

To: De Anza senior administrators

From: Rachel Baker, Stanford Graduate School of Education

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Subject: Program Selection Focus Groups

Highlights:

- Students report that they choose majors primarily based on what they enjoy (their “passion”)
- Some students were concerned about job availability and stability, but few students mentioned salary¹
- Students report that they get most of their information about labor market returns to degrees from friends and family
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Methodology:

In July 2013, I conducted three focus groups at FHDA (two at Foothill, one at De Anza) that asked students about how they pick a major/program. The De Anza focus group had six students from a range of majors (film, political econ, architecture, not yet decided). One student already has a BA and one already has an AA. I asked students broad questions about how they selected a program and more specific questions about students’ knowledge of labor market returns and the perceived costs (monetary and non-monetary) of a program. The focus groups were semi-structured; I posed questions to the whole group but let the conversation evolve naturally. Sample questions are included on the next page.

Overall findings:

First, and probably most importantly, there was considerable variety in De Anza’s students’ responses to how they think about picking a program. However, a few major themes came across clearly in my focus group.² Most students were interested in having careers that would allow them to do what they **enjoy**. Many students also mentioned that they wanted careers that would allow them to give back; **altruism** was a theme that emerged a number of times. In terms of labor market outcomes (salary, stability and availability of employment), a number of students mentioned that they wanted “**family supporting wages**” but most students bristled at the idea that someone would choose a major based on money alone (though they noted that perhaps other students make decisions that way). A few students mentioned that they thought about the **number and variety of jobs** that would be available to them with this degree and that they considered job availability. Most students noted that they got information about careers and majors through their **friends and family**. Finally, students noted that they didn’t pick a program based on how hard they expected it to be, but that they did consider how much they would enjoy it (both subject matter and professors).

Next Steps:

From what we learned in these focus groups, and based on surveys used at other colleges, we are going to field a survey at both Foothill and De Anza that asks students more specific questions about how they pick a program. We will ask questions about broad fields (e.g. health, science, math and engineering) and specific awards that they are considering (e.g. a certificate in massage therapy). This survey will help us to better understand how students value different aspects of a program and give us a sense of how accurate students’ knowledge of labor market outcomes is. We will field the survey in early 2014 in ~10 classes at each Foothill and De Anza.

¹ The one exception to this is students in the radiology technician (Foothill) program who mentioned salary a number of times and seemed to have very accurate and detailed knowledge of expected salaries.

² I think it is important to note that the sample of students in the focus group was not random. One student helped me to recruit others. The final sample had a range of ages and ethnicities, but most of the students knew each other through a jujitsu club.

Sample questions from focus group:

- What are the most important considerations to you?
- What kind of information do you use? What kind of information do you think other people use?
- What kind of jobs could you get with this degree?
- How likely are you to be employed in a year if you get this degree?
- Do you think you will make more with this degree than you would with other degrees?
- How hard do you expect this degree to be?
- How confident are you that you will finish this program?