

Focus Group Results

Nine students participated in a focus group conducted by Donald R. Collins, Ph.D. on February 28, 2007. The focus group was conducted to facilitate an in-depth discussion that explored the experiences, ideas, and perceptions of students regarding their freshmen experiences during the 2006-2007 at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU). The focus group data was analyzed for emergent themes.

Emergent Themes

Freshmen at PVAMU engage within a larger complex university system. The freshmen class resides within the University College. As students matriculate through The University College, they experience the “Freshman Experience,” which consists of academic and social activities. Significant are the attitudes and perceptions students have about their ability to learn and be successful.

Students reported that they like many of their teachers and felt that they experience academic success at PVAMU. Additionally, students reported positive experiences with staff members. Students specifically named faculty and staff members who encouraged them to be successful academically. They also named faculty and staff members who provided emotional support when they needed it. Students insisted that respecting their college instructors was paramount.

Students reported active social lives that included social gatherings, friendships parties, and other events.

Academically, students revealed that they recognized that their freshman experience posed unique challenges for them. Specifically, students reported a more demanding course load in college than they experienced in high school. While students articulated time-management as a means to meeting the demands of college, they were unable to express specific strategies they employ.

Relationships with faculty presented unique challenges for freshmen. Freshmen stated they believed their teachers in high school “helped” them more than their college instructors. Specifically, students stated they experienced a more personal relationship with high school teachers that they do not experience with their college instructors (with some exceptions). Examples that some of the students provided was the ability to interact with teachers every day compared to interacting with college faculty only two to three times a week. On occasion, students complained that they had limited access to faculty because of office hours or because faculty were not available when they went to their offices. Students also commented that when they met with instructors, instruction was usually presented in the same manner in which it was presented during class. When students were asked about the questions they asked to clarify instruction, students had great difficulty explaining how they formed questions to gain clarification.

Failure was significant for some of the participants. Students experiencing one or two class failures revealed a desire to not return to the University. Students reported returning to the University because of a contact made by an advisor, teacher or staff member. Students revealed that the class (s) they failed was not a surprise to them. However, during the respective semester, they felt they got further and further behind without the ability to navigate improvement. After returning following their course failure (s), students expressed difficult traversing their Spring semester. Specifically,

students felt “off-balance” with an unclear direction. While students reported feeling somewhat alone, they found an inner strength that helped them persist.