Executive Summary

This report summarizes findings from three focus groups conducted by the Retention and Graduation Council in fall 2009 with second-, third-, and fourth-year students at Central Connecticut State University who had a high probability of graduating from the institution in six years or less. A total of sixteen students participated in this research project, and these “successful” students exhibited a number of common characteristics, including:

Motivation and Self-Confidence
Participants exhibited a high degree of self-confidence and were motivated to succeed, no matter what got in their way. They talked about their education as their own responsibility but also praised engaging in- and out-of-classroom learning activities when offered; they were critical of students who appeared apathetic about the educational experience. These successful students filled their time outside of class with studying, student activities, and on- and off-campus jobs. They appreciated recognition for their successes.

Connectedness
Participants actively sought out connections and friendships with other students, with faculty, and with professionals in their fields. They praised university clubs and activities as well as residence halls as great venues to develop these relationships. Second- and third-year students specifically valued connections they made with older, more experienced students who served as an informal advising network for them about courses, professors, university procedures, and social events. Fourth-year students highlighted the role of internships, guest speakers in the classroom setting, and networking as valuable ways to make connections and the transition into professional life.

Frustrations with Curricular Structures
Participants expressed a variety of frustrations with curricular structures. General education was characterized as potentially valuable but poorly presented as worthwhile and not coherently integrated into their academic programs. Electives and general education courses should apply to all majors or they do not really represent a common general education. Course availability and sequencing was criticized, when required courses were full or not offered. Students also pointed out a mismatch between the time and assignments for courses and the credit hours they carried, especially for lab and music courses.
Frustration with University Communication and Processes
Participants thought university offices should be friendlier, more helpful, and able to provide all information needed about their student records, not just bits and pieces. University communications should be expanded to include regular communication to mobile devices and postal mail; website navigation should be improved. Processes and services such as registration, major and course changes, and bill payment should be easy and transparent. Students remarked that these functions could be made to work with effort on their part, but these functions should be designed to make the student experience easier, not more difficult.

Mixed Perception of Advising
Academic advising was both praised and criticized. In instances where advising worked well, students talked about building a friendly relationship with a faculty member or a staff member in Willard Hall; this relationship extended beyond “just giving out a PIN.” In instances where advising went poorly, students most prominently cited getting inconsistent information or just receiving PINs for registration without much consultation, advice, or planning. In other instances, advisors discouraged students from “taking too many credits,” even though taking a lower number of credits would delay progress to graduation.

Year-Specific Issues
Second-Year Students
Students in their second year did not provide information that specifically characterized their second year as different from their first year or was distinctive from the overall comments provided by third- and fourth-year students.

Third-Year Students
Students in their third year at CCSU observed that their academic courses had become noticeably more demanding compared to those they took in their first and second years.

Fourth-Year Students
Students in the fourth year at CCSU specifically noted the value of internship opportunities and making connections with their professional fields. Fourth year students in majors where internships were less available or received less emphasis complained that not having an internship detracted from their academic experience.

Only tentative conclusions should be drawn from qualitative research of this nature. Nevertheless, much of the material provided here re-emphasizes the importance of educational practices typically deemed to be highly effective, such as helping students form bonds with other students and university employees as well as experiential education activities that connect academic learning with application outside the classroom. Further, successful students making progress toward graduation appeared to be very motivated; they filled their time with academic work and co-curricular activities, expected to make progress, and appreciated recognition for their efforts. While campus services were perceived to be helpful in some areas, unfriendly personnel, inefficient communication, difficulty registering for classes, and uneven advising detracted from their educational experience.
Methodology

This research project was initially designed to investigate qualitative differences in perceptions about the educational experience at CCSU between students with a high probability of graduating in six years and those with a low probability of graduating in six years. Because the research team was unable to recruit students with a low-probability of graduating to participate in focus groups, this study focuses only on students with a high probability of graduating.

Students who began their college careers at CCSU in fall 2006, fall 2007, and fall 2008 were assigned to high- and low-probability of graduation groups according to a logistic regression equation based on cumulative GPA and credits earned. This formula has about an accuracy rate ranging from 72% for second-year students to 84% for fourth-year students, an increase in predictive power of 7 to 11 percentage points. Students in the high-probability group, in general, had earned about 30 credit hours or more each academic year and had a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher. By contrast, students in the low-probability group typically had earned 5-10 fewer credit hours per academic year than their counterparts and typically had cumulative grade point averages below 2.5.¹

Students from these lists were invited to participate in one of six focus groups held on weekday afternoons on the CCSU campus. As an incentive to participate, students were offered a $15 gift card for the CCSU Bookstore, valid for books only. Light refreshments were provided to participants. Students were informed upon recruitment and again at the focus group that their participation in this activity was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous.

Focus groups were facilitated by members from several ad hoc subcommittees of the CCSU Retention and Graduation Council (R&GC) and assisted by Allison Joslyn, a graduate assistant in the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and a second-year master’s student in the psychology department.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Year Facilitators</th>
<th>Third Year Facilitators</th>
<th>Fourth Year Facilitators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily Chasse (Library)</td>
<td>Myrna Garcia-Bowen (Academic Articulations &amp; Partnerships)</td>
<td>Don Adams (Philosophy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan Frazier (Financial Aid)</td>
<td>Allison Joslyn (OIRA)</td>
<td>Joe Paige (Academic Affairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison Joslyn (OIRA)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Awilda Reasco (Pre-Collegiate Access Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Allison Joslyn (OIRA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two common questions for focus groups were developed by a steering committee consisting of the convener of each subcommittee (Don Adams, Myrna Garcia-Bowen, and Liz Hicks), Braden Hosch (OIRA), and Allison Joslyn (OIRA). Each subcommittee also developed two specific questions for their target group. Scripts for the focus groups appear in the appendix.

A total of 24 students with a high probability of graduating in six years or less time from the fall of entry to CCSU signed up to participate; of these 16 actually participated, five did not show up, and three sent an email prior to the focus group to explain they could not attend. By contrast,

only three students with a low probability of graduating in six years signed up to participate, and none of these three showed up at the focus group.

### Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Invited</th>
<th>Signed-Up</th>
<th>Attended</th>
<th>No Show</th>
<th>Emailed Apologies</th>
<th>Pct Attended or Emailed Apologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Probability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd-Year</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd-Year</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th-Year</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1821</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Low Probability** |         |           |          |         |                  |                                   |
| 2nd-Year        | 198     | 1         | 0        | 1       | 0                | 0.0%                              |
| 3rd-Year        | 123     | 0         | 0        | 0       | 0                | 0.0%                              |
| 4th-Year        | 91      | 2         | 0        | 2       | 0                | 0.0%                              |
| **Total**       | 412     | 3         | 0        | 3       | 0                | 0.0%                              |

### Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Black, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Probability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd-Year</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd-Year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th-Year</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These participation rates should be placed in the context of the size of the groups: the pool of students with a high probability of graduating was 4.5 times larger than the pool of students who had a low probability of graduating, and as a result the overall participation rate for students in the high-probability group was only just over 1%, compared to 0% for students in the low-probability group. Nevertheless, the recruitment efforts illustrated the difficulty of engaging students whose academic performance was not on-track.
Helpful Features of the CCSU Experience
Participants were asked to write down on a note card three aspects about their experience at Central that had helped them. Numbers in parenthesis represent the number of comments.

### Services and Staff (14)
- Orientation weekend – scavenger hunt
- Advising career services
- Career Services
- Computer lab and library availability
- Disability services
- Financial Aid advisor
- In-school tutors
- Orientation
- Ability to check registration etc. statuses independently
- The great librarians there to answer any question.
- The guidance I have received from Residence Life staff
- The library staff have helped me often when researching
- The Math Tutor Center
- The Pre-collegiate and Access Services have helped me a lot; given me a solid base to work from. I sincerely do love the people that work there and I would love to work for them one day.

### The Academic Experience (11)
- FYE courses helped first semester
- Flexible hours
- Helpful professors
- Availability of Technology
- The academic material in the history classes has been interesting
- First-year experience classes
- Flexible class scheduling - i.e. many sections and time offerings of classes
- Academics/small program- Social Work very close/encouraging
- Availability of professors -i.e. flexible office hours and professors' guidance
- Being able to meet with the head of my program to discuss what I need to receive my degree in 4 years.
- The professors have been extremely helpful and are willing to meet privately to discuss course material

### Networking and Connectedness (9)
- Diverse interaction with others
- Familiarity- born and raised in CT
- Knowing people who came here with me.
- Living in the dorms
- Other students
- Knowing older students on campus. Their knowledge of professors and where everything is
- Networking on campus and finding out other peoples experiences to help my own.
- Social-small tight-nit group of friends
- Style of living and living arrangements

### Advising (8)
- Academic Advisors
- Advising
- Advisor, professors
- Becoming familiar with my academic advisors
- Decent advisors
- Flexibility of advisors
- Good Advising
- Online requirements available as regards majors, specializations and minors

### Co-Curricular Activities (7)
- Activities, clubs – interacting with different people
- Becoming a part of campus through clubs- which also allowed me to meet new people.
- Extracurricular activities
- Involve with club
- Joining clubs and going to events on campus
- Majors Club Fairs
- Student clubs
Frustrating Features of the CCSU Experience
Participants were asked to write down on a note card three aspects about their experience at Central that had frustrated them. Numbers in parenthesis represent the number of comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services and Staff (16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Bureaucracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cafeteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cafeteria food isn’t great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Disability services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Parking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Poor publicity of helpful events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Required meal plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Being told to fill out a form instead of being allowed to see someone with regard to registration issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Notifications either not given at all or only given electronically as far as fees due, registration, etc. (loss of application)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Parking on campus is a big frustration of mine; being a commuter and arriving on campus at different times every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sometimes not having a computer available in the computer lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bursars holds, charges, no communication as why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Food- mundane especially on weekends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Office faculty being uncooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Book store inflation/lack of supply</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Academic Experience / Class Availability (14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Band is mandatory for music majors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Classes only offered certain semesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Finding internships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Scheduling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Transfer credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Unavailable classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When classes are offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rarity of certain required courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When class work and reading is due. It’s all bunched together for every class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Being able to sign up for classes and having available spots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Music classes are not worth the amount of credits as they should be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lack of morning classes/options for classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loss of classes in switching majors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Overload courses; time management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactions with Other Students (10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Class participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dorms- noise level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No social life!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Roommates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Zero class interaction/participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students not caring enough about their school work or not participation, yet they receive the same grade as those who do want to be there and do care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There are not enough Hispanics there. This is a Hispanic town, but something has to happen to get more to come here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Too many students are apathetic to their education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pack up and go home one weekends type of school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Difficult professors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Issues with teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Professor some not so great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Professors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| - Professors being afraid to admit they don’t know, disorganized, unfa
mess |
| - Professors; people; judgment, respect, skills, capabilities |
| - Teachers: Part time vs. Full-time |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advising (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Academic Advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Advisors not focusing on institutional credits needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Advisors telling student to take mostly course for their major rather than Gen. Eds. Their first year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When I don’t get advising I need to have to go back and make a new appointment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Motivation and Self-Confidence
Participants exhibited a high degree of self-confidence and were motivated to succeed, no matter what got in their way. They talked about their education as their own responsibility but also praised the availability of engaging in- and out-of-classroom learning activities when they were provided; these students were critical of peers who appeared apathetic about the educational experience. These students filled their time outside of class with studying, student activities, and on- and off-campus jobs, so that they had little time to relax or “waste.”

Second-Year Students
Second-year students highlighted personal responsibility in their education and indicated they prioritized school, family, and work -- in that order. They maintained “college is our responsibility” but also insisted that “education should be fun,” and expected faculty to provide stimulating and engaging classroom experiences. Second-year students in this group had all become involved in clubs, sports, and campus events, and further, they indicated that these activities contributed to their overall educational success. Finally, when they needed assistance, they took the initiative to get it. One student remarked, “don’t be scared to ask for help.”

Third-Year Students
The third-year students also emphasized the role of personal responsibility for their education, although for these two students, this also extended to paying for it themselves. These students too filled their schedules with co-curricular clubs and activities, but also mentioned working 10-16 hours at Rec Central and Breakers, in conjunction with an off-campus job. These students continued to take 15 and 18 credits per semester respectively in part because on-time graduation was a financial imperative. These students indicated that their packed schedules had probably lowered their grades somewhat (although this meant more Bs than they would have liked to earn rather than As), and one student indicated her health had suffered from overextending herself.

Fourth-Year Students
Facilitators described these students as “fighters” who would “persevere no matter what,” and observed the students were not afraid to express themselves. They were friendly and open and wanted others to do act likewise. These students valued high standards, expected them to be applied evenly and fairly, and felt a sense of injustice when they thought other students were getting away with substandard work. The students appreciated recognition for successes such as the Dean’s list, letters of commendation sent home, and other incentives. Speaking of these forms of acknowledgment, one student remarked, “it’s like they really cared.” Participants in this group were frustrated by the apathy of other students on campus and felt that non-participation of unmotivated students detracted from their own experience; they were pleased about new probation and suspension policies that set a minimum GPA of 2.0 for academic performance.
Connectedness and Networking

Participants actively sought out connections and friendships with other students, with faculty, and with professionals in their fields. They praised university clubs and activities as well as residence halls as great venues to develop these relationships. Second- and third-year students specifically valued connections they made with older, more experienced students who served as an informal advising network for them about courses, professors, university procedures, and social events. Fourth-year students highlighted the role of internships, guest speakers in the classroom setting, and networking as valuable ways to make connections and the transition into professional life.

Second-Year Students

Second-year students spoke deliberately about the value of informal advising from upperclassmen, resident advisors, and their friends. Resident advisors were praised for “taking time” to talk to them and because their advice comes “from their own personal experiences”; this peer advice was contrasted with inconsistent information students received from the formal advising system. Students also highlighted the importance of participating in campus clubs and activities to develop support networks. In these venues students developed connections to each other and also occasionally discussed academic matters in these non-academic settings. Some students who knew people from high school prior to their arrival on campus also found these connections valuable in making an adjustment campus life.

Third-Year Students

Third-year students highlighted the campus size and layout as facilitating contact with other students because the campus is “walkable” and does not require buses to get from place to place. These students too specifically mentioned that knowing students who were older and more experienced helped them with adjustment issues and with solving problems, including recommendations like talking to a department chair when a professor was unresponsive and how to navigate the campus website. Students praised peer advice as more effective than direct communication through formal channels; talking to a peer was in the words of one student, “better than calling the university. You either get a recording or feel rushed by the person on the other end.” On the negative side, however, some peer connections detracted from the educational experience. One participant had issues with roommates, and during one year had five different roommates during the course of the year.

Fourth-Year Students

Making connections with individuals inside and especially outside the university was both valuable and important to students in this group. Some of these connections had been developed through relationships with campus personnel or services, in particular faculty and staff advisors, the Counseling and Wellness Center, residence hall student and professional staff, clubs and activities, and knowing other students in class. Fourth-year students praised small academic programs in which they got to know professors and take several courses from them, which helped them better understand expectations. One student remarked of the experience with different faculty, “When you find out who the right one is, it becomes beneficial.” Connections to the professional world of their discipline outside the university were of special value, including guest speakers in classes such as alumni, professionals, and graduate programs. Internships were praised by the students who had been able to arrange them. Students who had found it difficult to arrange internships expressed frustration and disappointment.
Frustrations with Curricular Structures
Participants expressed a variety of frustrations with curricular structures. General education was characterized as potentially valuable but poorly presented as worthwhile and not coherently integrated into their academic programs. Students indicated that electives and general education courses should apply to all majors or they do not really represent a common general education. Course availability and sequencing was criticized, especially when required courses were full or not offered. Students also pointed out a mismatch between the time and assignments required for courses and the credit hours assigned to them, especially for lab and music courses.

Second-Year Students
Second-year students expressed frustrations with curricular structures that did not appear consistent or reasonable to them. A number of students complained that the number of credit hours assigned to a class do not match the time commitment for the course, especially in the case of lab and music courses. Also, students pointed out that general education and electives are not consistent across majors and so really constitute major requirements rather than a common requirement for all students. Finally, students indicated that curricula should allow for more electives. By the start of their second year some had already used up all electives just exploring one or two courses that seemed interesting but were not required. Finally, second-year students felt that the learning experience was inconsistent among the various faculty members who taught them and expectations were unclear. They were unhappy when faculty constantly came late to class, had no syllabus, and did not respond to tests and papers in a timely fashion. They also felt that all faculty members should be required to post grades for assignments to Blackboard.

Third-Year Students
Third-year students expressed surprise that the third year of their studies was significantly more difficult than first two years. They speculated this resulted from a move from general education courses to specialized courses in the major but still thought the curriculum should have more a smooth transition and integration throughout their studies. Finally, they complained that when class work and reading is due, it is all bunched together for every class.

Fourth-Year Students
General education was perceived by fourth-year students as potentially valuable down the road but poorly packaged and the connection to disciplines was not strong enough. Participants reported there was a common perception among students and even university employees that general education was “something to get out of the way” or something “to bang out.” Course availability and sequencing was criticized, and students were frustrated when required courses were offered only at one time or were full. Finally, an overview of significant expectations and activities should be provided to all students prior to registration in a class and preferably at the beginning of the program. For instance, if a required research methods course requires a major independent research project, then this should be discussed in orientation for majors, and it should be mentioned in the catalog so students can prepare themselves for such activities.
**Frustration with University Communication and Processes**

Participants thought university offices should be friendlier, more helpful, and able to provide all information needed about their student records, not just bits and pieces. University communications should be expanded to include regular communication to mobile devices and postal mail; website navigation should be improved. Processes and services such as registration, major and course changes, and bill payment should be easy and transparent. Students remarked that these functions could be made to work with effort, but they should be designed to make the student experience easier, not more difficult.

**Second-Year Students**

Second-year students were critical of registration processes that assigned registration times when a student has a scheduled class as well as assigning privileges to special populations such as resident assistants and athletes, although some students in the focus group defended these practices. Students thought the communication among the staff in offices of the Registrar, Bursar, and Financial Aid should all be able to answer the same questions, since billing, financial aid and registration are all so closely related. Students also complained about food options and wanted flexibility in the number of meals in a meal plan; they also wanted more kitchen facilities in residence halls.

**Third-Year Students**

Observed that various campus services were helpful but often students had to make the services work for them rather than the services initially working for the students. One student singled out Disability Services in this respect. The Learning Center, math tutors, and Writing Center were described as helpful but difficult to find initially. Even in their third year, students praised their First-Year Experience activities and orientation (in fall 2007) as getting them on the right track.

**Fourth-Year Students**

Fourth-year students were especially interested in seeing an improvement in University logistics and communication. The overarching complaint expressed by the group involves a lack of integration and communication and services that are compartmentalized. One student remarked, “If the university can communicate detail about a robbery in the park in real-time, why can’t I be told why there is a hold on my financial aid?” Students expected better coordination of services as well as a higher level of communication from the university including detail, friendliness, and efficiency. Other students described their attempts to get information “like pulling teeth” and didn’t understand why better and consistent information could not be made available online. There was frustration when a person was unavailable to discuss issues with them, and when staff were available, they were often unfriendly. One student remarked, “You feel like you are interrupting their day and are sent on wild goose chase” in order to get information regarding payment and/or registration. Specific offices mentioned in this respect included: Bursar, Registrar, Business Office, Admissions, and Financial Aid. Finally, participants felt that communications from the university should be sent redundantly in multiple media – email, postal mail, telephone, and text messages.

“**You feel like you are interrupting their day and are sent on wild goose chase” in order to get information regarding payment and/or registration.**
Mixed Perception of Advising
Academic advising was both praised and criticized. In instances where advising worked well, students talked about building a friendly relationship with a faculty or staff member in Willard Hall; this relationship extended beyond “just giving out a PIN.” In instances where advising went poorly, students most prominently cited getting inconsistent information or just receiving PINs for registration without much consultation advice or planning. In other instances, advisors discouraged students from “taking too many credits,” even though it would delay progress to graduation.

Second-Year Students
Second-year students identified various positive aspects of advising, and when they had positive things to say, they observed they received good advising from the start of their college experience. Students reported that good advisors helped them set goals as well as communicate to them exactly what they need to do to succeed. Good advisors were supportive in helping students make decisions and solve problems. Students appreciated meeting with the department chair for advisement as well as their assigned advisor.

Advising was described negatively in cases where students had “too many different advisors; not by choice.” One student found the athletic advisor better than the official academic advisor. Students were also displeased with advising when the advisor just gave out a PIN rather than provide good advice. Great frustration was expressed when there was a conflict between information in the degree audit system and person-to-person advice.

Third-Year Students
Third-year students did not discuss academic advising at length during their focus group.

Fourth-Year Students
Fourth-year students described advising by and large as helpful and accessible. Students talked about using both their faculty advisors as well as advisors in Willard Hall to schedule classes and make academic decisions. One fourth-year student was especially pleased with an advisor who had influence to meet with potential employers and have “people I can talk, email, or call,” allowing students to network.

Like the second-year students, fourth-year students expressed great frustration when advice they received from a faculty member or staff advisor conflicted with information in the degree audit system. Additionally, students reported having multiple degree requirement sheets for the same program “floating around” led to confusion and uncertainty about which one was the right one. These events led students to lose confidence in the entire system.
Appendix: 2nd-Year High Probability Group Notes
Nov. 10, 2009
12:30pm-1:30pm

9 signed up
6 students attended (3 men, 3 women; 2 Hispanic, 1 Black or African American)
2 students communicated via email that they could not attend

Advising
- Positive aspects of academic advising:
  - received good advisement from the start – good and bad choices make the difference
    - Advising structure had set goals and advisors communicated to students exactly what they needed to do to succeed.
    - Learned to be proactive
    - able to meet with department chair for advisement as well as assigned advisor
  - Advisors were supportive in helping students make decisions, solve problems
- Negative aspects of academic advising:
  - had too many different advisors; not by choice; found athletic advisor better than academic advisor
  - Advisors just dispense PINs rather than provide good advice.
  - Conflict between degree audit system and person-to-person advice. The differences between personal online graduation requirements and what advisor lists led to confusion, and one student expressed frustration about an advisor who could not explain why the conflicting information; can lead to having to attend longer.
  - When advising structure didn’t work, students went to Chair.
  - Getting bad advice and wasting time with new appointments

- Informal advising
  - RL advisors are very helpful – take time, draw from their own personal experiences
  - Each of the RAs and student workers in their building had valuable experience to share; the wide range of majors among them made them a valuable resource from which to get advice

Different messages about four-year graduation:
- Students in the focus groups reported their peers discouraged them from trying to graduate in four years. Completing certain majors (e.g. music, education) was deemed to be impossible or at least not a good idea.
- Conversely, the institution at times sends a message to encourage students to graduate in four years.
- But students reported advisors often discouraged from taking “too many” credits, making graduation in four years difficult to do.
Frustrations with curricular structures:
- Credit hours don’t match the time commitment. Some majors have 1 credit hour classes which require as much real time as a 3 credit hour class; may require taking up to 10 classes to be classified as full time. Same frustration with 3 times a week labs.
- Taking band required for music majors, but the time commitment is enormous and the focus is on choreography (marching patterns) rather than musical knowledge or technique.
- Switching majors – specific electives for one major do not carry over to new major’s requirements.
- More electives should be built into the curriculum so various majors can be explored. In some cases trying just a few courses used up all their electives, and so taking courses that seemed interesting but not required translated to staying an extra year to complete required courses.

Teaching and faculty
- Learning experience is inconsistent; expectations are often unclear.
- Lack of professionalism by some faculty members
  - constantly late to class
  - no syllabus
  - no timely response to tests, papers, projects, etc.
- Faculty posting grades on Blackboard Vista – all should be required to do it.

Structural issues
- Registration
  - May be in class during appointed registration time; lose out on class choices
  - Too many pre-registrations for specific populations – athletes, RA’s, etc.
    - One student complained about this.
    - Two others explained/defended these practices
  - Lack of communication between registrar, bursar, and financial aid.
- Dining and food options
  - Flexibility should be allowed in meal plan choices.
  - Dorms should have more kitchens with working appliances (stoves, microwaves, toaster ovens, etc.) so students can prepare their own meals.
- Lack of cultural diversity, esp. Hispanic students
  - Some majors seem to not have many students from minority race/ethnic backgrounds.
  - Diverse students seem to be overrepresented among athletes.
  - Institution should make additional efforts to recruit students from high schools from diverse backgrounds and encourage them to participate in activities other than sports.
Personal responsibility initiatives:

- Prioritize school, family, work, etc.
  - “education should be fun”
  - College “is our responsibility”
- Becoming involved in clubs, sports, campus events were listed as items that help prompt success on campus.
- Don’t be scared to ask for help.

Resources:

- Campus needs more computers and printers
- Learning Center needs extended hours on Fridays

Activity 1
Participants were asked to write down on a note card three aspects about their experience at Central that have helped them. This list is below.

- The guidance I have received from Residence Life staff
- The Math Tutor Center
- Majors Club Fairs
- The Pre-collegiate and Access Services have helped me a lot. They have given me a solid base to work from. I sincerely do love the people that work there and I would love to work fro them on day.
- Financial Aid advisor [specific staff member]
- The great librarians there to answer any question.
- Good Advising
- Involve with club
- Style of living and living arrangements
- Joining clubs and going to events on campus
- Becoming familiar with my academic advisors
- Networking on campus and finding out other peoples experiences to help my own.
- Orientation
- Availability of Technology
- Academic Advisors
- Being able to meet with the head of my program to discuss what I need to receive my degree in 4 years.
- Becoming a part of campus through clubs- which also allowed me to meet new people.
- Knowing people who came here with me.
Activity 2
Participants were asked to write down on a note card three aspects about their experience at Central that have frustrated them. This list is below:

- Academic Advisors
- Cafeteria
- Scheduling
- Loss of classes in switching majors
- Advisors telling student to take mostly course for their major rather than Gen. Eds. Their first year.
- Transfer credits
- Lack of morning classes/ options for classes
- Teachers → Part time vs. Full-time
- When classes are offered
- Professors being afraid to admit they don’t know, disorganized, unfairness
- Registration
- Class participation
- Issues with teachers
- Roommates
- Being able to sign up for classes and having available spots.
- Pack up and go home one weekends type of school.
- Required meal plan
- When I don’t get advising I need to have to go back and make a new appointment.
- There are not enough Hispanics there. This is a Hispanic town, but something has to happen to get more to come here.
- Band is mandatory for music majors.
- Music classes are not worth the amount of credits as they should be.
3rd year high probability group
Nov. 9, 2009
1:00pm-3:30pm (started around 1:15 waiting for others)

Student Center 1849 Room
Facilitator Myrna Garcia-Bowen
Notes: Allison Joslyn, Co-facilitator

5 signed up
2 students attended

Motivation and Responsibility
- Always fill time with external activities. Whenever there is a gap in time, there is a need to fill that with something
- Time management and over-commitment
  - Works 10 hours at Rec Central
  - Took 18 credits because wants to graduate sooner and had time in her schedule; perhaps took too many general education courses;
  - Personal choice to do this; did not consult advisor
- Working
  - “I don’t study as much as I could or should, and I know my grades could be better”
  - Financial pressure because father laid off. Graduation in four years is important and work allows that to occur (???)
    - 16 hours per week in Breakers (campus job)
    - 25-37 hours off campus
    - Plus full-time credit load
    - Has prompted illness

Connections and Networking
- Knowing a lot of older students and having a family member on campus helped with adjustment and with solving problems
  - Having a friendly face
  - Having connections
  - Solving problems (got around an unresponsive professor by asking a friend who suggested going to the asst. chair)
  - Helped navigate the website (which is difficult to navigate on your own)
  - Better than calling the university (you either get a recording or feel rushed by the person on the other end)
  - Scavenger hunt was useful to learn where things are and how to get there (buildings, services, etc)
- Campus features promote familiarity
  - Campus is perfect size; walkable, no buses needed to get around campus
  - Close to mall
  - See familiar people
- Roommates have been a problem
Had trouble with roommate (stayed up late; couldn’t make schedules work) – solved problem by going home because it was too late to change.

One student had five different roommates in the course of a year.

Campus Services / Programs

- Disability Services. At first, the office wasn’t helpful, but student eventually figured out how to make the services fit her needs.
  - Professors didn’t follow through on understanding her needs and accommodating note-takers.
  - Getting off of the syllabus was problematic
  - Professors could be more adaptive or flexible to meet student needs.
  - Had to be assertive and learn how to make Disability Services work for her
- Used Learning Center and math tutor and Writing Center and tutoring services through Psychology. Resources were helpful but hard to find originally.
- “Semester-at-a-glance” is helpful to manage their time (Learning Center resource?)
- First-Year Experience was helpful
  - FYE professor was advisor. This connection assisted with a continuing connection over subsequent three years.
  - One student was in a learning community, and she reported the experience of being in the same classes helped her to form relationships
- First semester success carried through to current activities
  - Joined marching band and was on campus before other students – help with acclimated (found where everything was), made friends, made connections).
  - Established sense of place and ownership
- Orientation was helpful, but it was an overwhelming in terms of information and activities.

Junior year

- Surprised that year three was more difficult than first two years. Students speculated this resulted from a move from general education courses to specialized courses in the major.

Activity 1

Three aspects about your experience at Central that have helped you.

- FYE courses helped first semester
- Activities, clubs – interacting with different people
- Advisor, professors
- Disability services
- First-year experience classes
- Helpful professors
- Knowing older students on campus. Their knowledge of professors and where everything is
- Orientation weekend – scavenger hunt
Activity 2

- Working 2 jobs to pay bills
- Relationships
- When class work and reading is due. It’s all bunched together for every class
- Disability services
- Professors; people: judgment, respect, skills, capabilities
- Overload courses; time management
- No social life!
Self-confidence and motivation
Students who participated in the group were self-confident and motivated. They:

- Weren’t afraid to express themselves
- Valued engagement in university life and in the classroom
- Appreciated high standards that are applied fairly
- Praised classes that were engaging and active
- Seemed like fighters – they were going to persevere no matter what
- Exhibited openness and friendliness and wanted others to do the same
- Felt like they were successful
- Desired recognition for their success
  - recognition on Dean’s list, letters home, and other incentives were highly valued
  - “it’s like they really cared”

Improve University logistics and communication
Students expected better coordination of services as well as a higher level of communication from the university including detail, friendliness, and efficiency.

- Students paid a lot of attention to logistics of University and had higher expectations for coordinated delivery of services than current levels provided.
- When communicating with university employees in person or on the phone, they wanted details about how to pay bills, registration, financial aid, holds.
  - Employees could tell students they had a hold but could explain why this was the case or how to take care of it
  - “If the university can communicate detail about a robbery in the park real time, why can’t I be told why there is a hold on my financial aid?”
  - Detail about student information should easily be available online
  - Getting information is “like pulling teeth”
  - Frustration when it wasn’t possible to talk to a person
- University offices should be friendlier and more accessible
  - Employees were not friendly
  - “You feel like you are interrupting their day and are sent on wild goose chase” in order to get information regarding payment and/or registration
  - Specific offices mentioned in this respect included:
    - Bursar
    - Registrar
    - Business Office
    - Admissions
• Financial Aid

• **Processes are convoluted and inconsistent**
  o Students felt they required to gather a set of signatures on a form and then later told these signatures weren’t actually needed.
  o “I don’t want to fill out a form and be ignored.”

• Communications from the university should be sent redundantly in multiple media – email, postal mail, telephone, and text messages.

**Connections and networking**

Students valued making connections inside and outside of the university:

• Students praised the connections they made on campus and specifically cited:
  o **Advising** as helpful and accessible. Students talked about using both their faculty advisors as well as advisors in Willard Hall to
  o **Counseling and Wellness Center** was helpful
  o **Residence halls** were described as great places to make friends and feel connected to other students
  o **Clubs and activities** were resources that these students took advantage of and participated actively in them
  o **Classrooms** were important places to make connections with other students to develop friendships and relationships.
  o **Individual professors, tutors, and advisors.** Students praised small academic programs in which they got to know professors and take several courses from them. This helped them better understand expectations.
    ▪ “When you find out who the right one is, it becomes beneficial”
    ▪ Advisor has influence to meet with potential employers and have “people I can talk, email, or call” allowing students to network.

• Connections to the professional world of their discipline outside the university were valued and praised:
  o **Guest speakers in classes** such as alumni, professionals, and graduate programs were cited as very valuable additions to the academic experience in the classroom.
  o **Internships** were praised by the students who had been able to arrange theses. Students who had found arranging internships difficult expressed frustration

**General education and curricular structures**

• **General education** was perceived as potential valuable down the road but poorly packaged and the connection to disciplines was not strong enough.
  o Common perception among students and even university employees that general education was “something to get out of the way” or something “to bang out”
  o Because the courses are required and the negative attitude about them, the impact and usefulness of the content was muted or lost altogether.
  o The logic of how the skills and knowledge from general education courses fit into their major or degree was not made apparent enough or coordinated in a way that they could see why they were taking the courses
• **Course availability and sequencing** was criticized
  o Students were frustrated when required courses were offered only at one time or were full. This was cited as a barrier to graduating on time.
  o Some students indicated that courses should be better structured and sequenced
  o The number of required courses each semester should be balanced, not 5 required courses in one semester, and just one in another
  o Despite student demand and agreement, in one instance a professor “refused to teach one section”

• **An overview of significant expectations and activities** should be provided to all students. For instance, if a required research methods course requires a major independent research project, then this should be discussed in orientation for majors, and it should be mentioned in the catalog so students can prepare themselves for such activities.

• **Inconsistent information** about academic requirements:
  o Information from the degree audit system is inconsistent with information disseminated by people
  o Multiple degree requirement sheets floating around makes requirements confusing to all students – which one is right?

**Student apathy**
Participants thought too many other students were apathetic about their education
• Participants valued opt-in programs offered by their department to develop resumes or clubs because only motivated students who wanted to be there attended. It made these activities more focused and engaging
• Attendance policies were an area of discussion and disagreement.
  o Some participants felt that required attendance and doctor’s notes made CCSU “feel like high school,” while others felt it was important for them as students who regularly attended classes to get credit and recognition for their commitment to attending class.
• Participants supported the new probation and suspension policies that set minimum academic performance as a GPA of 2.0; this would have the effect of making students more motivated and setting higher standards. Students shouldn’t just be allowed to coast along.
• Some of the emphasis on student apathy could be related to the outgoing and friendly nature of the focus group participants.

**Additional Frustrations**
• **Bookstore** -- participants were generally frustrated with the availability of books in the bookstore and book prices
  o Students asked for advance notice of which books would be required for each course [editorial note: the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) will require book titles, prices, and ISBNs to be printed in course schedules beginning in July 2010]
  o Closed off sections of the bookstore at various intervals was inconvenient
  o Participants indicated that the bookstore sometimes did not have the required books and this negatively affected class performance and engagement.
- Participants also questioned publishers’ practices of continually releasing new editions.

- Food and dining services -- Participants expressed frustration with the quality and variety of food as well as meal plan structures
  - “Same old chicken”; “I can only eat so many chicken patties in one week”
  - Quality
  - Meal plan variety – credit or partnerships with local vendors

- Dilapidated facilities
  - DiLoreto and Willard Halls were singled out as facilities that desperately needed renovation, especially in contrast to Vance Academic Center.
Activity 1
Participants were asked to write down on a note card three aspects about their experience at Central that have helped them. This list is below.

- Availability of professors - i.e. flexible office hours and professors’ guidance
- Computer lab and library availability
- Flexible class scheduling - i.e. many sections and time offerings of classes
- In school tutors
- Flexible hours
- Diverse interaction with others
- Flexibility of advisors
- Ability to check registration etc. statuses independently
- Online requirements available as regards majors, specializations and minors
- Advising career services
- Student clubs
- Living in the dorms
- Decent advisors
- Other students
- Advising
- Career Services
- Extracurricular activities
- Social-small tight-nit group of friends
- Familiarity- born and raised in CT
- Academics/small program- Social Work very close/encouraging
- The professors have been extremely helpful and are willing to meet privately to discuss course material
- The library staff have helped me often when researching
- The academic material in the history classes has been interesting
Activity 2
Participants were asked to write down on a note card three aspects about their experience at Central that have frustrated them. This list is below.

- Parking on campus is a big frustration of mine; being a commuter and arriving on campus at different times every day
- Sometimes not having a computer available in the computer lab
- Students not caring enough about their school work or not participatin, yet they receive the same grade as those who do want to be there and do care
- Difficult professors
- Zero class interaction/participation
- Notifications either not given at all or only given electronically as far as fees due, registration, etc. (loss of application)
- Advisors not focusing on institutional credits needed
- Being told to fill out a form instead of being allowed to see someone with regard to registration issues
- Professors
- Office faculty being uncooperative
- Unavailable classes
- Parking
- Bursars holds, charges, no communication as why
- Classes only offered certain semesters
- Professors some not so great
- Book store inflation/ lack of supply
- Rarity of certain required courses
- Poor publicity of helpful events
- Dorms noise level
- Food mundane especially on weekends
- Finding internships
- Too many students are apathetic to their education
- Cafeteria food isn’t great
- Bureaucracy
Appendix: Focus Group Outline

Welcome and Introduction
Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group conducted by members of the Retention and Graduation Council, a group sponsored by the Provost and the Vice President for Student Affairs to promote student success and timely graduation at Central. The purpose of today’s focus group is to discuss and identify aspects about the educational and social experience at CCSU that promote your success as students, as well as those aspects that may interfere with your success. [Introduce facilitators]

Informed Consent
This research is completely voluntary. You may choose to leave at any time with no penalty or consequence. You are not required to respond to any questions that are asked. Further, your participation in this focus group is completely anonymous, and no remarks you make will be attributed to you in a way that identifies you. We ask that you respect the anonymity of others in the focus group and do not discuss their remarks in a way that would compromise their identity. In return for your participation in the focus group, you will receive a $15 gift card for use at the CCSU Bookstore at the end of today’s session.

Outline of focus group
This focus group will last about one hour. The first part of the focus groups will ask you to write down some responses on note cards and talk about them. The second part of the session will cover open-ended questions about your experience at Central. Discussion with other participants is encouraged, and you should feel free to respond to or elaborate upon comments made by other participants. In all exchanges, we ask that you be respectful of others’ opinions and ideas.

A. Note card activities:

[Distribute the first blank note card]

- Take a minute to write down three aspects about your experience at Central that have helped you.

[After most participants have finished writing]

As everyone finishes up, who would like to tell us about one item they wrote down and discuss how it helped them?

[Continue to allow participants to share until everyone has had a chance to share at least one item]

[Distribute the second blank note card]

- Write down three frustrations about your experience at Central

[After most participants have finished writing]
As everyone finishes up, who would like to tell us about one item they wrote down and discuss how it frustrated them?

[Continue to allow participants to share until everyone has had a chance to share at least one item]

Open discussion items

For the next two items, we would like to have a discussion about what has promoted your academic success at CCSU and conversely what has gotten in the way of you making progress.

1. First, what has promoted and what has interfered with your academic success at Central?
   [if further prompts are needed: this could include offices and services, programs and professors/staff members, policies and procedures, and aspects of personal life]

2. Second, what has gotten in your way as you make progress toward your degree?
   [if further prompts are needed: this could include offices and services, programs and professors/staff members, policies and procedures, and aspects of personal life]

For the remainder of the focus group, we would like to discuss issues that relate directly to your experience in your [second / third / fourth] year at Central:

3. [Subcommittee special item]

4. [Subcommittee special item]

Wrap up

Thank you very much for participating in this focus group today. We remind you that we will protect your anonymity and privacy as we analyze and share findings from our discussion today. We ask that you respect each others’ privacy as well and do not discuss their remarks in a way that would compromise their identity. Thank you again and have a great rest of the semester.