

Major Highlights and Conclusions

- Out of all SSS services, students appear to benefit the most from financial aid/counseling, but they are also grateful for the additional academic and emotional support.
- Students describe the SSS atmosphere as “inviting,” “welcoming,” and “family-oriented.”
- Having close, individualized relationships with advisors and mentors is extremely valued by SSS students.
- Students who participated in SSS TLCs were satisfied with the experience, but there was some confusion around whether TLCs were required.
- SSS tutoring was highly preferred by students who have utilized it, but there were some concerns with the length of the application process.
- Students would like to be notified of SSS housing options earlier in the summer before the start of their freshman year.

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STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to understand the benefits students receive from participating in Student Support Services (SSS). In addition, we assessed the extent to which SSS is meeting its program objectives, connecting students to appropriate resources at IUPUI, and enhancing students' overall experiences at IUPUI. The information obtained in this focus group will be used to facilitate improvements to programs and services for the coming academic year. The results from this study are intended to be shared as part of the special populations program review to determine how IUPUI can better serve its diverse student population.

METHOD

Trained members of the Office of Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS) facilitated the student focus groups. The project was supervised by Steve Graunke.

Recruitment Procedures

SSS student were invited to participate in the focus group discussion via email. They were told that food and refreshments would be served following the discussion. Prior to the start of discussion in the focus groups, a member of the IRDS research team explained how the focus group would work and summarized the content. They also asked permission to record the session, and no participants declined. The focus group session lasted about 45 minutes.

Participants

A total of 9 domestic students participated in the focus group. Seven of the students were female. Class levels varied.

Data Analysis

Analytical procedures included an exploratory content analysis of the SSS focus group's transcriptions. This comprehensive report considers an overall view of participants in the group. Because the total number of students was small, some aspects of the data have been considered significant to report and address despite infrequency. In this study, the goal is to represent the perspective of the participants rather than attempt to generalize to a broader group.

Content Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed, and the text of the focus groups was analyzed to find the most significant content themes and meaning that emerged from the data. Patton (2002) describes content analysis as “referring to any qualitative data reduction or sense making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 453). In respecting content analysis as an analytical technique, a set of codes were developed. The process of developing these codes was based on the foundations of grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory posits that the central tenants of experience and phenomenon are held within the lives of the participants being studied, and that a general theory will emerge as a result of examining the lived experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Coding Process

A coding process was employed as the primary means of examination. Corbin and Strauss's (1990) work explains, "data using the grounded theory method is frequently referred to as coding to depict the process by which data are collapsed into smaller pieces of data, categorized, considered, and conceptualized in new ways" (p. 348). Specifically, the focus groups' transcriptions were analyzed carefully by creating codes and code groups that represented the content of the students' input. Each code was generated directly from the data.

RESULTS

Several notable themes emerged in the focus group data through analysis. These themes are presented and supported by actual examples of students' statements. Although names have been redacted to help promote confidentiality, this authentic student feedback has not been altered in any other way. It is hoped that this method of results presentation will allow for a trustworthy representation of students' experiences in SSS.

The results are organized by the questions asked in the focus group. Students were asked questions about their initial involvements with SSS, the environment of the SSS office, connections to IUPUI through SSS, and satisfaction with SSS services, including tutoring, peer mentoring, academic advising, housing, and themed learning communities. Students were also given the opportunity to make suggestions on how to improve the program and to express other comments that may not have been covered by our questions.

How did you find out about SSS and how did you feel when you were selected for the program?

Almost all of the students in our group were approached to join SSS during freshman orientation, with the exception of one student who found out about the program from a friend who was a member.

- "SSS found *me*. Before, I didn't even know it existed. I applied [to IUPUI]. I came here for orientation, and then was told that SSS wanted me in their program."

When asked to name one word that describes how they felt when they learned that they were selected for the program, students generated positive words, including:

- "Privileged"
- "Special"
- "Honored"
- "Excited"
- "Super happy"

One student offered the word, "confused," because she had never heard of SSS. However, she said that she did not remain confused for long, because:

- "Before you like agree [to join SSS], they take you in a room and they explain what it was."

How would you describe the environment of the Student Support Services office?

The students we interviewed described the SSS office as a safe and welcoming space where they enjoy spending their time, unwinding after a long day, and talking to people who know and care about them.

- "I would just go in there sometimes if I had a bad day, just talk to people, not really about anything. Like real inviting."
- "They all know who you are. Like, they know you by name, and they know your situation."
- "There's not anybody that you can't not talk to in there."
- "Just being in there, like they said, it makes you happy. You can be having a bad day and you'll go in there and like the vibes are awesome."
- "Even if my question might seem stupid, they don't care. Like I don't feel like I'm bothering them."

Which services in Student Support Services help you stay enrolled at IUPUI the most?

In response to this question, students immediately replied, in unison, "financial aid." They were clearly grateful for the financial support they've received through SSS, and several shared stories where they unexpectedly received funds without even applying or asking for them.

- “My situation was, they had something wrong with my bursar where they couldn’t give me a grant that they gave the freshmen, and they emailed me and told me to come in and talk to them, and they made it to where I could receive the grant, and for the second semester and everything, so it was really helpful because that’s money that I would have missed out on.”
- “I went to pay [my balance] myself and they were like, ‘Student Support Services paid it for you already,’ and I was like, ‘really?’ So I wanted to thank them personally because that’s a big deal for me.”
- “I don’t know exactly what it was, but they gave me something. I didn’t even apply for it, I just got it.”

Aside from financial support, students also said that SSS provides them with mental support during difficult times.

- “They’re like the mom that tells you before you go to school in the morning, like, ‘you’re gonna do great on that test or that project,’ or, ‘you’re gonna do awesome on that speech.’”
- “They give you like mental support. Like, you come in there and they be like, ‘don’t be stressed anymore,’ like studying for a test, like, ‘you’re gonna pass, don’t worry about it.’”

How did peer mentoring help you succeed?

Peer mentors provide emotional, social, and academic support. SSS students appear to enjoy the informal, yet strong, relationships they build with their mentors and their availability to communicate through text messages.

- “We didn’t meet all the time, but [my peer mentor] texts us... I was close to a mental breakdown and I texted my mentor and she helped me through it.”
- “My mentor has us go bowling and stuff with her, so to like get to know more about college and stuff.”
- “I had a mentor with the Bridge and I feel like I’m closer with my mentor at SSS and she’s more open and she gave me her number and I can text her. And the mentor that I had through TLC was like, ‘you’re not allowed to have my number, if you need me you can message me on Canvas, you are to refer to me as a professor, I am your higher up,’ where my mentor here was just like, ‘I’m here to mentor *you*, I’m here to help you if you’re having a bad day,’ you know, ‘text me or call me whenever you need me,’ whereas other ones it’s more professional, but here it’s more laid back and more family-oriented.”
- “I would go in and talk to my mentor like if I needed to drop a class or get a W or anything like that.”

Furthermore, students consider their peer mentors as friends.

- “I used mine to just help me with classwork... and just like as a friend, they can be like a friend.”
- “It’s just also like your friend talking to you. Like giving advice and that.”

How satisfied were you with tutoring from SSS?

Three students received tutoring in math or science from SSS. They reported positive experiences.

- “I was satisfied. The girl that I had, she was very flexible with her time, so basically whenever I needed to make an appointment, she would be available to me.”
- “Some people say they’ll get to [their homework] later... but when you’ve got tutoring and you know you gotta be somewhere at a certain time, they make sure you get the job done.”

Students who received tutoring from SSS found it to be more efficient and helpful than the MAC.

- “Mine wasn’t more than once. I just came to what they had on our recent newsletter... She helped me with my finals study guide, because in the MAC it was packed because it was finals time, so I came down here and I had my person who I could just talk to.”
- “[At the MAC] They kind of just answer it for you, cause they want to just get to the next question, I feel like... but the tutor here was... it was only me and her in this room, and we would sit here for however long we needed to... She told me step by step how to do it, she taught it.”

Students who did not seek tutoring through SSS were asked why they did not use this resource. One student explained that she tried to apply for an SSS tutor, but she had trouble receiving one.

- “I sought tutoring. I filled out the application; they just never gave me a tutor... It was a psychology class.”

Another student who had received SSS tutoring explained that it can be a lengthy process to receive a tutor, but believes it is more efficient to have a tutor once you’ve gone through the process.

- “They didn’t have too many science tutors. That’s what they told me...It was almost until like the middle of semester before I got one.”
- “Once you have one, they... like the one I have, she was there whenever I needed her.”

Students who did not seek tutoring were also asked if they knew about the service, and it was agreed that SSS adequately advertises tutoring through flyers and emails.

- “I think they make it... I knew about it... I think they made it, you know, known.”

How satisfied were you with the academic advising at SSS?

SSS students were very satisfied with their academic advising experiences. They valued the personal, one-on-one relationships they have with their SSS advisors, and believe that this relationship is superior to what they would receive from an academic advisor through their school or program.

- “The reason I think we’re so lucky is because we don’t have to stand in line or wait to get an appointment with an advisor because they’re booked up.”
- “It’s more personal than just doing their job. They’ll crack jokes and what not. And they’ll schedule appointments and help out. Here at SSS, we’re like a family.”
- “I really think they’re really helpful, because I knew what I wanted to do with my major from the day I got here, but [my advisor] was like, ‘you know, if you change your mind, we’ll look for back up things’. Like, she just made sure that I had plenty of help no matter what, even if you change your mind, so you don’t waste time and money, because school isn’t cheap.”
- “Versus a normal advisor who just asks you the basic questions, like, ‘do you want science or math or this or that’, and ‘we’ve got 30 minutes and then you’re done,’ [my SSS advisor] literally said, ‘we’re just gonna sit and talk and have a normal conversation as if we’re just friends, and I’m gonna pick out things about you that I see’... and then she laid like 4 or 5 majors out onto the table, and I loved all of them.”

How satisfied were you with your SSS housing experiences?

Only one student had utilized SSS housing. He was satisfied with his experiences.

- “Yeah, so it was all good. Clay helped me out and made sure, like, you know how it’s kind of competitive, so he made sure that I actually had a place to stay, so it worked really good. And I applied for it the semester before. It worked out.”

Others said that they did not know about SSS housing until they got to college, and by then it was too late to apply. They would have liked to have had the option to apply for SSS housing earlier so that they could take advantage of it as freshmen.

- “I didn’t know about it. When [SSS] accepted me, they told me about it, but I had already applied for housing somewhere else.”
- “So maybe if they told us about it earlier before all the housing stuff is due, because IUPUI tells us we have to have everything in by this date or else you’ll be on a waitlist.”
- “I applied for housing way before orientation, and we didn’t find out about SSS housing until orientation.”
- “[Finding out about SSS housing earlier] would’ve saved me, like, \$6,000.”

What does Student Support Services do to help keep you connected to IUPUI?

Students reported that SSS keeps them connected to IUPUI through emails and newsletters about campus events.

- “They send a newsletter.”
- “They also send emails around.”
- “They send emails around and we get the Pillar once a month which has the workshops on it and big things happening around campus.”

Students are also notified about various social events through SSS.

- “We usually throw some kind of, like, a game night or we have the end of the year celebration.”
- “Like, hey guys we’re going to Regatta, if you don’t have anything to do it’s this time or this time, you should go check it out.”

What benefits did you receive from the SSS Themed Learning Communities?

When asked about SSS Themed Learning Communities (TLCs), most students replied that they had participated in a TLC of some type. Some general confused remarks and clarifications about TLC requirements followed.

- “I think it’s a requirement.”
- “No, it’s not required.”
- “Mine wasn’t SSS, it was a trio, but I thought they said we had to do a trio to be in a program.”
- “A trio?”
- “I don’t think we had to do it, I think they just encouraged it.”
- “How long they been doin’ this? It’s my first time hearing about this.”

While almost all students had participated in some form of TLC, 3 students has been in TLCs through SSS. Among these students, the benefits of SSS TLCs that were reported appeared mostly to be social.

- “It was with the same people so I became friends with them, ‘cause we were always in the same classes.”
- “I met my best friend in mine, because we were in all the same 3 classes.”
- “I’m still friends with everyone there, and made a best friend too.”

Students in SSS TLCs also reported some academic benefits in terms of the usefulness of class material and the reinforcing nature of the separate classes.

- “Ours was Money Smarts, the actual SSS one, and he just told us about how to really manage money, how to make budgets, and be money-aware. And that helped a lot.”
- “I feel like it helped me in the 2 classes that it was linked with. Because mine was linked with psychology and English, and it helped with those classes.”

When asked if and why anyone did not sign up for a TLC, one student replied:

- “I just didn’t want to be in one.”

How else can Student Support Services help you succeed at IUPUI?

Students appeared content with SSS’s efforts to help them succeed at IUPUI. They remarked that success is really up to students themselves, and that they are each responsible for deciding the extent to which they will utilize SSS resources.

- “I mean I think [SSS] does a lot. You can’t expect something to be just so amazing all the time, but they are! People pick and choose how they feel about it.”
- “The more involved you are the more you get out of it.”
- “Yeah, so if you don’t put in the effort, you’re not gonna get anything back.”

Some observed that SSS would benefit if they had funds to devote to a bigger office space.

- “More funds, or maybe a bigger office.”
- “There are some days, usually certain specific days, when [the SSS office] is just packed. Like people everywhere and at the computers and everything.”
- “They need a bigger office.”

One student also noted that she would like to see more awareness of SSS, although another student remarked that that may not be necessary because SSS picks their students.

- “And make it more a known thing. ‘Cause it’s kind of just like, over here in this corner.”
- “I think that’s more because they pick the people.”

Do you have any other comments?

Students concluded the discussion by elaborating on their positive experiences in SSS.

- “It helps me a lot, especially in the financial aspect. I always have a little bit left on my bursar and if I come in and talk to them, they usually can give me a grant or something to help me out.”
- “It made me more social. To be honest, I’m an introvert, I don’t like people, I don’t like small talk, but like, all the positive energy...”

When asked why they joined SSS as opposed to other services that IUPUI offers, students explained that they were compelled by the welcoming atmosphere.

- “I feel like it’s just the close knit... ‘Cause I was in the Bridge so I had an advisor with that, I had my advisor for the CSC, I had my advisor for the Social Work program, and I get in and I have Maurice for SSS. And I just feel like I can get in and I don’t have to make an appointment. I feel welcomed.”
- “It’s more laidback and family-oriented.”

Some also remarked that they appreciate how people in SSS stay connected to the program after they’ve graduated.

- “You see people that have graduated. My mentor actually came in last week and just talked to Ms. B for 2 hours. He came in and he was like, yeah I was just downtown and I thought I’d stop in and say hi, I haven’t seen you all in a while. You don’t see that in other offices... One of our new advisors, Dennis, is actually a previous SSS student. So, you see people actually wanting to come back and giving back because they gave that to them. And I think that goes back to the whole family-oriented thing.”
- “I still talk to my mentor.”
- “It sounds so cheesy, but SSS really is like, forever. They still talk to you and they still come in even though they’re not in it anymore.”

OVERALL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, students were highly satisfied with the SSS services they have received. In terms of understanding which services have the greatest influence on students’ success, participants in our focus group appeared to be most satisfied with the financial support that SSS provides. They were incredibly appreciative of the way in which they often receive financial aid without even having to apply or ask for it. Aside from monetary support, students were also grateful for the additional academic and emotional support they receive. Students especially enjoy the close, interpersonal relationships they build with their advisors and mentors in SSS. They consider the program to be very “welcoming” and “family-oriented,” which several students say compelled them to join.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

The focus group results suggest that in general, students are highly satisfied with their experiences in SSS and the various forms of support that the program offers. When asked to provide feedback on ways that SSS could be improved, students were reluctant to say anything negative about the program. As one student remarked, “it’s like biting the hand that feeds you if you complain about something or a program that’s actually trying to benefit you.” Students did, however, agree that the office is too small, and they would like to see expansions to the space.

Students who had taken part in Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) through SSS were satisfied with their experiences, especially in terms of social benefits. However, it was clear that there was some confusion around TLCs amongst the group. Several students were unsure if TLCs were required or if the TLC they participated in was through SSS, and one student was completely unfamiliar with TLC’s. Based on this observation, SSS advisors and mentors may need to better explain the benefits and structure of TLCs to students.

Several students in the focus group had utilized tutoring through SSS, and they found the individualized, one-on-one sessions to be more convenient and helpful than other tutoring services such as the MAC. However, it was mentioned that the process of actually attaining an SSS tutor can be quite difficult, especially for science tutors. Considering the benefits of these tutors that were reported in the focus group discussion, it may be valuable for SSS to invest in more tutors and look for solutions to expedite the process of assigning a tutor.

Our final suggestion concerns SSS housing. The students we interviewed were noticeably unsatisfied with IUPUI housing as a whole, and it appears as though SSS housing would be an appealing option for incoming freshmen, as it would provide reassurance that they will have housing secured when they arrive. However, due to the nature of SSS’s selection and identification process, incoming freshmen typically are not aware of the SSS housing option until they have arrived at IUPUI for orientation, and at that point they usually have found housing elsewhere. The students interviewed in this focus group explained that it would have helped them to have known about the SSS housing option earlier in the summer when other IUPUI housing applications were due.

In sum, focus group participants were extremely satisfied with their experiences in SSS. The financial and academic resources are very much appreciated, and the staff has done an excellent job fostering a welcoming atmosphere that gives members a “home away from home.” Based on students’ statements, SSS may consider examining the office space, clarifying TLCs, improving the tutoring application process, and better notifying students about SSS housing.