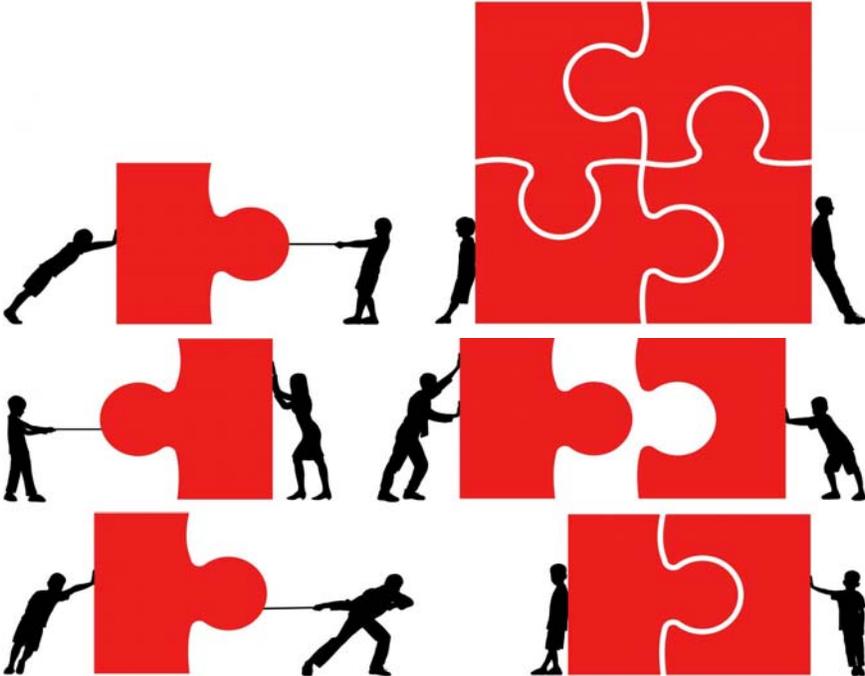Credit Student Success Framework (CSSF)

Focus Group Final Report – Part I Macro

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Purpose of this study

To understand student perspective and experience of academic (i.e., academic path, measuring progress, learning support) and non-academic support services (i.e., support communities, college feasibility, career services) at LaGuardia Community College. More specifically, what and how students perceive, feel and think about their experience at the college through multiple lenses. The final report consists of two parts: Part I synthesizes student's perception of their college life at the macro level; and Part II presents student experience at the micro level.

Goal of this macro study

Our goal with the focus groups was to find and present how the student experiences LaGuardia, focused on the six areas of the Credit Student Success Framework: 1) Academic path; 2) Support communities; 3) Measuring progress; 4) College feasibility; 5) Career services; and 6) Learning support.

To make sense of the experience, we have presumed a model of student decision making, where students face a series of decisions that help them maneuver through various obstacles that might prevent them from completing a degree, while seeking leverage to improve their chances of success. Students face each decision with a level of awareness of the decision and some knowledge of outcomes associated with choices. LaGuardia policies frame the limits of these options. While facing the decision, students have feelings or affect about each of these outcomes and the decision itself. Often these feelings are key components of positive and negative feedback loops that change how students approach future decisions.

Information represents a sort of sea in which a student floats as he or she moves through this multi-dimensioned decision space. Knowledge has been said to be social and the accumulation of knowledge is a social process, greatly influenced by the trust one shares with those who purport to have knowledge. Information provides awareness that choice exists and describes outcomes. Choice leads to behaviors and may trigger positive feedback loops that fosters effective behavior in the future or negative feedback loops that decrease activity in an area in the future.

As an example, take the decision to apply for outside scholarships. Although the information exists, we must assess whether the student was aware. We must understand whether the student understood what the outcomes were of deciding to apply (taking the time) against deciding not to apply (saving the time). We must also understand how the student felt about the choices. Did the student feel that they were not worthy of a scholarship and should not apply? Did this set up a negative feedback loop of affect that leads to further withdrawal from the process of seeking additional financial support?

Framework

We have therefore created a seven-part framework to analyze a series of decisions that students discussed within the focus groups:

1) Information
2) Information blocks
3) Decisions
4) Policy (decision blocks)
5) Behaviors (decision outcomes)
6) Emotional state
7) Feedback loops

To employ this framework, we developed the following coding structure in Nvivo. The tree nodes cover the above seven parts with further classifications. More specifically, Information, Information blocks, and policy (decision blocks) are from the node Information Input; Decisions and Behaviors (decision outcomes) are from the node Action; Emotional State is from the node Feelings, and Feedback loops is from the node Future Decision.
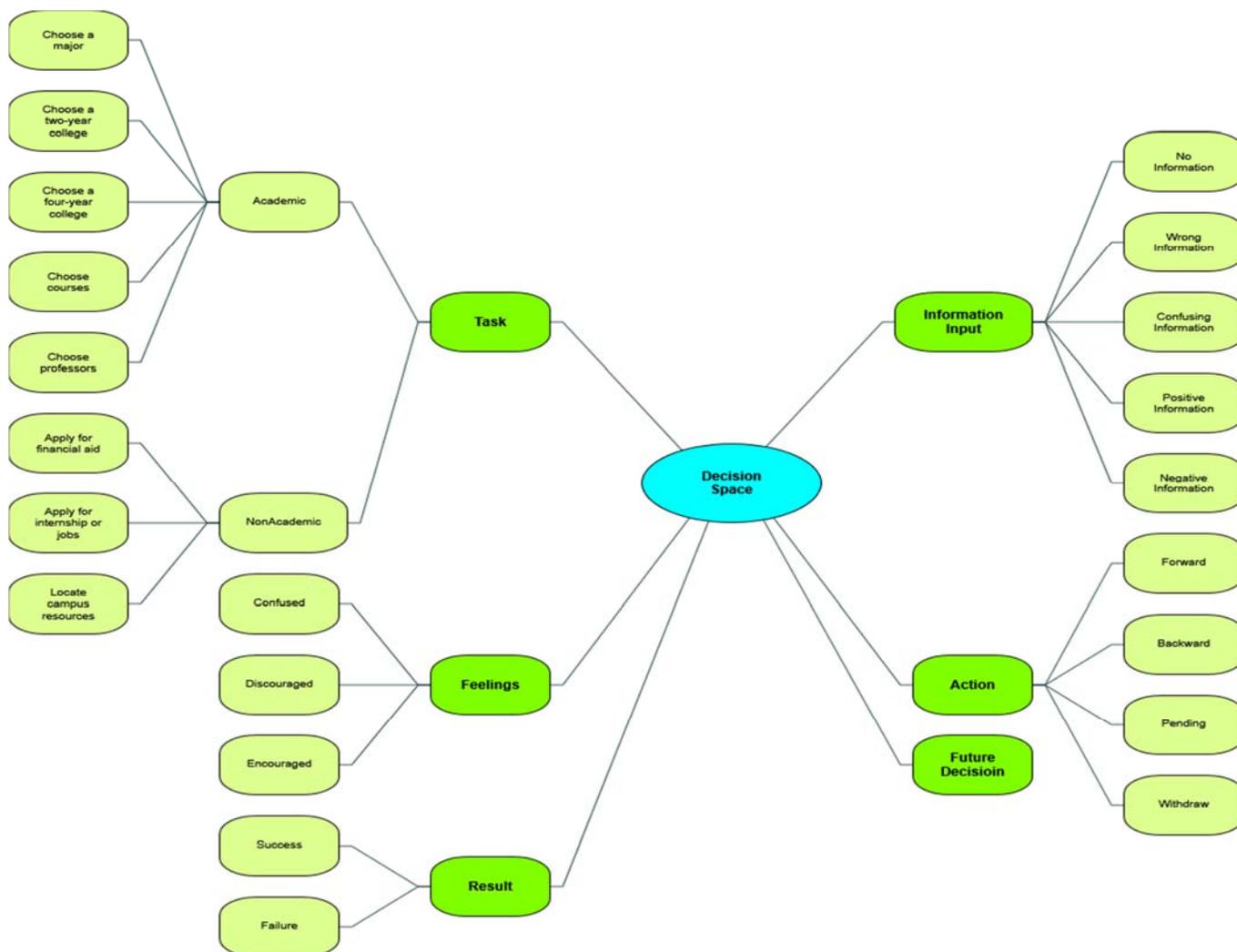
Figure 1 NVivo Coding Structure for Decision Space

Decision Space by Domain

For each group we provide below a grid with a summary of the student experience within each of the seven decision elements. The grid is followed with excerpts from the focus group transcripts, which support our summary of the student experience for that element. In some cases we did not find any evidence to use for one or more of the seven decision elements, especially future choices (feedback loops) and LaGuardia policies that had an impact.

True "findings" are difficult to pull from this evidence. The central question of the project seems to be: How can LaGuardia increase and maintain a student's momentum toward success? Nevertheless, this stage of the project is focused on understanding the student experience. Thus, it may be premature for us to "find" that "LaGuardia improves momentum by doing X." Our findings are simply this is how the student experiences the information, policies, choices and outcomes of going to LaGuardia.

Academic path

Three decisions are highlighted here. Two of them involve choosing classes and the third involves preparing to transfer. Information seems to be an issue with the students used as examples here.

Decision Space	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Information	Advisor told me	Degree Audit	Transfer Fair
Information blocks	Advisor didn't recommend	No prerequisites listed	Didn't know about the process
Decisions	Sat in the physics class	Checked with the department	Visited the transfer office
Policy (decision blocks)	N/A	Had to take the prerequisites first	Had to submit the Intent to Graduate before the deadline
Behaviors (decision outcomes)	Dropped the class	Delayed a year	Sent out the belated transfer package
Emotional State	Lucky to have a good advisor	Annoyed	Mad because I was misinformed or not informed at all.
Feedback Loop	Listen to the advisor all the time	N/A	N/A
Sources	Group1Round1	Group4Round2	Group5Round2

[Example 1]   *She saw the physics class and she said, "You're not majoring in any type of science?" I told her no and she said, "Get out of the physics class." But I like physics and in high school I was great at physics, but she said not at this level. She told me that she would keep an astronomy class open for me, because that was my second choice, and she told me to go to a physics class and see what it was like. So I went to the course and within five minutes I literally just walked out. The professor just started writing crazy equations on the board. I didn't know what was what so I ran away. I went to the adviser and said, "Get me out. Please. Get me out." Yes, and she was very, very helpful. She knows everything about everything. Do what the professor wants you to do.*

[Example 2]   *I still don't understand why they don't show the prerequisites. It shows all the courses you should be taking for your major courses, but it doesn't show the prerequisites until you get to that course. Especially the prerequisites that you need for classes, because it never shows [inaudible]. It's like you get to the end of a certain time in school and you think you're almost done with all these class and then you go to your adviser and they're like, "You have to take these prerequisites in order to graduate." You're like, "Didn't I just finish everything I need for my degree work?" I didn't know about these other courses I had to take. It holds you back.*

[Example 3]   *I went to the transfer office and spoke to Jose. I sat down with him, but I wasn't aware that the transfer cutoff was September 21st. I went September 23rd and I missed the deadline by two days. Jose said to just put in the transfer package for Hunter and Lehman for spring to see if they will still accept it even though it is a couple of days late, so I'm praying for that… I got helped out pretty good but I was just mad that I didn't know about the September 21st cutoff date. I'm real OCD when it comes to timeframes. Then I didn't even know about the intent to graduate thing. Nobody was telling me any of this. So I found out last minute about doing the intent to graduate, this is my last semester, you know. So I felt like I was misinformed or not informed at all.*

Support communities

Clubs, ASAP and information fairs come up in these student expressions. The decisions center on finding ways to become connected to LaGuardia, especially getting help with classes and taking the right classes.

Decision Space	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3	Example 4
Information	Friends told me	N/A	Professor introduced; several friends are going	N/A
Information blocks	N/A	I thought I could dropped the classes and register later	N/A	I was transferred from BMCC and didn't know much about LaGuardia
Decisions	Joined a club to help with coursework and financial aid	Consulted advisor	Went to the Finance club	Attended the fairs
Policy (decision blocks)	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Behaviors (decision outcomes)	Joined the Chinese club	Took some courses that I needed to	N/A	N/A
Emotional State	Strong sense of belonging	ASAP helped me to stay in school and to progress	The club is good for learning	Felt more integrated
Feedback Loop	Took leadership role in the club	Highly recommended ASAP to other students	N/A	My old school didn't have those fairs.
Sources	Group6Round1	Group2Round2	Group2Round2	Group3Round1

[Example 1]   *Yes, I joined clubs and I am leader right now in the Chinese Student Club. From my friends because Chinese Club help you. Like financial aid. In the first year and the first semester [inaudible] a lot of problems. I don't know how to apply the financial aid and how much I need. Yeah. And I have transfer problem. They know that. We have tutor in the club on Wednesday and Friday and Friday is [inaudible] people [inaudible] other schools. Anything they can help us with. Like homework or some problem you have in the school.*

[Example 2]   *My adviser is Iola and she is very helpful. Last year I had a crisis and I dropped all of classes a couple of days before school started, thinking I could go back and register for classes. No! It was this year. So I dropped all the classes [inaudible] and she was just like, "Oh no you don't." And then she told me to go to the [inaudible] and I was able to go back and get some classes that I needed. I make my own connections. I stay in touch with my teachers. ASAP is good. Even I refer some friends. Some people [inaudible] ASAP because of me. I advocate for them to go there.*

[Example 3]   *They have a financial club here, but I'm not a part of it. I just go sometimes. Some friends are part of the club, so I just go with them. It is something that will help you very much how to manage your finances and stuff like that. It's good for learning.*

[Example 4]   *The fairs. I went to a job fair and an advising fair. I have a bunch of papers and if one day I need it, I know where to go exactly. So that helped me a lot. When I used to go to BMCC I would go take class and go home, but anytime I need help, I didn't know where to go. Here I feel more integrated. I know where to go. I know who to talk to. If I need help I know how to find it.*

Measuring progress

In these excerpts students talk about how they measure progress, especially what works and doesn't work. These students reflect on their first year seminar experience, e-portfolio and the usefulness of the college catalog.

Decision Space	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Information	First Year Seminar	First Year Seminar	First Year Seminar
Information blocks	I was told that the progress from when you started to when you graduate.	N/A	Need guidance
Decisions	Used E-portfolio	Used E-portfolio	Bought a course catalog
Policy (decision blocks)	N/A	Everything on E-portfolio belongs to the college	

		(according to a professor)	
Behaviors (decision outcomes)	Barely used it ever since	Stopped using E-portfolio	Used the course catalog to monitor academic progress
Emotional State	Annoyed	Misinformed by the First Year Seminar	Well-informed
Feedback Loop	N/A	N/A	Recommended the book to other students
Sources	Group3Round1	Group6Round2	Group3Round1

[Example 1]   *Our professors tell us [E-portfolio] it's the progress from when you started to when you graduate. But I don't see it like that. I already took the class, so why do I have to take it again? I think it's just another requirement for college. And I already took it, so I don't know why I have to take it again. That one hour studio I could be, you know, yeah. It's Annoying.*

[Example 2]   *For studying for my First Year Seminar class there is a book. I got the book from the E building and it was like an early start book. I recommend that everybody should get one of those. It was like a course catalog, what courses you need to take and what you gotta do and your credits and how you can keep on task. Yes. I bought the book and I use it a lot and so far it helped me.*

[Example 3]   *You don't own it. [Inaudible] researcher wrote some medical stuff and you found something and you post it on E-Portfolio and then the professor published it, he has—the college has the full right to own whatever you posted.*

College feasibility

In these excerpts students talk about the decision to apply for financial aid, to apply for loans and getting help requesting documentation. The word "confused" appears several times.

Decision Space	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Information	Financial Office	Financial Office	N/A
Information blocks	Didn't know about the options	N/A	Nobody knows where the fax machine is
Decisions	Applied for financial aid	Applied for subsidized loans	Asked around

Policy (decision blocks)	My mom makes too much money for me to apply for financial aid	Need GPA for the application, but freshman doesn't have GPA record.	N/A
Behaviors (decision outcomes)	Paid out of pocket	Paid my own	N/A
Emotional State	Confused. I wish someone would have told me this is what it is.	Annoyed	Confused
Feedback Loop	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sources	Group4Round2	Group4Round2	Group4Round2

[Example 1]   *I don't have financial aid just because when I filled out the FASFA they said my mom makes too much money. That's why it was a big issue for me when I wanted to go away. I never had any resources of anybody telling me that there were other options for me. They said she makes too much money for me to qualify. I went to the financial aid office. At first my program, they didn't give me my first portion of my stipend, so my grandma had to pay out of pocket for the first session. I tried to do work/study. I handed in the papers and everything. No one contacted me. Even if it was a yes or a no, I would still have appreciated a call or email. I'm not sure what the requirements are for work/study.*

[Example 2]   *When I applied for the subsidized loan the class had already started, so I had to pay on my own. And then they would refund it back. So I had to arrange for money to pay for my tuition first and then when I got back the refund later I repaid that. When I applied in September—it was mid-October that I got it. Yeah, it was half of what the subsidized loan was. Yeah, the lady said I could apply for the Foundation Scholarship, but since it was my first semester I didn't exactly know my GPA, it didn't pop up on my CUNY portal. So I was just going to wait it out until I could see. They didn't tell me about any other options other than the Foundation.*

[Example 3]   *It's hard to figure stuff out when no one knows where anything is at. Staff. I was looking for a fax machine, but no one knew where a fax machine is. So I asked one of the security guards. He told me to go to student life and there was a fax machine in there and the guy in there helped me fax my mom. Every time I ask they tell me there is no fax service. They also said there is one in this building, like in the basement, but I couldn't find it.*

Career services

Students talking about this area discussed their decisions to look for a job, prepare for an internship and participate in a training program. Although these decisions seem similar, the decision paths taken by the three students were very different.

Decision Space	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Information	Online job search	N/A	Accounting professor told me
Information blocks	I didn't know the job qualifications	I didn't know the requirement of doing an internship	N/A
Decisions	Visit the career development office	Went to four offices	Participant an accounting training program
Policy (decision blocks)	Job qualification requires Social Work major, not Criminal Justice	International students need to meet certain requirements but nobody knows	This certification is a required qualification for some insurance jobs
Behaviors (decision outcomes)	Switch major	Gave up	Obtained the certification
Emotional State	Career Development changed my life in a good way	Confused	Helpful for job search
Feedback Loop		N/A	N/A
Sources	Group5Round2	Group3Round1	Group2Round2

[Example 1]   *I was in the military, so when I came here I just decided to do criminal justice because it was the most—it is like basically the same thing. Like police and stuff. I thought with a bachelor's degree I would be eligible for most jobs, as far as, federal, state, and city. What I really want to do is be a substance abuse counselor. I can't do that with a criminal justice degree. All of the jobs that I am looking at you need a master's in social work. So I decided to switch to social work.*

At first, I would look online and see certain jobs, like Nassau County was hiring for substance abuse counselors, but then I went to the Career Development Office here and I sat down with Brian Caba. He started showing me the job qualifications for substance abuse manager and counseling, and stuff like that, they were all master's. That's when I knew I needed to kick in gear. I thought I would just need a bachelor's. It isn't a big deal, just a little bit more school.

[Example 2]   *Internships. I had a question a couple of weeks ago and I had to go to four different offices and I ended up with four different answers and I still don't know the*

answer. Since I'm international I need to know if I need to be a full time student in order to get an internship. Nobody could tell me that. But if I work full time how can I take 12-credit classes. It didn't make sense. I don't get the whole thing. I'm looking, but I don't know how it's supposed to work. They send me to—everybody send me everywhere. And then I give up. Somebody told me I don't have to do internship at all.

[Example 3]   *I am going to take Accounting II. So I stay in touch with my accounting professor, that's a nice guy too. Through him I take some here at LaGuardia [inaudible] or something like that, for like one month and a half, for you to become a financial adviser. At the end they give us certification or something like that. So I got it. That [inaudible] was you have to work for those companies—insurance company or [inaudible].*

Learning support

Two students discussed their decisions to seek help, one in writing and the other in math. Both students found the help to be beneficial.

Decision Space	Example 1	Example 2
Information	ELS professor recommended	N/A
Information blocks		Math 99 professor was bad
Decisions	Writing center	Math Tutoring
Policy (decision blocks)	N/A	N/A
Behaviors (decision outcomes)	In good standing	Retook Math99
Emotional State	More confident, higher self-esteem	Doing much better
Feedback Loop	N/A	N/A
Sources	Group6Round1	Group4Round2

[Example 1]   *At first I was not confident with my English. I found an ESL class and I knew I needed to go for tutoring and it helped improve my writings. From my teachers, my professors. She tell me if I want to improve my writings I need to find a tutor that can help me. It was really helpful.*

[Example 2]   *They (the math center)'re very helpful and inviting. I actually found out about the math club coming here for the Math 99, which was free in the summer. The teacher that we had wasn't really helpful so I was going there every day and I ended up not passing the Math 99 because of confusion with the math center and the teacher's communication was completely confusing, but I'm retaking it and I'm doing much better.*