested that instructors have urgent email accounts.

Students were asked how fast they expect their grades to be returned and the majority of the students reported that grades should be returned in at least a week. One student stated that, “Instructors should be clear at the start of the semester about the policy on grading and how fast graded assignments will be received.” Other students stated that if the test is online and multiple choice the grade should be given right away.

Students were asked to think about the best and worst class at Calhoun and share why. The consistent theme here mimics the traits asked about a good teacher. Students stated that their best classes were when the teacher was clear in their expectations, engaged the class, made the stories real and personal by giving good examples and explanations, made students feel comfortable and cared about students being present in class. When describing a bad class the main point of students was that the class was ‘bad’ when instructors were not knowledgeable of the subject matter and not excited about teaching. Other students reported that they deemed their class ‘bad’ when the “instructor was not available, moved too fast, acted annoyed when students asked questions and provided straight lecture as their method of teaching. Several students stated that they would have preferred to have an option on their books as evidenced by them stating “they would like flexibility on what format book the class uses. “

## ATD Focus Group Summary

Students were asked to share what other things, other than their teacher affect their success. The majority of students stated that “disruptive students or know-it all’s” affect their success in class.

Lastly, students were asked to give advice for instructors to help future students. Students stated that teachers need to be clear in their expectations, flexible in working with students but be fair.

When asked to discuss anything one did not share in the group, a few students mentioned teachers’ texting students about things pertaining to the class as a whole and not necessarily using email.