

CITY COLLEGE OF SAN FRANCISCO  
**IMAGE RESEARCH**

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# Table of Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>2</b>
Focus Group Summary of Comments	2
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>APPENDIX A - SURVEY INSTRUMENTS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>BUSINESS/INDUSTRY/WORKING ADULTS FOCUS GROUPS</b>	<b>7</b>
PROTOCOL FOR EXTERNAL GROUPS	7
<b>HIGH SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS</b>	<b>9</b>
PROTOCOL FOR HIGH SCHOOL GROUPS	9
<b>CURRENT STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS</b>	<b>11</b>
PROTOCOL FOR INTERNAL GROUPS	11



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Purpose

This research was conducted to examine the local community's attitudes toward City College of San Francisco. Over the last few years, and particularly the last six months, the College has been at the center of a controversy surrounding its accreditation.

During this time, media coverage has been persistent and ongoing, much of it less than positive. In addition, the Fall 2013 semester saw a troublesome drop in enrollment, leading to concerns that the college maybe facing a crisis of confidence within its community, due to accreditation issues.

A phone survey was conducted to examine attitudes of the community toward CCSF during this time of upheaval, and to help inform ways that the college can improve its messaging to the community. Focus groups were conducted after this phone survey to further identify and clarify those attitudes and opinions. This report identifies the most relevant positive and negative comments made by the focus group participants.

## Background

Data was gathered using focus groups with scripts designed for each audience. The focus group participants were asked a series of questions, including questions about their experiences with CCSF (both positive and negative), what they have heard about it, their level of confidence in CCSF, where they get information, and which sources of information they trust the most.

The data were analyzed, and a list of the most relevant positive and negative comments was compiled from the comments. Some comments were unique to their individual groups, while others were mentioned by all of the groups.

The focus groups were conducted Dec. 4-5, 2013. Four groups, each consisting of 18-22 individuals, were recruited from current CCSF students, working adults, high school students, and business professionals who live and work in the San Francisco area. The CCSF student group was conducted at the Ocean Campus Library, while the other three groups were conducted at a downtown San Francisco research facility.





# Findings

## Focus Group Summary of Comments

### Positive comments and strengths noted (by group)

- Multiple groups
  1. People generally believe (or know through direct experience) that the CCSF faculty is hard-working, and cares about students more than the faculty of other colleges and competitors
  2. People pay attention to various sources of media, though each person tends to prefer a single source, rather than paying attention to them all. The internet is the most frequently mentioned source of information, but many people still notice billboards, advertisements on public transportation, marquees, cable TV ads, radio ads, ads before movies, and even newspapers
  3. People value the impact that CCSF has on their lives and their communities. They do not want the accessibility to quality education to suffer and they do not want the college to continue to reduce the availability of classes or to close down completely
- Working Adults
  1. The satellite campuses are seen as a big convenience for working adults that do not live near the main campus
  2. Working adults said that they can only trust people they talk to face-to-face; they say that they do not trust marketing messages, local news media, college administration, or websites to get the messages out; they would prefer that messages come directly from the students themselves, since people look to them to get information about what is happening on campus already
- Business Professionals
  1. Business professionals notice when advertisements are specialized and targeted, for example, when ads are done in Chinese. They prefer these types of ads to general messages like "register now for the fall semester"
  2. Business professionals noted many positive experiences they had taking classes, attending events, and being on campus both in the present and in the past. Many also know people that had attended or are currently attending classes there
  3. Business professionals trust the local TV news, the *Chronicle* newspaper, *sfgate.com* website, and NPR for general news. For business news, they trust the Chamber of Commerce, the Hospitality Association, other union or specialized industry groups, SF Business Times, LinkedIn, and Facebook
- High School Students
  1. High school students trust their friends and younger adults, such as teachers, high school counselors, advisors, and mentors. They do not generally trust older adults
  2. High school students want to have younger people with experience at the college come to talk to them about their experiences face-to-face. They are used to this from other colleges and military recruiters, and they trust it much more readily than marketing messages and ad-



vertisements

3. High school students choose colleges primarily based on what programs they offer, how those programs compare to those at other colleges, and how likely they are to be able to get a job when they graduate
  4. High school students trust websites if they are from an official source, like CNN, whitehouse.gov, College Board, or official college websites. They do not trust Wikipedia or other unofficial sources
  5. High school students tend to only trust reviews if people say not only what they like or dislike about something, but have a combination of both. Perfectly positive reviews and all-negative comments don't sound genuine
  6. High school students like the concept of getting a scholarship and going to a school that they have heard a lot about, rather than going to a school that they don't know that is considered less expensive
- Current Students
    1. Current students are more likely to trust their friends and college faculty (even if they give conflicting information) over what they hear in the media
    2. Current students would prefer to hear information directly from the administration instead of hearing things through the rumor mill and sources of misinformation
    3. Current students trust their school newspaper, and believe that it should also be distributed in their communities
    4. Current students generally want to help the college, and are willing to help to do things like clean up the campus and pass along positive messages to the community

Negative comments, problems, and issues noted (by group)

- Multiple groups
  1. The accreditation issue is the number one topic of discussion for all four audiences
  2. Many people believe that the college is in the process of closing down, losing accreditation, or both
  3. Many people do not understand exactly what losing accreditation means or why the college may be shut down
  4. People hear stories from many sources (newspapers, local news, online, etc.), but they say that they trust word of mouth and face-to-face conversations with people that they know, especially if they are students or employees at the college
  5. People are not connecting with the current marketing messages from the college because they are vague; saying they are "open" and "accredited" does not answer their fears
  6. People want to know the reasons why the college has been threatened to lose their accreditation, and what steps the college is taking to solve the issues
  7. People generally tend to be wary of administration due to various scandals, stories in local media, and the series of chancellors and turnover in administration



8. People feel that there is a lack of information and transparency from the college
- Working Adults
    1. Working adults are concerned with the differences between the students that are focused on learning and those that are working the system to get their financial aid checks and dropping classes once they have the money
    2. Working adults are concerned that people with existing degrees and training from CCSF will be looked down on by employers, due to the accreditation issues, and that those alumni will have a hard time finding employment
    3. Working adults believe that the administrators that create the systems do not understand how they work for individual students. They believe that many people abuse the current financial aid system and that there are little or no consequences to those that work the system to get checks
  - Business Professionals
    1. Business professionals are angry about the accreditation issue because they believe that it was brought on by financial mismanagement by the administration. Though the issue starts there, they believe that it also may be creating a negative impression about the quality of the education at the college. They see the faculty pension issue and the new buildings they have recently built as symptoms of the financial mismanagement, lack of budget control and inability to forecast future liabilities
    2. Business professionals believe that, since CCSF is supported by taxes that they pay, that the college should be transparent with its financial issues. They believe that the college owes the community an explanation as to how the issues are being resolved
    3. Business professionals see the current marketing campaign ("We're Accredited") as desperate and sluggish. They feel that this message is saying "they still haven't taken away our accreditation... yet"
    4. Business professionals have to do searches for information about the college. They feel that the college does not distribute its messages effectively through the college website
    5. Business professionals noted that they had not seen a printed college catalog in a while. Though they may agree with the reasons not to print them, they would like to see something to replace it in getting the word out about the college
    6. Business professionals believe that the college is not doing enough to reach out to them directly, to tell them how they can help their businesses. They suggested a college fair for businesses to attend, similar to what they do for high school students
  - High School Students
    1. High school students may not understand the difference between losing "accreditation" and losing "credibility"
    2. Some high school students worry that the buildings are old and dirty, and that the college cannot afford to have people clean and maintain their campuses
    3. By the time high school students have reached their junior year, many of them have already decided where they will be going to college. Very few of the students in the focus group considered CCSF as a first or even a second choice – the exceptions are those who are going for a particular program only offered at CCSF (example: Russian language class)



4. High school students often feel like they are being targeted with advertising by colleges with messages that feel impersonal; they do not like it when their names are misspelled, when they are bombarded by phone calls and voice mails, or when they receive messages from colleges that they have never heard of before

5. High school students do not trust colleges when they say they are affordable. They know that it is expensive and don't like it when colleges tell them otherwise

- Current Students

1. Current students rely heavily on the opinions of their friends and their professors. They have heard them talking about the college closing, and whether they believe it or not, they notice that a lot of people spread those rumors

2. Current students are concerned about the lack of upkeep of several buildings (example: the art building on the main campus)

3. Current students are concerned about the decentralized nature of the college, and that individuals with political agendas have undue influence over the chancellor and certain departments and programs

## Conclusions

- In general, people believe that CCSF is an important institution that provides quality education to its communities, and they believe that the faculty of CCSF is hard-working and cares about students more than the faculty of other colleges and competitors in the area
- All four groups brought up the issues of accreditation and closure, without prompting. This is the overwhelming issue that everyone seems to be concerned about, far and above other issues. Many people mistakenly believe that it is already in the process of closing
- None of the groups want to lose CCSF, but they do not know what steps are being taken to prevent loss of accreditation or closure of the college. This lack of information appears to be driving their fears, and fueling negative speculation
- While media coverage has been negative and inflammatory lately, people say that they most trust students and employees to get them information about CCSF. Students say that they trust their professors and what they hear from their friends, and what they have heard recently is negativity and speculation from those sources
- Current messaging saying that CCSF is "open and accredited" does not resonate with people, as they see these messages as vague and evasive. They would prefer to know details about what the issues are, and what is being done to resolve them
- Many people do not understand what "accreditation" is, especially younger current students and high school students. High school students sometimes confused the term with "credibility"
- The lack of printed schedules has been noticed by adults and older audiences. Though they may agree with the reasons for cutting back, they would like to see something to replace them. For this reason, and other reasons, they feel like they are not getting very much information from CCSF
- Of those that are attending or have attended CCSF, many people say they chose the college



partly because it is affordable, but mainly because of specific programs or classes in which they are or were interested

- High school students do not admit to planning on attending CCSF. They consider it a safety net, in case they can't get into the college or university that they have already chosen, or if they can't get scholarships to pay for what they consider "the best education they can get" at a four-year institution
- There is a concern among many students that the current system of sending financial aid checks directly to students is being abused by many people who are not serious students. They believe that the administration does not know or care about the people that attend classes only long enough to get paid, as it could increase the enrollment numbers that can be used to gain more funding. Some people believe that this is tied to the accreditation issue

## Recommendations

- CCSF needs to concentrate on increasing the amount of information that it provides to the public. The most immediate need for information regards how they are addressing the accreditation and closing issues
- The current message that CCSF is "open" and "accredited" needs to be explained in more detail for it to be effective. The specific steps that are being taken to fix the accreditation and closing issues need to be shared in messaging to the community more directly
- Face-to-face communication from students and faculty is an important key to spreading information about CCSF to the community. If they are not given positive messages to spread, they will continue to spread the negativity and speculative stories that have been promoted by various media sources
- Since high school students are used to being targeted aggressively by four-year institutions and the military by direct phone calls, personalized mailers, and face-to-face recruitment, CCSF should increase the use of real students, talking in their own words about their experiences, to effectively compete with these sales techniques. This can be accomplished either through advertising, or with direct visits to high schools.
- Since businesses would like CCSF to talk to them directly about what it can do for them, we would recommend special messages and events geared towards business owners to be worked into the overall marketing effort
- When talking about financial aid for students, consider that the current system is perceived by many people to be prone to abuse by some students. Students that are more serious and are not abusing the system resent this, and would like to see changes to the system to limit those abuses and to more effectively punish those that attempt to take advantage





# APPENDIX A - SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

## BUSINESS/INDUSTRY/WORKING ADULTS FOCUS GROUPS

### PROTOCOL FOR EXTERNAL GROUPS

Introduction:

Good MORNING/EVENING/AFTERNOON. I want to thank all of you for taking time to participate in this focus group. We really appreciate your willingness to assist us. TODAY/TONIGHT, we are asking you to help us by giving your opinion about issues having to do with City College of San Francisco.

While I will be recording these sessions, you and your opinions will not be identified in our report. Your honesty and candor are very much appreciated. The information you are providing will help us identify issues and make plans for the future.

Questions:

1. Have any of you had direct experience with City College of San Francisco?
  - a. (If any responds positively) What kind?
  - b. Have any of you had indirect experience? (Family, friends, etc.)
2. What have you heard about the college?
  - a. Who did you hear that from?
  - b. How long ago?
3. Working Adults: How is City College of San Francisco perceived within the community, in general? OR Business/Industry: How is City College of San Francisco perceived within the business community, in general?
  - a. Why do you think that?
    - i. (Examples and sources)
  - b. Positive things you've seen or experienced?
    - i. (Examples)
  - c. Negative things you've seen or experienced?
    - i. (Examples)
4. Tell me about your "level of confidence" in CCSF.
  - a. Why do you think that? (Examples)
5. At this critical juncture in the college's history, what would you like to see City College of San Francisco focus on?
  - a. What are the obstacles?
  - b. How would you like to see the college proceed?
6. How well is CCSF meeting the needs of the businesses and industries in your community?
  - a. Can you give me an example?
  - b. What should CCSF be working on?
7. Where do you get most of your information about the college? (Ask for examples of messaging methods they have seen)
  - a. Do you remember any specific messages FROM the college?
    - i. What are they?
    - ii. What did you think about them?
    - iii. What would have made them better?
8. Are there ways that CCSF should be communicating with you, or people you know, that it isn't



doing now?

- a. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you like?
- b. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you dislike?
- c. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you want to see more of?
- d. What media do you trust?

Is there anything else that you would like to say or note about CCSF?

Closing:

Thank you for your comments and insight. We appreciate it. I can now give you some background I could not provide before.

The California Community College Chancellor's office, the Mayor of San Francisco, and the new permanent Chancellor of City College are all working together to resolve the accreditation issue with all due speed. While nothing in life is certain, we believe that the accreditation concerns will soon be behind us.

You have all helped us to understand what information is out in the community, and what kinds of facts we need to do a better job of communicating. Your input will allow us to determine what types of information have been missing, and to spread good news as quickly as the bad seems to have spread.





# HIGH SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS

## PROTOCOL FOR HIGH SCHOOL GROUPS

### Introduction:

Good MORNING/EVENING/AFTERNOON. I want to thank all of you for taking time to participate in this focus group. We really appreciate your willingness to assist us. TODAY/TONIGHT, we are asking you to help us by giving your opinion about issues having to do with City College of San Francisco.

While I will be recording these sessions, you and your opinions will not be identified in our report. Your honesty and candor are very much appreciated. The information you are providing will help us identify issues and make plans for the future.

### Questions:

1. Have any of you had direct experience with City College of San Francisco?
  - a. (If any responds positively) What kind?
  - b. Have any of you had indirect experience? (Family, friends, etc.)
  - c. Does CCSF affect your life, directly or indirectly?
  - d. (If any responds positively) How would you say that it affects you?
2. What have you heard about the college?
  - a. Who did you hear that from?
  - b. How long ago?
3. What do your parents say about CCSF?
  - a. Why do they say that? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
  - b. Do you agree/disagree with them?
4. What is your general impression of CCSF?
  - a. Why do you think that? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
  - b. Positive things you've heard? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
  - c. Negative things you've heard? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
5. Have you selected a college to attend after your high school graduation?
  - a. If Yes: What school... and why did you select that school?
  - b. If No: Why not?
6. Are you considering CCSF as a possibility?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. What would make you change your mind? (Either way)
  - c. Do you have any concerns about choosing CCSF?
  - d. What are they?
7. Where do you get most of your information about the college? (Ask for examples of messaging methods they have seen)
  - a. Do you remember any specific messages FROM the college?
    - i. What are they?
    - ii. What did you think about them?
    - iii. What would have made them better?
8. Are there ways that CCSF should be communicating with you, or people you know, that it isn't doing now?
  - a. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you like?
  - b. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you dislike?
  - c. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you want to see more of?
  - d. What media do you trust?

Is there anything else that you would like to say or note about CCSF?



Closing:

Thank you for your comments and insight. We appreciate it. I can now give you some background I could not provide before.

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What you have all helped us with is understanding what information is out in the community and what kinds of facts we need to do a better job in communicating. Your input will allow us to spread good news as quickly as the bad seems to have spread, and has pointed out what types of information have been missing. For that, and for your time, we thank you.





# CURRENT STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

## PROTOCOL FOR INTERNAL GROUPS

Introduction:

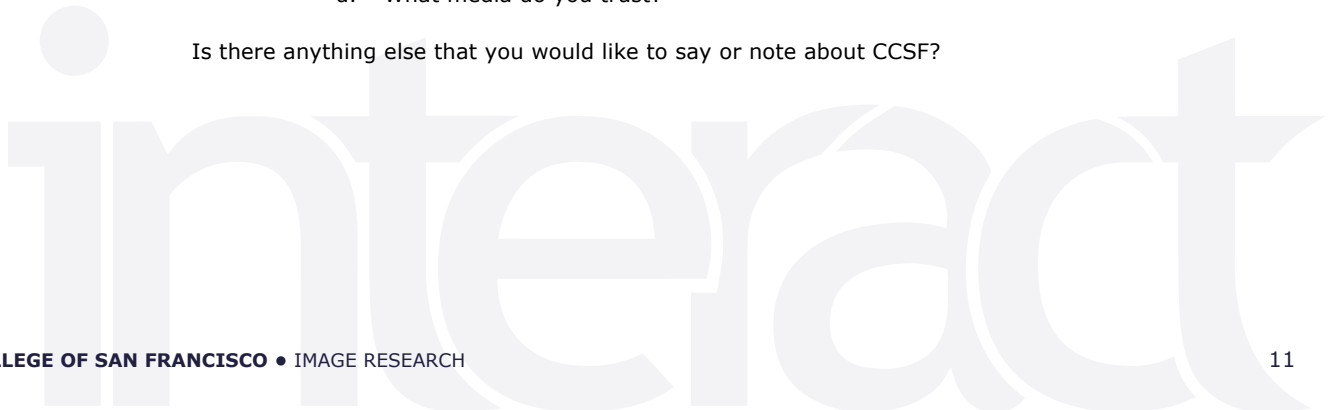
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While I will be recording these sessions, you and your opinions will not be identified in our report. Your honesty and candor are very much appreciated. The information you are providing will help us identify issues and make plans for the future.

Questions:

1. How is City College of San Francisco perceived by students here, in general?
  - a. Why do you think that?
    - i. (Examples and sources)
  - b. Positive things you've seen or experienced?
    - i. (Examples)
  - c. Negative things you've seen or experienced?
    - i. (Examples)
2. What does your family say about CCSF?
  - a. Why do they say that? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
  - b. Do you agree/disagree with them?
3. What is your general impression of CCSF?
  - a. Why do you think that? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
  - b. Positive things you've heard? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
  - c. Negative things you've heard? (Ask for examples and sources of the opinions)
4. Tell me about your "level of confidence" in CCSF.
  - a. Why do you think that? (Examples)
5. At this critical juncture in the college's history, what would you like to see City College of San Francisco focus on?
  - a. What are the obstacles?
  - b. How would you like to see the college proceed?
6. Are there any issues that you believe could enhance the college's image, or build its reputation and draw students?
7. Are there any issues that you believe could hurt the college's image, or its ability to serve students?
8. Where do you get most of your information about what's going on at the college? (Methods)
  - a. What could be done to improve communications?
  - b. Are there ways that the college is communicating with you that you like or dislike?
  - c. Are there ways that CCSF is communicating with you that you want to see more of?
  - d. What media do you trust?

Is there anything else that you would like to say or note about CCSF?





Closing:

Thank you for your comments and insight. We appreciate it. I can now give you some background I could not provide before.

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