

**Personal Growth 110 Student Characteristics, Course Outcomes, and Focus Group Findings
(Spring 2017)**

Project Overview

In Fall 2016, the Mesa College Office of Institutional Effectiveness completed two focus groups with students enrolled in each section of Personal Growth (PERG) 110. One section included college students enrolled at Mesa, whereas the other consisted of high school students enrolled in MET. Demographic and academic data were also collected for those enrolled in the PERG 110 sections. This was the first semester that PERG 110 was open to enrollment, as it was a pilot test for future sections of the course. Focus group questions asked students about their experiences in the course in addition to the impact of the course on their time at Mesa and in the future.

Summary of Results

► Student Data

Demographics

A total of 35 students had valid end of term enrollments in the two PERG 110 sections offered in the fall. The majority of the students were Latino/a (54%), followed by White (31%). Almost all students enrolled were under 24 (91%), with a large number under 18 since one section was offered to MET high school students. More students enrolled were male (60%) and not first generation students (74%).

Academic Outcomes

Retention and success rates were also examined among students enrolled in PERG 110. A majority of students were retained throughout the semester (69%), whereas less than half of the students successfully completed the course (43%).

► Focus Group Responses

Most Useful Assignment

Respondents were asked to describe the most useful or important assignment from the class to their development as college learners. Most comments regarded the assignment for which students learned about the services available to Mesa College students. While many commented on the fact that they became more aware of the services and started using them, others mentioned that the services might not be as personally useful. For instance, one response indicated that the transfer center was not useful for current high school students.

Other assignments with positive comments mentioned in response to this question were the education plan, the personal reflection journals, assist.org, and the e-portfolio. Respondents found the education plan useful for determining the steps to take when entering college, the personal reflection journals were insightful in learning about oneself, and the e-portfolio was useful for understanding the class and Mesa. In general, students reported that the class helped to guide them in their future:

- "I think the whole class kind of teaches how to open our minds on what we want to do."

Preparation for Assignments

Professor Assistance

The most common response to what the professor did to help students prepare for assignments was to meet with students outside of class time, including during office hours. While one student reported more office hours in the beginning of the semester, another mentioned that they made sure they met with their professor early on. Additionally, students were pleased that the professor responded quickly to emails and sent summary emails regarding what happened in class and homework details. Others appreciated

the counseling assistance, specifically regarding various general education requirements. One general comment indicated that the professor had done well:

- “I felt like she did a pretty good job.”

Elements Needed for Better Preparation

Many students commented on what was missing from the class that could have helped them to be better prepared. Although others appreciated the time spent with the professor in the previous question, one area in need of improvement for many students was the desire to have more access to the professor outside of class time. Students noticed that the professor’s office hours were busy since she was also a counselor, whereas others reported that their schedules changed or were different from the typical college student’s schedule and that this made seeing her difficult. Limited access to the professor via email was also noted, with respondents suggesting that there was a delay in responses to emails.

- “I wasn’t able to go to her and ask for help because her schedule would change each week.”

Students also expressed a need for more clarity and assistance with assignments. Specifically, many requested a desire to reduce confusion by demonstrating the relevancy of assignments. The assignments for which students mentioned seeming irrelevant to the course included readings, the e-portfolio, and personal journal prompts, especially the prompt about technology. In one example, a student thought the English assessment and education plan should have been completed together but they were weeks apart. The following comments demonstrate the need for assignments to explicitly relate to the class as a whole:

- “Especially the second one, where we talk about our relationship to technology, we didn’t really discuss anything about technology...it just, it felt disconnected.”
- “It felt like we spent a lot of time on things that I am still unclear on the importance of.”

Along with making assignments more explicitly relevant to the course, students felt that they needed more clarity on assignment guidelines and requirements. There were general comments about not knowing what was needed for assignments, and then there were a number of specific responses for the personal reflection journals, with students suggesting that topics were not covered enough in class to adequately provide a reflection. One student suggested providing more examples of assignments, whereas another indicated the need for more examples at the beginning of projects. The following quote demonstrates the suggestions of some students:

- “Especially the second one, where we talk about our relationship to technology, we didn’t really discuss anything about technology...it just, it felt disconnected.”
- “Also we didn’t have much examples and when she gave us examples...she would be like, ‘it’s something like that, but it’s not like that.’”
- “She expected us to already know certain things about college and about looking at classes or looking at catalogs that we didn’t already know...We didn’t know what she expected from us and didn’t feel like we have a good support system to help us learn how to do those things.”

There was a desire to receive more in-class support for projects, particularly for assigned readings and the English assessment. For the reading assignments, respondents felt that they did not always understand them or how they related to the class. Students also noted that the professor would not indicate when the readings would be incorporated into class tests. Respondents reported frustration with the English assessment assignment because some felt they were not given adequate time to prepare for the assessment and did not receive access to helpful resources. This frustration was compounded by the fact that students felt the English assessment was an important determinant of their future academic careers. As a general note, one student felt that they were expected to know information before they learned it. The following quotes exemplify these feelings:

- “One thing that really made me frustrated about the English assessment in our class was the lack of preparation, just because it’s so important for us.”

- “She expected us to already know certain things about college and about looking at classes or looking at catalogs that we didn’t already know...We didn’t know what she expected from us and didn’t feel like we have a good support system to help us learn how to do those things.”

Some students felt that the pace of the class left something to be desired. Students reported spending more time than necessary on assignments that they found less meaningful (e.g. the e-portfolio) than on assignments (e.g. the education plan) or tests that were more important. One respondent noted a general sense of feeling rushed in the class. To counteract the issues with timing, students suggested adding more time to in-class meetings or more class meetings a week:

- “It was kind of difficult when we only met up once a week.”

Finally, students provided logistical suggestions that would improve their experience in the course. Students suggested having more regular access to grades throughout the semester, as well as receiving a syllabus that did not change throughout the semester and which included an overview of what they would learn.

Future Utility of the E-Portfolio

Many students found the e-portfolio project to be useful for the purposes of the course, although they did not see the general utility of the e-portfolio for their future academic or professional careers. However, some respondents thought they would use the education plan in the future, in addition to possibly replicating the process for other purposes. A few students also found the assignment to be personally beneficial:

- “You can look back at it and be like, ‘oh I remember,’ you know, ‘when I felt this motivational.’ Like, in case you’re at a low point.”
- “One of the things was looking at a project that we’re not proud of and then looking at a project we are proud of and then explaining our difference. Like, things like that did inspire me looking inside myself to find what I did differently.”

Future Utility of Experiences in the Course

Students found three categories of experiences and skills learned in PERG 110 to be useful for future courses: 1. education planning and counseling information, 2. an improved understanding of college resources and how to use them, and 3. developing personal skills. Specific to the education planning and counseling theme, students found that through education planning and using assist.org they had a better understanding of what they specifically needed to do to complete their academic goals. Students learned about the various services available to them at Mesa, as well as details regarding responsibilities within each student services department. Finally, respondents reported becoming motivated to help themselves, advocating for themselves, and learning that professors are approachable and helpful. Students shared the following:

- “She was really helpful when I went to see her in the counseling center. It was worth actually waiting in line to see her...She helped me figure out if I wanted to be a geographer or in urban planning.”
- “I didn’t know the health center can help with so many, like, different things.”

Pre- to Post- Course Changes

Expectations of College

When asked if their expectations of college had changed since taking the PERG 110 course, some students felt that they expected much the same from college as they had before the semester began. Other students, especially those in the MET section, felt that the experience in this course did not exemplify other college courses due to the nature of a pilot course, whereas another student reported feeling some apprehension towards college courses. Others commented on the improvement in their expectations, feeling that college is not as hard or as isolating as they initially thought it would be. Students shared the following:

- “I got told all the wrong things in high school about college. They said the professors wouldn’t work with you, they won’t check with you...they just won’t really care. That’s what I got told in high school. And this class really helped with that. Because they do...they do try to help you if you’re falling behind.”
- “For me, I thought it was like super, super hard...It’s not that hard.”

Role of Education

Again, a number of students reported experiencing no shift in the role of education in their lives before and after the PERG 110 course. However, other students discussed how education impacts their lives directly, indirectly, and in general. Specifically, respondents suggested that their education will be directly applicable to their future careers, which included an x-ray technician and an engineer. Others found school to be more important for the indirect benefits, such as overcoming challenges and becoming more knowledgeable. Another student emphasized the general importance of obtaining an education. Finally, two students mentioned how beneficial community college has been in their lives.

Connection to Mesa College Community

In thinking about their feelings of connectedness to the Mesa community before and after PERG 110, many students referenced the club assignment. Among those students, most felt that this improved their connection to the community at Mesa by gaining familiarity with professors and other students. One student mentioned that they never got in contact with anyone when trying to join clubs and another reported that they lost contact with people after the club assignment was completed. Additionally, students reported feeling more connected to the Mesa community by developing an improved understanding of the resources available to them and feeling more empowered to seek out resources.

- “This semester with this class, it kind of like, helped me more, that I was more secure or I felt more secure to approach other programs and go to other places in the building, I guess. Because of the way she talks to us.”

Another student commented on experiences in which the two PERG course sections were integrated as improving her connection to Mesa, or being able to attend other college courses. However, this same student noted that these activities only took place in the beginning of the semester. Students from the high school section of the course reported not feeling more connected, to the point of feeling isolated on campus.

Changes to the Course to Improve Success

The most common response to what could be changed about the course to improve success in the class and in college was to modify the structure or organization of the course. Specifically, students discussed spending more time on meaningful assignments (e.g., the education plan) and less time on less impactful assignments, ensuring that there is time to meet with the professor outside of class, cohesively integrating all assignments into the course, modifying the length of the course, and initially providing an overview of what students will learn.

Other recommendations to the course included providing more information on scholarships, including programs that are not typically discussed (e.g., AmeriCorps), providing more transfer information about local and vocational schools, and providing access to needed resources, such as food and computers.

- “If we could have gone to the computer center as a class, maybe it could have helped more because like she said, she didn’t have a computer. That’s a problem.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The present focus groups were conducted to assess the effectiveness and utility of the pilot sections of Personal Growth 110. College students enrolled in one section of the course and high school students enrolled in the additional section were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the PERG 110 assignments, structure, and future relevance. In general, students found many of the assignments,

particularly the education plan, student services assignment, and club assignment, to be useful and relevant. These assignments, along with student experiences in the course, were important for their future academic career and for integrating into the campus community. Students indicated that this course influenced their expectations of college and their connection to the Mesa community; however, this differed somewhat between students enrolled in the college section compared to the MET section, with the high school students feeling more apprehension toward college and isolation at Mesa.

Many students suggested changes to the course that would improve their experiences and success. Primarily, students requested more out of class availability with the professor or more in class time, more directed support on assignments and readings, and more time spent on more meaningful projects, such as the education plan and English assessment. Although some students found value in the process of creating the e-portfolio, few reported a relationship to anything outside of the course.

For future sections of the course, it will be important to further recognize the often varying needs of students who are already enrolled in college versus those who are still primarily enrolled in high school courses. Additionally, more support may be necessary for assignments, readings, and tests, in addition to creating more in-class time throughout the semester. Finally, more out of class time may also be helpful in improving the experiences of students in PERG 110.