

New Student Focus Group Summary Winter 2021

Purpose of the New Student Focus Group Purpose

The New Student Workgroup wanted to learn about new students' experiences from the initial application, navigating college processes during COVID-19, registering for classes, and learning what helped students and what would help them succeed in college. Seven Focus Groups were held in January and February with 19 participants.

Admissions and Funding Application Experience

Admissions Application

When asked to describe their experience from application to registering for classes in one word, students used words like smooth, exciting, frustration, confusion, new, professional. Students found the admissions application straightforward and easy. A high proportion of focus group students were running students who traditionally completed their application with a high school counselor. For those students who found it confusing, they found that reaching out to admissions or counselors via a call or Zoom was helpful in completing their application.

Applying for Funding

Applying for funding to pay for college was easy for most. Running Start students only required a verification form from their high school. There was one student who did not apply because they were unsure of whether they would qualify for funding.

Preparation to Get Started

In completing the application process, students encountered some confusing aspects. Students felt that it was difficult to find the right person or reach people to help them with their application. However, when they found the right person, their help was very beneficial. Emailing people (counselors and staff) was frustrating because they would either not respond in time or there was an automated response.

Orientation and Preparation for Coursework

Orientation

The students' experience with orientation was good and informative. Students felt that the orientation videos provided them with skills on how to navigate various aspects of the website, Canvas, and other tools to help them navigate college. Students especially felt a connection when they heard from current students talking about their experiences. "It brought "comfort" to know how others' experiences went." There were some students who felt that the videos were unnecessary and that they could have skipped through it without paying attention.

Preparation for Coursework

In addition to being asked about their experience with orientation, students were asked to reflect on their previous quarter and evaluate how orientation may have helped them prepare for the quarter. Most indicated that orientation helped them prepare for the quarter by identifying resources, programs, navigating the website and kiosk. Some students were confused on how and where to pay for courses and how to best prepare for an online learning environment.

New Student Registration and Steps to Prepare for Classes

Students seemed confused in distinguishing New Student Registration from Orientation. After explaining the difference, students recalled that they had a mostly positive experience with the process of registering for classes. Many students mentioned that the breakout sessions were especially helpful. They liked having direct communication with advisors and staff as they prepared.

Students faced technological issues in the online New Student Registration. Students' phones and/or computers were not connecting to Zoom, they did not have access to proper Wi-Fi, or their technology was outdated. To remedy that, some students went as far as to purchase new phones or laptops with some checking out library laptops. Purchasing books was challenging. They shopped for the best deals online. Others could not purchase books because they had to wait for financial aid money.

Resources for Initial Class Preparation

Students found that most resources they needed to prepare for initial classes were offered by the college. Although some students had difficulty in contacting advisors/counselors and specific departments, they assumed it was due to pandemic environment. Once students reached someone they received helpful information.

Students did mention difficulty when it came to using Canvas and the Financial Aid portal. The primary concern with Canvas was that it was a new program many students had never used and it wasn't similar to other programs they used. Many students felt that Canvas video and other videos, helped overcome that. Students said the financial aid portal was not user-friendly and outdated.

Academic Experience

Challenges and What Helped

As new college students, many struggled with time management in an online environment. Online classes offered them the ability to be self-paced but the personal accountability piece was lost by not being in person. Conversely, others felt that they could still learn as if they were on campus and that being online saved them time in other tasks that involved attending school in person (commuting, childcare, etc.). The Canvas calendar was a resource that helped them organize their time based on coursework. Students struggled keeping track of assignments when instructors did not include all assignments and due dates in Canvas.

Positive experiences included communicating with their teachers, through Canvas, which some prefer over traditional email. By having more work to do for classes some students learned better time management skills and worked harder to get assignments done.

Academic Support

When it came to specific resources that students used to assist in their academics, students identified the STEM Center, Writing Center, Canvas, and the Library. Students felt that even with there not being in-person sessions, they were still able to schedule meeting times with tutors to help with their homework. Some students were not aware the STEM Center was open and ready to help although now they plan to use it in the future. The library was especially helpful to those students who needed to checkout a laptop or books. Zoom meetings were appreciated by students since they could get help without being on campus.

Recommendations to Prepare New Students

Faculty and Staff

Provide more ways to directly connect, via Zoom or extended calling hours, to accommodate the changes the pandemic has brought. For faculty, it included having more Zoom hours to meet with faculty on a more personal level, having faculty layout the entire course so students could plan ahead, or extending study hours beyond Monday through Friday. The main recommendation for staff was being more available and present when students had questions or issues.

Additional Resources to be Successful

Students also felt as if the process from being accepted to finally registering for classes was lengthy. One student even said they were considering attending another institution as a result. Students mentioned that outside of regular hours (9 am – 5 pm) it was difficult to get help on class, technologies, registration, and other things. They hoped the college could offer some form of limited service that would help with those last-minute issues.

There were many more suggestions, to find a complete list visit the portal [insert link].

Students' One Suggestion for the Colleg

Students focused on asking instructors to be more understanding of students' difficulty with learning Canvas and the new environment of learning online. For classes completely online they wished that they a weekly Zoom component. Self-paced courses made them feel isolated and they were more likely to procrastinate. Non-traditional students who have been out of for a long time need additional help. Other than those suggestions, most students felt their experience in preparing to attend Big Bend went well given the conditions. Some went as far as to say that instruction exceeded their expectations and felt that the quality of instruction was on par with bigger institutions.

New Students Feedback Summary	
What Helped	Recommendations to Help
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Admissions staff & counselors assisted students completing applications➤ Staff were helpful when students found the right person➤ Orientation videos provided students resources and a way to navigate going to college➤ New Student Registration breakout sessions were beneficial➤ Academic support - STEM Center, Writing Center, Canvas and Library➤ Virtual tutoring➤ Communicating with instructors via Canvas and Zoom➤ Up to date Canvas Classes with assignments was especially helpful to students (time management)➤ Some students indicated that instruction exceeded their expectations and was on par with bigger institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Layout steps in the Admissions process with due dates➤ Shorten turnaround between when students ask questions and need/receive the answer (sometimes too late)➤ Make it easier to contact advisors/counselors➤ Provide information on how to use BCC laptops to complete the admissions, orientation, and registration (some students did not have the needed technology)➤ Update Canvas assignments and deadlines to help with time management for classes➤ Provide more Zoom hours (instructors)➤ Be more available when students have questions or issues (staff)➤ Provide class and technology help outside of regular hours➤ Understand students' difficulty learning online➤ Find a way to connect with students in self-paced courses, these courses made students feel isolated