



theRPgroup

Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Los Angeles Valley College Focus Groups

Findings and Recommendations to
Support Strategic and Equity Planning

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Executive Summary

Project Background and Purpose

Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC) engaged the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) to conduct a series of 12 focus groups with internal and external stakeholders. A total of 88 participants took part in the focus groups. The purpose of this study was to identify the college's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) to inform the college's strategic and equity planning efforts. These areas of focus in this report included a lens on the COVID-19 pandemic and ways the college can continue its equity work related to and through the current situation. The key stakeholder groups invited to participate included:

Internal stakeholders

- Current students
- Instructional faculty
- Counseling faculty
- Classified professionals
- Administrators

External stakeholders

- Dual enrollment coordinators
- University representatives
- Regional program directors
- Workforce partners

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and included up to 10 participants. Researchers from the RP Group, in collaboration with LAVC research staff, designed a set of questions to guide the focus groups based on a SWOT analysis framework. For the purposes of this study, the SWOT analysis components were defined as follows:

Strength: A positive internal attribute.

Weakness: An internal attribute requiring improvement.

Opportunity: A trend or situation that, if acted upon, may have a positive impact on the institution.

Threat: A trend or situation that, if *not* acted upon, may have a negative impact on the institution.

Beyond the SWOT analysis framework, LAVC was interested in understanding its college identity by examining the perception of the institution, why students choose to attend, and what distinguishes LAVC from other colleges. The findings from this study highlight ideas for the creation of a visioning statement, including ways in which the college supports students' success and equitable outcomes, as well as how LAVC can strengthen its identity and visibility in the community.

Key Findings and Common Themes: Internal Stakeholders

Focus group participants offered feedback on institutional attributes and external factors believed to impact student success and equity at LAVC. Stakeholders were asked to discuss the ways in which the college effectively supported their success, the challenges they encountered, and suggestions they had for improving their experience. The conversations were analyzed to identify key themes across groups.

Summarized below are the findings that emerged from the focus groups with internal stakeholders.

STRENGTHS

A welcoming campus. The college was described as having a serene, park-like setting with faculty and staff who are welcoming and go above and beyond to assist students and campus visitors.

Working relationships and collegiality. There is notable comradery among college employees and a collaborative spirit that results in a true sense of community.

Support services and programs. A great deal of discussion took place around the standout programs and services LAVC provides students, along with many of the unique resources the college offers such as the Community Services Center and Family Resource Center.

WEAKNESSES

Administrative processes. Participants spoke about the lack of communication and coordination in Student Services that makes it difficult for students to get the information and resources they need.

Communication. LAVC struggles with communication across the college. Employees and students explained how information is not disseminated in a timely or consistent manner.

Campus cleanliness. Participants reported a real issue with campus cleanliness. While the outward appearance of the college has a pastoral quality, students and employees remarked on the untidy and soiled state of the classrooms and other buildings.

Technology. One of the major topics that emerged when discussing weaknesses at LAVC was technology. Specifically, the college website was described as outdated and difficult to navigate. Students also indicated many instructors are not up-to-date with respect to technology and do not know how to use Canvas.

OPPORTUNITIES

Equity and institutional reform. Participants described LAVC's call to action stemming from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and increased willingness from students, classified professionals, faculty, and administrators to engage in meaningful discourse around racism and social justice.

College leadership. Participants explained how the college president and other leaders on campus are creating a future for LAVC that offers new possibilities. The current administration was described as willing to listen and having a desire to innovate.

Transition to remote instruction. While COVID-19 created a multitude of obstacles and barriers for LAVC, focus group participants shared how it also provided an opportunity to increase access to college courses and services for many students by moving instruction and support into an online modality.

THREATS

Financial constraints. Participants raised concerns about the college budget. They questioned whether the anticipated cuts stemming from the pandemic will negatively impact LAVC's work around student success and equity.

Online-only instruction and campus life. According to participants, online instruction at LAVC has historically been a weakness for the college, which made the transition to remote instruction in spring 2020 due to the pandemic difficult.

Lack of community awareness. One concern participants identified as a longstanding issue was the lack of the community's awareness of LAVC as an institution and what it has to offer. Participants felt that the college has not done enough to brand itself.

COLLEGE IDENTITY

Standout faculty and resources. Participants spoke highly of the faculty and resources at LAVC. The quality of instruction and unique services offered by the college were cited as the main benefits to students.

Community reputation. LAVC has many noteworthy resources and supports, however participants explained that many people are unaware the college exists, and those who do know about the college sometimes perceive it as second choice.

Key Findings and Common Themes: External Stakeholders

Focus group participants offered feedback on institutional attributes and external factors believed to impact student success and equity at LAVC. Stakeholders were asked to discuss their interactions with the college, reflect on how the college is perceived in the community, and offer suggestions for turning LAVC's strengths and weaknesses into opportunities. The conversations were analyzed to identify key themes across groups.

Summarized below are the findings that emerged from the focus groups with external stakeholders.

STRENGTHS

Community partnerships. The college was described by external stakeholders as friendly and inviting, with a focus on community engagement. Residents in neighboring areas enjoy LAVC's publicly accessible facilities, including the gym, pool, and tree-lined walking paths.

College accessibility and student support. Conversations around college accessibility highlighted how LAVC has worked to help students reach their education goals by offering a diverse course selection and exceptional support services.

Community resources and civic engagement. Participants shared how the college embodies a service-minded attitude by providing community resources and creates opportunities for civic engagement by regularly partnering with non-profit organizations and regional programs in the area.

WEAKNESSES

Inefficient processes and lack of coordination. Students sometimes get bounced around Student Services and receive conflicting information from different departments due to unorganized processes and difficulty operating as a cohesive unit.

Communication and responsiveness. Prompt feedback does not always occur when corresponding with LAVC, and participants shared it sometimes takes multiple emails or phone calls before a response is received from the college.

Marketing and promotion. It was evident to participants that LAVC needs to increase its messaging and presence in the community through greater promotion and marketing efforts, as the college is not well known in the surrounding region.

OPPORTUNITIES

Outstanding faculty. Participants spoke of the exceptional instruction provided by faculty at LAVC. They described instructors as involved and engaged, taking the time to get to know students on an individual basis.

More online classes and virtual support services. The transition to remote instruction served as an impetus to increase access to courses and services that had historically only been available on campus.

Employee diversity. While the majority of participants described a very welcoming and inclusive environment at LAVC, conversations also emphasized the need for greater diversity and equity in the hiring of college employees.

THREATS

COVID-19 pandemic. Participants expressed how the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for students, and explained how certain students may be more vulnerable than others, especially those who lack the necessary technology and equipment for online courses.

Surrounding colleges. LAVC has struggled to create an identity that allows it to stand out amongst the large number of colleges in the region making it difficult for students to differentiate it from other institutions.

Recruitment and outreach. Participants explained that many people in the community are not aware of the benefits LAVC has to offer, and emphasized the need to increase advertising and marketing of the college.

COLLEGE IDENTITY

Community reputation. Participants explained some of the misconceptions held by community members about LAVC, including the belief that the college is geared toward older adults, is a trade school, and has low transfer rates.

Feature the students and employees. The college could increase community awareness and stand out amongst the competition by focusing marketing efforts on the *people* who make the college special, in addition to the outstanding and diverse academic programs and services.

Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

Recommendation 1: Build upon existing equity and anti-racism work.

- Strengthen institution-wide knowledge through regular and ongoing engagement that promotes meaningful dialog, as well as professional development and training on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Seek opportunities to diversify the workforce to ensure it is representative of the student population and local service area.
- Regularly capture student feedback to understand the experiences and needs of different student groups to help them feel valued by and connected to the college.

Recommendation 2: Streamline communication across the college to provide information and guidance that is clear and timely.

- Implement a reliable and consistent method for disseminating information across the institution – reaching beyond administrators and department chairs to include all faculty and classified professionals.
- Inventory the communication vehicles utilized by the college (e.g., email, text messaging, college website, social media platforms) and standardize procedures on who, what, when, where, and how communication will take place.
- Leverage social media platforms for messaging of important news and announcements so students, employees, and regional partners are kept informed of campus activities.

Recommendation 3: Revamp processes with the student in mind and strengthen coordination across departments in Student Services, paying particular attention to outreach, onboarding, and registration.

- Examine administrative processes from a student perspective by gathering direct feedback about their experiences. Consider the identification of non-value-added steps, variations in the application of department procedures, and confusing or conflicting information. Including students in any redesign efforts will help ensure processes are student-centered.
- Engage in division-level meetings and training activities to increase communication and cohesion among the core functional areas in Student Services.
- Increase employee awareness of the policies and processes across the Student Services division to improve the coordination and delivery of accurate information and services.
- Convert paper-based forms that require wet signatures to a digital format with electronic signatures.

Recommendation 4: Allocate resources to improve campus cleanliness.

- Conduct a campus walk-through to identify the buildings and classrooms with the greatest need.
- Develop or update the facilities plan to ensure ongoing upkeep.
- Prioritize hiring of custodial staff to fill vacant positions.

Recommendation 5: Develop a marketing plan to increase community awareness and strengthen LAVC's college identity.

- Create a college slogan and marketing strategy to spotlight the standout programs and services LAVC has to offer and the people who are part of the LAVC family.

- Shape the college’s brand around the key strengths identified in this study (e.g., outstanding faculty, welcoming campus environment, unique resources, community partnerships, robust student supports).
- Spotlight students in the marketing campaign by inviting them to share their educational journeys and plans for the future, along with the ways the college helped them reach their goals, supported by quantitative data that highlight LAVC’s successful student outcomes.

Recommendation 6: Expand educational technologies and redesign the college website.

- Provide professional development and training to faculty to increase their knowledge of instructional design and consistent usage of technology-based resources including Canvas.
- Redesign the college website to make it student-centered and easy to navigate, and ensure all of the services and resources that LAVC offers are reflected on the website.
- Assign an official webmaster at the college-level to ensure consistent organization, test functionality, and update content on an ongoing basis.

Critical takeaways from the focus groups include addressing the longstanding challenges LAVC has faced related to communication, infrastructure, administrative processes, and marketing and promotion. LAVC administrators, faculty, and classified professionals have an opportunity to inform the planning and equity work at the college by listening to the voices of their stakeholders. Participants spoke about the many strengths LAVC can leverage to help the college stand out in the region, including the outstanding faculty and classified professionals, student support services, and welcoming environment.

Introduction

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) contracted with Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC) to inform the college’s strategic and equity planning efforts. To achieve this goal, we provided remote planning and facilitation via a process that identified the college’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).

Beginning in summer 2020, 12 focus group sessions were conducted with 64 internal stakeholders and 24 external stakeholders to gather information on perspectives and experiences at LAVC. The information collected will be used to inform strategic planning and visioning efforts that support equity and student success. This report provides an overview of the impetus for this research, the themes and recommendations identified from the perspectives of the focus group participants, and considerations for college leaders to support an equity-driven student success agenda.

Background and Purpose

This study is a continuation of equity planning efforts for which LAVC had previously partnered with the RP Group in 2016. At that time, focus groups were conducted with students, faculty, and classified professionals who were likely to be impacted by equity issues and/or be in a strong position to offer insight into equity-related challenges at LAVC. In total, 51 students and 46 faculty and classified professionals participated in this endeavor.

The current research study aims to gather further insights and information in order to increase the college's understanding of the experiences and perceptions of LAVC students, faculty, and classified professionals regarding matters related to student success and the college's efforts to close equity gaps. Additionally, the college was interested in hearing from external programs and organizations that partner with LAVC to fully understand the institution's impact in the community it serves.¹

Areas of focus for this report include institutional strengths as well as weaknesses that likely impact student success and equity.² These areas of focus will include a lens on the COVID-19 pandemic and ways the college can continue its strategic planning and equity work related to and through this health crisis.

In This Report

Fostering an equitable learning environment that improves outcomes for disproportionately impacted students is a top priority for the college and this research study, therefore, this report begins with a summary of the equity highlights that emerged across the 12 focus groups with an emphasis on areas of achievement and opportunities for improvement at LAVC. The next two sections explore the key themes identified from internal and external stakeholders organized according to a SWOT framework: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, followed by a summary of the attitudes and observations discussed around the college's identity. Participants' perspectives on these themes are shared in their own words via quotes to put a voice to the findings. The final section of the report offers college leaders a set of recommendations for consideration and concluding remarks with potential implications and next steps for strategic planning and equity.

Equity Highlights

LAVC has made substantial gains in its equity goals, and participants from both internal and external stakeholder focus groups shared positive examples of how the college has prioritized this work. According to participants, LAVC provided professional development opportunities that addressed implicit bias, as well as ally training to support vulnerable student populations.

¹ For a detailed overview of the research design and methodology used in this study, please see Appendix A.

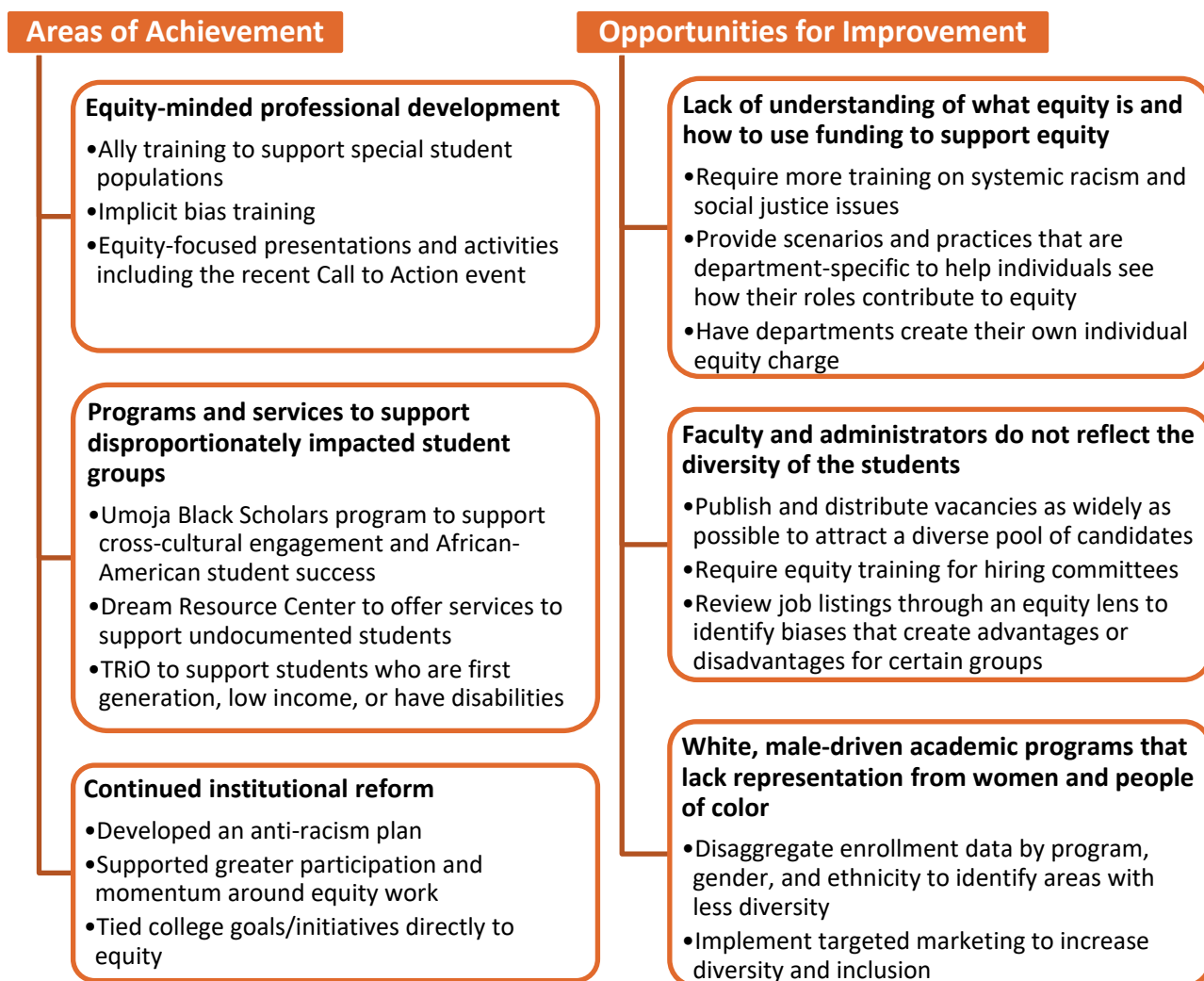
² A copy of the Focus Group Protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Students and employees also remarked on the programs and services at LAVC, such as Umoja and the Dream Resource Center, that offer additional support to students and create an improved sense of community.

Though progress has been made to address systemic racism, participants noted there is still work to be done in terms of diversity and inclusion. Student participants from historically underrepresented populations described situations where they felt alone and excluded, or found it difficult to connect and engage with the LAVC community. According to one classified professional, there are divisions on campus that have never employed an African-American/Black staff member.

Focus group participants explained the importance of increasing institutional knowledge of what equity is and how to practice it to positively impact students' sense of belonging and lead to greater success in their academic efforts. In Figure 1 on the next page are the areas of achievement and opportunities for improvement that emerged from the focus groups around the topic of equity.

Figure 1. Summary of Equity Findings



Key Findings: Internal Stakeholders

The eight focus groups held with internal stakeholders—LAVC students, faculty, classified professionals, and administrators—yielded numerous important findings. Key themes based on the SWOT framework are summarized in Figure 1 below, followed by a detailed explanation of the findings. The section ends with a presentation of the opinions and perspectives shared by focus group participants on the college’s identity.

Figure 2. SWOT Analysis from Focus Groups with Internal Stakeholders



Strengths

A Welcoming Campus

Focus group participants described a beautiful LAVC campus environment that offers a serene, park-like setting and an abundance of trees. Participants described the college as being situated in the heart of the entertainment industry, which makes it ideal for students and employees to commute from the surrounding areas. One participant shared that LAVC is the only college in the Los Angeles Community College District awarded a Tree Campus USA³ designation by the Arbor Day Foundation. Further discussion emphasized the welcoming campus environment and tranquil surroundings LAVC has to offer. One employee described:

³ To be granted this designation, two- and four-year accredited colleges and universities must meet five standards developed to promote healthy trees and student involvement.

On a personal level, I grew up at Valley College as a kid. Valley College even as a very young child...it was always a welcoming campus and a beautiful campus and I love the trees.

One of the features most frequently cited during the focus groups was the campus' location. Participants noted how the college is centrally located in the San Fernando Valley on a commuter bus/metro line, which makes it easily accessible to students, employees, and the neighboring community. Participants also remarked on the continued renovations on campus and new buildings under construction, which will provide additional space and modernized facilities. One employee explained:

The school grounds are very inviting...It's a beautiful campus and the new construction really adds to that and it keeps getting better and better. Since I've been there, it's gotten measurably better...the fact that it's on a commuter line and in dead center of the San Fernando Valley is a huge strength.

Participants explained how faculty and classified professionals go out of their way to assist students even when it is beyond the scope of their work or outside their department. For example, if a prospective student or campus visitor needs help finding a service or department, employees will walk them to the appropriate office and facilitate the connection. In the words of one employee:

There are a lot of instructors who go out their way to assist students in areas that are not necessarily even in their subject matter or you know expertise. For instance, in the psych[ology] department, we always have students who seek us out for initial mental health screening...[also] getting logistical issues taken care of and things like that. I think that our greatest attribute are the people themselves.

Students also remarked on the caring instructors at LAVC who go out of their way to help students. Two students commented:

It's a very welcoming school... .Most professors are really willing to help you, not just school wise, but how do we help for you to grow better personally, for job interviews, how to study in classes, and how to achieve good grades.

I felt really welcome my first semester of school. If I needed help with things, there were people who were really willing to help. Not just help, but actually teach me how to do it.

Working Relationships and Collegiality

Faculty and classified professionals described the importance of their working relationships, noting a variety of positive impacts resulting from the strong connections they have made with colleagues. Commitment from and longevity among personnel are advantages for the college, with many employees having worked at LAVC for five or more years. Internal stakeholders remarked how well people get along, helping to create a true sense of community. Employees

spoke about the notable comradery and family-like bonds that are strengthened through interdisciplinary teamwork and shared values. Two employees described:

I think our strengths lie mostly in the individuals who work at our college, at all levels and all roles. There is a very positive climate... . What I mean by that is there's a lot of great collegiality, a lot of really smart people who are highly professional who just want to do their best and are always looking to how to support new programs and new ideas. So there's always a forward-thinking view. I think that's the strength of our college. We have really strong people at all levels, who want to do the best they can for students and they make that known and are open to new things and new ideas.

What I've noticed the last few months that we've converted to remote, we've seen the instructors that are really good with [distance education] they've done these workshops and have created opportunities for the rest of us to improve, even if we were already on Canvas. They really made our classes better... . And so it shows that we have some really strong faculty that seem to work day and night to create opportunities for the rest of us. So that is, to me, just astounding.

Discussion also took place around the support of college leadership. Internal stakeholders described how administrators are open new ideas and work toward improving collaboration across departments and divisions. To strengthen this endeavor, the college has a shared governance process that includes voices from students, faculty, classified professionals, and administration. Employees reported feeling supported by administration and explained how deans regularly work together to coordinate activities such as grant-funding opportunities. There is a cooperative spirit and positive attitude that supports decision-making throughout the institution. One employee shared:

What's really very positive is that management now, our dean, is trying to improve things and she's really listening, and I think that it's just been huge that it's really made a big difference. We're very grateful that things are moving in a more positive direction.

Support Services and Programs

Internal stakeholders remarked on the exceptional services and large variety of programs the college offers to support student success. A great deal of discussion took place regarding the many supports LAVC offers students, such as the Academic Resource Center that provides tutoring services, and the resources available to special student populations. As three students shared:

The programs...EOPS, TRiO, and CalWORKS. It feels like there's advocates on campus. No matter where you're coming from, there's someone that can help you. If you really want to succeed, there's a lot of programs that can help you. Like tutoring, the fact that you can get tutoring for anything, that's amazing.

I want to emphasize the services that they provide, the programs, like SSD, EOPS, TRiO, and counseling...It's really helpful for the students who are coming in and who are new to the college.

There are so many opportunities and so many things that help. There are so many programs. People are always amazed by what options are available.

Internal stakeholders further reported how the college has dedicated space and counseling services for special student populations including Black Scholars, veterans, international students, and Dreamers. Staff shared how LAVC addresses students' basic needs by offering assistance to those facing homelessness or housing insecurity. The college also offers scholarships to low-income students through funding provided by the college foundation. An employee and student commented, respectively:

In terms of great accomplishments or positive programs, I think if we look at the Veterans program, the Umoja program, the Dreamers program, which we recently instituted in the last few years, that has been a huge contribution to the campus and the student body.

I found the Umoja group and they were amazing. They were diverse—not just in backgrounds, but age range. I was accepted in this group. I was given academic resources to help me.

Weaknesses

Administrative Processes

According to some internal stakeholders, the college creates as many obstacles as it does opportunities due to cumbersome administrative processes. More specifically, participants remarked that while LAVC offers numerous services and supports, there are too many steps and too many people who have to coordinate with each other in order for students to get information and access resources through Student Services. Students reported that LAVC takes too long to get things done, and employees believe enrollment would increase if the college streamlined its registration processes. As three employees shared:

The biggest challenge to Student Services from an operational and functional point of view is the lack of communication and awareness where all of us are working together on one page, following the same rules, the same policies, and the same processes.

I think one of our greatest weaknesses, and an area that students say is a weakness, [is] our student services. I think they've been a weakness for decades. In many ways, outreach to high schools has always been a problem...it has always been a mess.

One of the biggest weaknesses in Student Services is that you have several core main areas. We have financial aid doing their thing, admissions and records their thing. Different areas in admissions. There's the graduation area, there's a transcript

processing intake, then there's the general processing and counseling... there's a lot of territorial protection and the danger in that is we're not communicating at the same level.

Communication

According to internal stakeholders, the college has historically struggled with communication within and between departments. Employees shared how changes are often made at the department or division level, but are not communicated across the college. For instance, two employees explained how there is no clear method for disseminating information regarding policy changes:

When a new policy or new procedure is happening, we sometimes don't catch wind of it until we talk to someone [or]...someone comes back to a staff meeting and says, "Oh, and by the way, this is what we're doing".

We get the information to a department chair or an administrator, but then, is there a good conscious effort within the department from administration all the way down to faculty and staff to actually communicate what's being done?

The college has many programs, services, and activities that support students; however, employees are at times unaware they exist, and the communication about the committees and task forces that lead them is not widely disseminated. Two employees described:

On the subject of communication, it's a huge issue. It really is... We have so many incredible things going on, so many services for students, special programs, events, it's a really rich environment and so many of us don't know what someone in the next building is doing... . Boy, over the years, every time we do something like this SWOT analysis or something similar, communication keeps coming up as an issue and I don't think it's really improved much to be honest. It's a shame because I think that some of our services and some of our great programs and activities are underutilized.

I think we still struggle to some level with communication. I think we did really well with the COVID crisis, but I think in general, the campus has a communication issue. Whether it's from administration down or from bottom to top. We have a communication issue. There's still gaps in that.

Campus Cleanliness

According to various internal stakeholders, LAVC faces challenges around campus cleanliness. While the outward appearance of the college has a serene and pastoral quality, students and employees remarked on the untidy and soiled state of the classrooms and other buildings. Internal stakeholders reported the presence of leaky ceilings, carpet stains, and maintenance needs that detract from the appearance of the college. One employee shared:

Our buildings, a lot of them are dilapidated. When it rains, it rains inside the buildings, even in the new buildings. These are our working conditions. My books are constantly damaged to the point that I've thrown books away. There's a possible mold issue in my office. It's just not clean, it's not safe.

Several focus group participants also indicated a perceived difference in how some facilities are cared for compared to others. For example, participants reported that the administration building and library are well maintained; however, other areas of the campus, including classrooms, are neglected. One student and employee commented, respectively:

Halfway through the semester they stop cleaning. I will come into my [statistics] class and there's the same trash that's been in there for weeks, and it's gross. And there's just piles of hair on the floor... . I go into the library, which is beautiful, and I go into other rooms that are beautiful, but the classrooms are not cleaned. In the beginning they are, and then it stops and it's just gross.

With regards to cleanliness...and one of the things that concerns me is that for many, many, many years, there's been a real disconnect between administration and faculty when it comes to cleanliness. The VPs over there, the ones I have dealt with, have always thought that we get the same level of service as the administration building and I proved them wrong and they still didn't believe me. I literally sprinkled little pieces of paper in the hallway in administration and it was cleaned up every single day and if we get that done once a semester we're happy. And so for me, it's that disconnect. And it's not just janitorial services because the issue is, if their building is clean, they don't see the filth and we're talking about filth. We're not talking about some dirty window, some dirty desks, our rooms are DISGUSTING. DISGUSTING.

According to focus group participants, there are not enough custodians to maintain the entire campus. Discussion also took place around the ongoing construction projects, which are believed to have further taxed the facilities department, and prevented the implementation of a cleaning and maintenance plan. As one employee shared:

One of the biggest weaknesses is absolutely the campus is a mess. Allied Health Sciences is the messiest place on campus because they're doing construction and then we've had holes in our staffing, so there hasn't been implementation of a good maintenance plan because of lack of resources and also this additional construction.

Technology

One of the major topics that emerged when discussing areas needing improvement was the use of technology at LAVC, which elicited many opinions and suggestions from internal stakeholders. Participants reported that LAVC has a lot to offer its students and the surrounding community, but the website does not reflect that. There are many programs and services the college offers that are not present on the website. The LAVC website was also cited by students and employees as being difficult to navigate and outdated with respect to both content and functionality. As one student described:

I think there's a lot that [LAVC] offers, but their website is really outdated and hard to navigate... . The search feature, there are things I know that are on there you can't access it. Even the banners. The pictures are small instead of spread out. The pictures they've chosen are people who aren't even smiling, so it makes you feel sad. You should always have smiling people in pictures... . I just hope that Valley increases its efforts to tell people how great they are and make their services more user friendly, specifically on the website.

Students indicated that many instructors are not up-to-date with respect to technology. For example, many do not know how to leverage resources such as Canvas, which students rely on for course materials and grade information. In the words of one student:

I think it's the online component that [instructional faculty] struggle with. I know they're doing Canvas training, and I hope that helps, but I wish there was some accountability—if you don't know the technology, you are not allowed to teach an online class.

Opportunities

Equity and Institutional Reform

Internal stakeholders were asked to reflect on how the college can turn its strengths and weaknesses into opportunities. Faculty and classified professionals described LAVC's recent call to action stemming from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which garnered support from students and employees across the campus. As one employee described:

I'm excited about where the college is going in terms of the application of equity. I've always had concerns at this college that there were not enough programs that focus on all the [disproportionately impacted] groups. Especially the African American student population. And now since we have the equity initiatives, there's a more deliberate course, we have an Umoja program. We have a Black Scholars program now. I think in terms of equity, the college is definitely striving to improve itself based on where it was just three or four years ago. That has something to do with the new leadership. It has a lot to do with the equity initiative. We have a Dream Resource Center now. So from that angle, I think the college is doing a great job.

Much of the focus group discussion pertained to the college's continued commitment to equity and institutional reform. Participants remarked on the increased willingness from students, classified professionals, faculty, and administrators to engage in meaningful discourse around racism and social justice. One employee shared:

It's really about changing our mindset and kind of changing a culture, to a great extent. And that takes some time. I think we just have to keep moving forward and working on it, but we have plenty of individuals who help remind us, "Okay, are you looking at this through an equity lens?" We're asking those questions. Now it may not be the first thing that comes to mind, but I think there's a critical mass of individuals who are bringing

that forward to the forefront. And I think that's a really positive thing.... We're not quite there yet, but I think we're moving in that direction. That's all I can say. I think we're doing well. We have a long way to go.

College Leadership

Despite the challenges expressed regarding some of the administrative processes at LAVC, participants remarked on the collaborative environment and spirit of cooperation exhibited by the college administration. Much of the conversation focused on the new college president, who according to participants, demonstrates a deep dedication to student success and a commitment to making equity a driver at the institutional level. Several participants described positive interactions with the president, underscoring his accessibility and ability to connect with students and employees alike. The administration's focus on strengthening the organizational culture was reported by counselors as an opportunity for growth and transformation. Participants explained how the president, along with other college leaders, is creating a future for LAVC that offers new possibilities for the institution. In the words of one employee:

We have an administration that has experienced a big turnaround in terms of staffing. In terms of the President, in terms of deans who are in key positions... . And these new administrators that are coming in, they are encouraging us to continue to move forward. We were stuck in a traditional way of doing business, but now we are moving forward with a more progressive attitude to try different things, or to try things in different way. And to listen to us, the individual.

When exploring the topic of decision-making at the college, participants shared how the process has improved over time. Participants described how decision-making was largely top-down in the past, but now there is greater participation from all levels of the institution. Faculty and classified professionals remarked on the current administration's willingness to listen and desire to innovate. One employee described how the college deans are team-oriented and ask for recommendations, further cultivating a democratic leadership style that values outside perspectives:

Now we have a dean who I believe actually sits and listens to us for ideas. For recommendations. She trusts us as the professionals to go forth and try to do things in a different way. Giving us that autonomy and that trust to go out and try things is very encouraging versus the traditional view with the individual before the current dean [who] was very narrow minded and it was difficult to get things done. It was difficult to really evolve and to progress in terms of the department trying to serve our students. The transition from the traditional way of thinking to this new way of thinking I think is really exciting.

Transition to Remote Instruction

While COVID-19 created a multitude of obstacles and barriers for LAVC, as it did for most if not all colleges, focus group participants shared how it also provided an opportunity to increase access to college courses and services by moving instruction and support into an online modality. Students spoke thoughtfully about the positive aspects of pursuing their educational goals in an entirely remote format and the advantage of being able to connect to campus resources and support services virtually. Students shared how they were initially unsure about taking classes online, but were now more comfortable with receiving instruction remotely. As one employee explained:

Some of the students have told me that they were scared to try an online class. And even though it was stressful, now they understand it.... it doesn't change that it was stressful, but I think now our students are trying it.

Conversations revealed how the pandemic forced the college to innovate, which came with growing pains, but also created many opportunities for institutional transformation. Faculty explained how working remotely due to COVID-19 made them aware of different technologies and modalities that could be leveraged to transition instruction and support services online. Two employees commented:

COVID-19 and working remotely really made us aware of the many different technologies and ways or modalities of how we could deliver our services. I was talking to a couple of counselors who were telling me, "Hey, you know what, we can start to do many different things in a different format in terms of online workshops, in terms of changing our counseling structures."

Our online program needs to be improved and I think it's taken [COVID-19] to actually push us to start improving it. And it seems as if our district is even putting more money into our online offerings. I do think there's an opportunity there to improve our online pedagogy.

Counselors and classified professionals shared how they had to transition their work to an online environment rapidly in order to continue serving students. The conversion to remote student services opened doors in terms of what the college could offer online, which included workshops, tutoring, and one-on-one counseling appointments. According to one counselor, departmental discussions had taken place for years around offering services online, but the pandemic served as an impetus to expedite those goals. One employee described:

COVID-19 has been a tremendous opportunity within counseling. We have talked for a number of years about doing more online stuff. And we've talked about it. We've done baby steps. We were approaching it, but within a couple of days, we all had to get trained and suddenly we're doing all of these things online. I think that we were forced into making changes, but I think it was, it is and continues to be a really good opportunity.

Threats

Financial Constraints

When exploring potential threats to the college, one primary concern faculty and classified professionals raised pertained to the college budget and the anticipated cuts stemming from the pandemic. Discussions revealed that the college does a good job identifying priorities and planning activities, but there is often no budget to back the work. If employees request funds for a project aimed at supporting the college's initiatives, they are told there is no money for it. Several focus group participants reported that the college has faced budget problems in the past, and were concerned how programs and services at LAVC would be impacted. One employee shared:

It seems like the most needed programs are the first ones to go whenever there is a budget cut. I think that's going to have a very negative impact on the gains we have made and that worries me.

Faculty and classified professionals were uncertain about how enrollments at LAVC will be impacted in the 2020-2021 academic year due to the pandemic, but they were aware that budget cuts were happening statewide and the threat of declining enrollments could be a financial challenge for the college. Employees wondered if the positive changes taking place due to the pandemic, such as those tied to equity planning, could be sustained in the long-term. Two employees commented:

There are certain things that I think the pandemic has shown us that we could do and we could be doing better, putting more of an effort into doing, but at the same time, when these cuts hit hard, I'm just wondering what's going to happen to all these gains that we think we're making.

I think all of us know that budgets are being cut. [The COVID-19 pandemic] is going to have a huge economic impact across the country, and I'm very concerned about programs getting cut. Even though we think we're moving in a direction where we're much more equitable and we have a more robust online program, I guess my worry is that with budget cuts come all of these cuts in the [equity] gains that we have made. Funding will dry up, and then we will go back to how things were before, which was not equitable.

Online-Only Instruction and Campus Life

Participants reported that online instruction at LAVC has historically been a weakness for the college, so the transition to remote instruction in spring 2020 due to the pandemic was difficult. Students identified several challenges they experienced as a result of taking all of their courses online, including access to technology, difficulties with self-paced learning, inadequate computer skills, and instructors who were not prepared or equipped to teach online. One employee shared:

We have to look at the courses where we're really offering suboptimal teaching techniques because we decided to move things online and they are working on it and they are prioritizing it, but that's got to be one of the biggest, most immediate concern is that the classes that are difficult to convert, we can still optimize them so we can give the students the experience they deserve and get good completion.

Focus group participants were concerned how the pandemic will affect the future of services, such as the Family Resource Center, cafeteria, and bookstore, that rely on students and employees being on campus to sustain them. Additionally, participants reported that the college does not have a full-time distance education coordinator, and there has not been an investment in online learning in the past. As such, many employees were unprepared for the shift to remote instruction in spring 2020. In the words of two employees:

I think if there was more of an investment in online teaching and learning it wouldn't have been as challenging to make that switch to remote learning. I feel like a lot of our faculty were under prepared and that also clearly is going to impact our students.

Online teaching is a weakness. I think we have necessarily gotten a lot better at it in a very short amount of time because we've had to. And faculty have had to go through professional development for online teaching but I think it's a huge problem that we have not had a full-time DE coordinator on our campus to have better prepared our institution for this really fast transition that we had to make.

Lack of Community Awareness

One concern that participants identified as a longstanding issue for the college was the lack of the community's awareness of LAVC as an institution and what it has to offer. Several participants remarked that many individuals living in the neighboring areas do not know the college even exists. Participants felt that the college has not done enough to brand itself. As two employees explained:

Before I applied to the job at Valley College, I'd never even knew Valley College existed, and I've been in Southern California all my life, so I do think that we have a problem in terms of our visibility.

We don't have an identity.... I think we're still struggling with who we are, in terms of a campus, [and] our branding in the community.

When asked to share why they believe students choose LAVC, participants explained that many students attend because of proximity or convenience. Discussions underscored the need for greater marketing and outreach efforts to strengthen the college's presence and visibility in the community. One participant suggested LAVC should conduct market research to better understand the community it serves and how it can meet the unique needs of that population. Once those topics are better understood, the college will be able to craft messages that speak effectively to its target population. One student commented:

If you want to know how to get the word out, not just from somebody who works there...have an enthusiastic student, people who have actually used the services...The high school students can ask college students actual questions instead of somebody who just works there trying to make it seem good.

College Identity

Student and employee perceptions about LAVC were explored to understand what the college is best known for, what makes it different from other colleges, and how the college is viewed by the community. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and interactions at LAVC and share any words or phrases that come to mind when they think of the college or how they might describe it to others.

Standout Faculty and Resources

Participants spoke highly of the faculty and resources at LAVC. The quality of instruction and variety of academic programs offered by the college were cited as the main benefits to students who attend LAVC. According to participants, the college has diverse class offerings that serve everyone from children to older adults. The faculty and classified professionals were described as caring and supportive of students. In the words of two employees:

What I hear from students is that the instructors are really focused on teaching. You know when you get a four-year college a lot of the instructors are focused on their research. So to meet up with instructors who are passionate about actually teaching, sometimes you'll hear that when they come back to visit that they do appreciate the foundation that was set in a certain subject matter by certain instructors.

One of the things I hear the most is how caring our instructors are. We have a lot of family and friends who attended Valley College. So whenever I've mentioned I work at Valley College, that seems to be the one thing that people say. And many of them have gone on to UCs or Cal States and one thing they say is they love the instructors and they love the classes and they said instructors seem to care.

There are a multitude of programs and services available inside and outside of the classroom, and participants commented on many of the unique resources LAVC has to offer. As described by two employees:

From a community services point of view, one unique resource is the Community Services Center, which includes the rock-climbing wall—we are one of the only, if not the only, community college in the state that has a rock-climbing wall—and teaching kitchen. We also have a very large day camp program that serves the community.

One of the things that I know our campus is known for in the community is the Family Resource Center, which I think is something that has really distinguished us. I think we're one of the only community colleges nationally to offer the level of childcare that we offer to students, which is pretty remarkable.

Community Reputation

LAVC has many noteworthy resources and supports, however participants explained that many people are unaware the college exists, and those who do know about the college sometimes perceive it as second choice. Participants explained how there is a stigma attached to attending LAVC. Participants remarked on the image the college has in the community relative to other colleges in the area and that misconceptions about the LAVC could be addressed through messaging that frames LAVC as a “stepping stone” rather than a backup or last resort. Two students commented:

I think that Valley, even though it's amazing in what it offers, doesn't have the prestige necessarily that Pierce and Pasadena City College do. I think that students will sometimes drive a greater distance versus going to Valley which is right there. And there's something about the image of Valley that I think turns away some students and that's a bummer because I think students who drive all the way to Pierce and they shouldn't because there's so much that Valley has to offer. There is definitely a little bit of a stigma that Pierce is nicer.

All of us are fans of Valley, but that's not necessarily the stigma that Valley has. Valley has so much to offer, any student of any background, of any level of desired education, but somehow the excellence and inclusion. I feel so included in so many different things that happen, it's beautiful, but I don't think that's what's put out there.

Participants were asked to think of a slogan or tagline that could enhance the college's overall presence in the community. Suggestions from internal stakeholders are captured in Figure 2 below.

Figure 3. Slogans and Taglines Suggested by Internal Stakeholders



The facilities have grown over the years. The community makes use of the college facilities including the pool and gym.

Participants shared how the college embodies a service-minded attitude and creates opportunities for civic engagement by regularly partnering with non-profit organizations and regional programs in the area. In the words of a university transfer coordinator and regional program representative, respectively:

I've been really, really grateful for the welcoming feeling that I got as an outside campus entity...I really enjoyed the way the campus works together to support one another to invite the community members to be a part of that event [LA Valley College Fest].

Everyone that works in the transfer center is very welcoming. They're friendly and they make us feel comfortable. We're coming to their campus, so we're an outsider, but they don't make you feel like an outsider. They make you feel like you're one of them, part of the family. If there's anything I need, the staff, the student assistants, the counselors, everyone that works there has been super friendly with us.

Weaknesses

Inefficient Processes and Lack of Coordination

Focus group discussions with external stakeholders revealed the need to examine administrative procedures and policies at LAVC that are known to hinder or delay the enrollment process. Participants explained how students sometimes get bounced around Student Services and receive conflicting information from different departments due to inefficient processes and lack of coordination. Focus group conversations underscored the importance of professional development and training to help ensure employees have a clear understanding of the administrative processes at LAVC and the individual roles of each department. A dual enrollment coordinator and regional program representative commented, respectively:

There needs to be a level of understanding of the responsibilities on both sides – the high school and the college. Who does what? What is each institution's role in the process?

Dealing with Student Services, I always get students bounced around. So, I think there definitely has to be more professional development within Student Services specifically...in training even just the basics of who is doing what because a lot of students are getting lost. They're coming to me because they're lost because they're getting told to do different things from different departments. "They told me to go here, they told me to go there." Not everybody is on the same page, students are wandering around and it's unfair to them. They're doing a disservice to them.

According to high school partners, the processing of K-12 forms could be organized better to facilitate a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities at both the high school and the college. Participants explained how dual-enrolled students struggle to find answers to basic

enrollment questions at LAVC and often rely on the high school partners for assistance. As two high school dual enrollment coordinators described:

For our ninth graders, we have to go back and forth with them. I did hold two workshops with the outreach reps and they're really good, they're trying their best. They're a big school, a big institution, and I think they need more people to process things. Why do [dual-enrolled students] have to go manually register? Class began before my students were processed, so then they have to get an add permission number. It's just so many steps...I like dealing with Valley, but [the college] can definitely improve the [dual enrollment] process.

One of the things I feel [LAVC] could really improve upon is the resources they have for the [dual-enrolled] students and their families to reach out to them. We get bombarded with phone calls regarding things that they could be calling the college on. Simple things that have to do with planning and counseling and so on. [Students] tell us "We tried to call Valley. We couldn't talk to a counselor. We couldn't get through to anybody."

Communication and Responsiveness

Another concern that emerged in the focus groups with external stakeholders pertained to communication and responsiveness. Participants reported that prompt feedback does not always occur when corresponding with LAVC. Sometimes multiple emails or phone calls are made before receiving a response from the college. Representatives from universities reported that LAVC transfer center staff are often busy, so coordinating schedules and activities can be a challenge. For this reason, it can be difficult to connect and collaborate with advisors from other areas of the campus that would be helpful to transfer students, including student clubs and the veteran center. A dual enrollment coordinator and a university transfer coordinator commented, respectively:

A few things I can see LAVC improving on is communication. I can email a few times and I need things to be done...I need an answer right away. Why? Because a parent and a student is requesting...everyone is crunched on time just to make decisions, so it would take them awhile to respond to me. I understand everyone is super busy...but it's the communication and I think they can be more organized with processing admissions.

They're just busy. The transfer center is busy...I know a lot of transfer directors are really busy, so maybe just [providing] the best person to contact on certain areas if we want to do presentations...maybe the transfer director doesn't need to coordinate the presentation, just give us the right person to contact. The director could be busy with other planning...so maybe have a list of contacts for us for different areas [of the college]. That would be very helpful to us and LAVC as well.

Marketing and Promotion

In listening to the voices of external stakeholders, it was evident that LAVC needs to increase its messaging and presence in the community through greater promotion and marketing efforts. While the college offers many standout programs and resources, it is not well known in the surrounding region.

Participants further commented that amongst those who *have* heard of LAVC, it is sometimes thought of as a backup option for students who are not accepted into their desired college or university. According to external stakeholders, there is a clear need for an advertising campaign that highlights the unique programs and services the college provides, as well as the recent renovations and new construction on campus. One corporate partner shared:

[LAVC] needs to advertise more. They can't assume the community knows they are there. They can stand out for their resources and renovation. They can share what services they offer and what students can achieve there.... There are more high schools they could be recruiting from. Even cross-enrollment with students who attend four-year universities.

Opportunities

Outstanding Faculty

According to external stakeholders, the quality of instruction is one of the college's most underrated attributes, and the education students receive is exceptional. It was clear from the focus group discussion that the LAVC faculty is collectively a committed group that does not mind putting in the hard work to meet the college's goals and support student success. As one workforce partner commented:

The instructors that I've met through this [workforce program]... are so involved with their students, they're so engaged with their students. They know each one [student] very, very well. And they're proud of their [students] accomplishments.

Participants described how the college encourages students to get real-world, hands-on experience to complement their academic studies. This is achieved through partnerships that are fostered with local businesses for programs such as and media arts and manufacturing, as well as in the classroom from instructional faculty who work in the field, therefore bringing practical applications directly to students. As two workforce partners commented:

Media Arts has lined up the expectations and goals of the students with the college. Rather than, the college has it plan, and the students have their plan. They've really done a super job on that [alignment]. It's so unusual for a public institution to do that. Valley does that so well. Really talking to the students, where the students are focused.

They [LAVC] really improved the capabilities of their manufacturing academy. [Students] are learning on very good equipment, modern equipment that they will definitely use when they go into the job market.

More Online Classes and Virtual Support Services

External participants explained how the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting transition to remote instruction served as an impetus to increase access to courses and services that had historically only been available on campus. By offering online classes and virtual support services, LAVC was able to serve students who under normal circumstances may not be able to come to campus due to scheduling conflicts or transportation issues. Participants emphasized the importance of innovation and open-mindedness during this time, and advised LAVC classified professionals, faculty, and administration to be willing to try new things and learn new skills. A regional program representative shared:

The college needs to be innovative now that we are working in a virtual environment. Figure out new ways to share information remotely. Find ways to work smarter, like sharing calendars to improve coordination.

Focus group discussions also emphasized the importance of maintaining a real college experience for students in light of the pandemic. Participants provided suggestions on how LAVC can recreate the environment students would typically encounter on campus by leveraging technology to move instruction and support services into a virtual space. Workforce partners explained how some courses are more challenging to convert to an online format because the instruction is very hands-on, such as manufacturing classes in which students are trained to operate heavy machinery. Business leaders suggested the college explore ways to offer alternative instructional methods to ensure these programs can still be offered. A workforce partner explained:

I think there should be opportunities to expand distance learning. Someone [should be] focusing on what works and what doesn't. What is effective and can be made more effective? What isn't effective? In the Manufacturing Academy, they can't do much distance learning because they're being trained to operate heavy machinery...some of it can be distance learning, but a lot of it has to be hands-on...Being able to identify what works effectively in a distance learning situation, capitalize on that, expand on that, I think would be opportunity...but also recognize what doesn't and figure out a way to provide that...it won't be as efficient, but it can be as effective.

Employee Diversity

While the majority of external participants described a very welcoming and inclusive environment at LAVC, conversations also emphasized the need for greater diversity and equity in the hiring of college employees, particularly within administration and faculty. Participants remarked on the importance of having instructors and administrators who reflect the populations they serve to foster a deeper connection with students through shared backgrounds and experiences. Participants suggested LAVC focus on hiring individuals from key historically-underserved groups, to help ensure students see the same diversity within the college as they do in the surrounding service area. In particular, participants urged LAVC to ensure there are African American/Black employees in different areas of the college, including

counseling, Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), and support services for vulnerable populations. A university transfer coordinator described:

Hiring [administrators] and instructors that represent key underrepresented groups [is essential]. It's important to have instructors and [administrators] that look like "you" to foster that connection and understanding.

Threats

COVID-19 Pandemic

Several external participants expressed how the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to remote learning has been challenging for students. Participants described how certain students may be more vulnerable to the change than others, especially those who lack the necessary technology and equipment required for online courses. As one participant explained, not all students have high-speed Internet or a laptop, and many may be accessing their online courses through a phone. The importance of being understanding, patient, and flexible during this time was a common sentiment. Participants emphasized the need for faculty and classified professionals to provide warm hand-offs and ongoing encouragement and motivation during this difficult time. In the words of university transfer coordinator:

Students are panicking from the pandemic and may not want to continue their education. It's important to explain to students the consequences of dropping out and of their poor academic performance. "If you don't keep your eyes on the prize, you're going to get left behind." Students may be resistant to taking online classes and don't feel like they're getting the same education and experience as they would in a face-to-face class, but regardless of that, we all have to push through and adjust to this new environment. It doesn't appear to be changing in the near future.

Surrounding Colleges

External participants discussed at length how the number of colleges in the region make it difficult for LAVC to differentiate itself from other institutions. It was clear from the conversations that LAVC has struggled to create an identity that allows it to stand out from other colleges. Participants explained how Los Angeles Pierce College and Santa Monica College have better reputations in the community because of their branding and marketing efforts. Students perceived those colleges to be institutions of choice, whereas LAVC is viewed as a backup option. One high school dual enrollment coordinator and regional program representative commented, respectively:

The perception of LAVC is that it is the second-choice community college, that Pierce is the top one. Even though there is no 'top one' because they are all part of the same district, that is the perception in the community.

When you look at Pierce and you look at Valley, everybody thinks Pierce is better because of the way they look, the way they advertise, the way they command themselves to have this attitude that they are the better community college in the valley. Students have this perception that Valley is the bad college. That it doesn't have the same that Pierce has...I have students who are willing to drive all the way to Santa Monica to go to Santa Monica Community College and they're right here in Van Nuys down the street from Valley.

Participants from dual enrollment programs reported that students who live close to LAVC will sometimes drive out of their way to attend other colleges. One participant suggested the college should market from the district level, so students understand that when they enroll at LAVC they have access to courses at eight other colleges in the Los Angeles Community College District. One high school dual enrollment coordinator commented:

[High school] seniors share which colleges they are planning to attend, and they aren't excited to say they are attending LAVC, like they do with Santa Monica College where they believe there's a direct path to UCLA.

Recruitment and Outreach

In discussing the college's reputation in the community, external stakeholders emphasized that LAVC must increase its advertising and marketing. Participants explained that many people in the community are not aware of the many benefits LAVC has to offer, including its unique resources, services, and recent renovations on campus. Participants reported that LAVC could strengthen its presence in the region with greater outreach and recruitment. According to external participants, there are more prospective students the college could be reaching, including those who attend high schools beyond the local service area, as well as students who attend private universities. Messaging could be increased to focus on the college's program attributes, such as the length and cost of earning a degree or certificate at LAVC, and what students can achieve once they complete their program of study. Participants also suggested the college extend its marketing to all prospective students, including those who are not interested in traditional academic studies. One workforce partner shared:

If I wasn't a neighbor to the college, [I'm] not sure if I would even know it existed. As someone in the community, I don't think I've ever seen any kind of mention about LA Valley, events, or things like that. I don't know that their message is out there as strongly as it could be.

College Identity

The college was interested in examining the community's perception of LAVC to understand why students choose to attend and what makes LAVC different from other colleges. To that end, participants were asked to discuss their attitudes toward and observations of LAVC, including words or phrases that come to mind when they think of the college.

Community Reputation

As noted previously, external stakeholders reported that the perception of LAVC in the community is not always positive, and that the college is sometimes considered a second choice or default option for students. Conversations alluded to the stigma associated with attending a community college, and the need for greater promotion of the benefits and resources available to students when they attend LAVC. One workforce partner described:

[Community college] is still considered a default. If you can't get into a four-year university, you go to a two-year university. But I think if the colleges reframed it in a way, like money well-spent, time-well spent...really focused on how positive the experience could be going to a community college...if the college could place greater emphasis on all the benefits to taking that path...instead of students being embarrassed to say that they're going to a community college or the assumption is, if you go to a community college, you couldn't get into a real university. There really are so many benefits about it and I very, very seldom hear about that.

Participants explained that some of the misconceptions held by the community about LAVC include that the college is geared toward older adults, is a trade school, and has low transfer rates. Two high school dual enrollment coordinators commented:

The first thing that comes to my mind is that a lot of people think of [LAVC] as a trade school. That's not a good or bad thing, but maybe it's not what [LAVC] would think the image is. I think a lot of people think of it as a trade school.

I do feel like a lot of students have this perception of Valley College that it doesn't have good transfer rates to reputable universities, even though I think it's false...but that's their perception, the community's perception.

Feature the Students and Employees

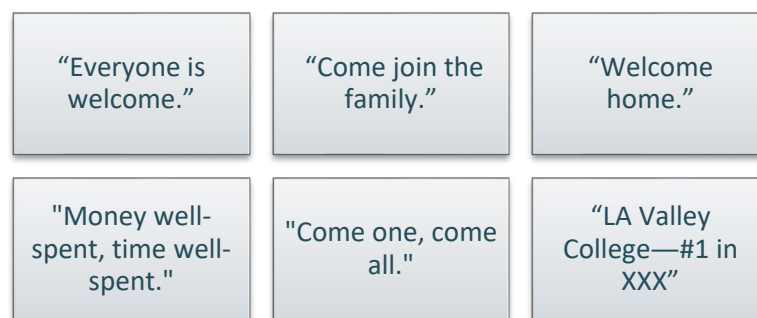
When asked to elaborate on the ways in which the college could increase community awareness and stand out amongst the competition, external stakeholders recommended that LAVC focus on the *people* who make the college special, rather than the programs and services. A campaign could showcase the students and employees, with individuals sharing their stories and experiences being a part of the LAVC family. Participants described how this approach could even be led by current or past students who can articulate what they have achieved by attending LAVC. In the words of one workforce partner:

The college should feature the students and staff at LAVC. It's the people who make the college. Brand the college based on the people, not the buildings. It's all about [the] people. It's not about this place. Their new buildings are fabulous, that doesn't hurt, but it's about the people.

Slogans and Taglines

Participants were asked to think of a slogan or tagline that could enhance the college's overall presence in the community. Suggestions from external stakeholders are captured in Figure 4 below.

Figure 5. Slogans and Taglines Suggested by External Stakeholders



Recommendations

To assist the college in making the most of the focus group findings and integrate the voices of students, employees, and the community into institutional decision-making processes, the RP Group offers the following recommendations:

1. Build upon existing equity and anti-racism work.

- Strengthen institution-wide knowledge through regular and ongoing engagement that promotes meaningful dialog, as well as professional development and training on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Seek opportunities to diversify the workforce to ensure it is representative of the student population and local service area.
- Regularly capture student feedback to understand the experiences and needs of different student groups to help them feel valued and connected to the college.

2. Streamline communication across the college to provide information and guidance that is clear and timely.

- Implement a reliable and consistent method for disseminating information across the institution – reaching beyond administrators and department chairs to include all faculty and classified professionals.

- Inventory the communication vehicles utilized by the college (e.g., email, text messaging, college website, social media platforms) and standardize procedures on when, where, what, and how communication will take place.
 - Leverage social media platforms for messaging of important news and announcements to help ensure students, employees, and regional partners are kept informed of campus activities.
- 3. Revamp outreach/onboarding/registration processes with the student in mind and strengthen coordination across departments in Student Services.**
- Examine administrative processes from a student perspective, including the identification of non-value-added steps, variation in the application of department procedures, and confusing or conflicting information.
 - Engage in division-level meetings and training activities to increase communication and cohesion between the core functional areas in Students Services.
 - Increase employee awareness of the policies and processes across the division to improve coordination and delivery of accurate information and services.
 - Convert paper-based forms that require wet signatures to a digital format with electronic signatures.
- 4. Allocate resources to improve campus cleanliness.**
- Conduct a campus walk-through to identify the buildings and classrooms in the greatest need of attention.
 - Develop or update the facilities plan to ensure ongoing upkeep.
 - Prioritize hiring of custodial staff to fill vacant positions.
- 5. Develop a marketing plan to increase community awareness and strengthen LAVC's college identity.**
- Create a college slogan and marketing strategy to spotlight the standout programs and services LAVC has to offer and the people who are part of the LAVC family.
 - Shape the college's brand around the key strengths identified in this study (e.g., outstanding faculty, welcoming campus environment, unique resources, community partnerships, and robust student supports).
 - Spotlight students in the marketing campaign by inviting them to share their educational journeys, plans for the future, and ways the college helped them

reach their goals, and supplement these success stories with quantitative data that highlight LAVC's positive impact on student outcomes.

6. Expand educational technologies and redesign the college website.

- Provide professional development and training to faculty to increase knowledge of instructional design and consistent usage of technology-based resources including Canvas.
- Redesign the college website to make it student-centered and easy to navigate, and ensure all of the services and resources that LAVC offers are reflected on the website.
- Assign an official webmaster at the college-level to ensure consistent organization, test functionality, and update content on an ongoing basis.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide insights into LAVC's attributes and opportunities for improvement, as well as the internal and external factors that impact the college. The results from this qualitative research highlight important perspectives beyond what can be observed in quantitative outcomes alone. The focus groups brought to light ideas and considerations about how the college can leverage its strengths to support strategic and equity planning. Additionally, the focus groups provided an opportunity for both internal and external stakeholders to express the ways in which LAVC can further support its constituents.

Focus group participants emphasized the importance of diversity and inclusion as a strategy to support equitable student outcomes. Making equity a component of discussions like those that took place in this study helps further LAVC's understanding of the college experience. While the college has many strengths, including its outstanding faculty and classified professionals, student support services, and welcoming environment, LAVC still faces challenges related to communication, infrastructure, administrative processes, and marketing and promotion. LAVC can use the findings and recommendations from this research coupled with local data to further advance planning and equity efforts moving forward.

Next Steps

LET'S GET TO WORK!

For each of the key findings and recommendations summarized in this report, consider:

1. Context and Additional Information

- a. What additional data and information does the college have that supports these findings?
- b. What existing efforts/initiatives are taking place at the college to address these findings?
- c. What existing efforts/initiatives (e.g., Guided Pathways, Student Equity Achievement Program) would these findings support at the college?

2. Challenges and Opportunities

- a. What challenges are present for addressing these findings?
- b. What opportunities are present for addressing these findings?

3. Strategies and Activities

- a. What are the main priorities that can be addressed at this time?
- b. What are the key strategies to advance the identified priorities?
- c. What activities are needed to carry out the strategies?

4. Resources

- a. What resources and supports (human, technology, etc.) are needed to advance this work?
- b. Who is best positioned to champion the efforts needed for each strategy/activity?

5. Timeline

- a. When can the activities be practically addressed? And over what duration of time?

6. Assess and Evaluating the Change

- a. What would be the expected change/impact for advancing this work?
- b. How will you know?
- c. Who will be responsible for monitoring and reporting the changes and impacts?

Appendix A: Research Design and Methodology

The RP Group co-designed and coordinated with key LAVC staff to plan 12 remote focus groups using a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis framework. The focus group protocols were designed using this model in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the institution. The internal aspects of the organization were addressed in strengths and weaknesses, while opportunities and threats examined factors such as changing demographics, state and federal legislation, and trends in the environment.

For the purposes of this study, the SWOT analysis components were defined as follows:

Strength: A strength is defined as a positive internal institutional attribute. Strengths represent what the college does well, including its capabilities and greatest accomplishments. Participants were asked to describe the things in which they believe the college excels, including programs and services, as well as core capabilities and major initiatives that lead to student success.

Weakness: A weakness is defined as an internal attribute requiring improvement. Participants were asked to describe the things they believed offered the college's greatest openings for improvement, such as ongoing unmet needs, and most significant areas of weakness in programs, services, campus climate, and resources.

Opportunity: An opportunity is a trend or situation that, if acted upon, may have a positive impact on the institution. Participants were asked to describe how the college can turn its strengths and weaknesses into opportunities, as well as the most important attributes or elements of a desired future.

Threat: A threat is a trend or situation that, if *not* acted upon, may have a negative impact on the institution. Participants were asked to describe the obstacles the college faces, such as changes in external systems, standards, policies, or legislations that might pose problems in the future.

Beyond the SWOT analysis framework, LAVC was interested in understanding its **college identity** by examining the community's perception of the institution, why students choose to attend, and what makes the LAVC different from other colleges. Participants were asked to discuss their attitudes and perceptions of the college including words or phrases that come to mind when they think of LAVC.

The RP Group worked with key LAVC personnel to develop the agenda and questions used to collect data and information for the SWOT analysis. LAVC staff were responsible for all logistics related to the focus groups including identifying, inviting, and reminding stakeholders to participate.

Focus groups were divided and organized by participant type such that each session included the opinions and experiences of those within a particular stakeholder group. For example, students were amongst students, and administrators were amongst administrators. A total of eight focus groups were held across internal stakeholders and four focus groups with external stakeholders. One session was scheduled for each stakeholder group, with the exception of current students and instructional faculty, which had two sessions each. Further details on the focus group participants can be found in the table below.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS		
Participant Type	Number of Focus Groups	Number of Participants
Current students	2	18
Instructors (full-time and part-time)	2	16
Counselors	1	8
Classified professionals (non-supervisory)	1	8
Classified professionals (supervisory)	1	7
Administrators	1	7

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS		
Participant Type	Number of Focus Groups	Number of Participants
Dual enrollment programs	1	6
Universities	1	6
Regional programs	1	9
Corporate partners	1	3

Appendix B: Virtual Focus Group Protocol

Introduction and Ground Rules

Personal introduction: My name is _____ and I am a researcher with the Research & Planning Group for California Community Colleges.

We are here in partnership with LA Valley College as part of a study to inform their strategic and equity planning efforts. We are interested in hearing your perspective and there are no wrong answers. What is your experience working with the college? What works well and what can be improved upon?

This is an informal conversation so when we ask a question, feel free to jump in and answer if you have something to say. If you want to get our attention, you can use the 'hand raise' feature in Zoom. We will be monitoring the chat box so feel free to ask questions or input comments there. We ask that only one person speak at a time. Mute yourself when you are not speaking to reduce interference from external noise. Make sure your full name appears in your video window. This will help us facilitate the focus group and let us know who is speaking.

The RP Group

The RP Group stands for Research and Planning Group. We are a non-profit organization and we are not affiliated with LA Valley College. We conduct various research, planning, and evaluation activities throughout the state. We also host a variety of professional development workshops and conferences throughout the state. Most of our work is in collaboration with community colleges in California that are interested in conducting specific research activities.

Project Overview and Purpose

The RP Group is working with LA Valley College to engage with students, employees, and community partners through focus groups to help inform the college's strategic and equity planning efforts. The questions that we've put together for this focus group are based on a SWOT analysis. If you've ever participated in strategic planning, you may be familiar with this model. SWOT is an acronym and stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The questions we are going to ask today are geared towards those four categories. Additionally, LAVC would like to learn more about their college identity, so we have prepared a few questions to learn what makes the college different and why students choose to attend.

Consent and Recording

Participation is voluntary. If you agree to participate, we ask that you respect the privacy of other participants by not discussing anything shared today outside of the focus group. We will be recording today's session for accuracy and completeness, but we will not associate any feedback that comes out of this focus group with a particular individual. Hit record.

1. **Strengths:** A strength is a positive internal institutional attribute. Please review the following prompts and respond to any that resonate with you. Consider programs, instruction, services, as well as core capabilities and major initiatives that lead to student success.
 - Describe the things you believe the **college does exceptionally well**.
 - What are the college's **greatest accomplishments**?
 - What **positive attributes or programs** is the college known for?
 - What **unique knowledge, talent, or resources** does the college have?
 - What do **other people say** the college does best?
 - What do you believe are the college's **greatest strengths**?

2. **Weaknesses:** A weakness is an internal attribute requiring improvement. Please review the following prompts and respond to any that resonate with you. Consider unmet needs and areas of weakness such as programs, services, campus climate, and resources.
 - Describe the things you believe the **college needs to improve upon**.
 - What **disadvantages** does the college have?
 - What **knowledge, talent, and resources** is the college lacking?
 - What do **other people say** the college doesn't do well?
 - In what areas does the college **need more training and professional development**?
 - What do you believe are the college's **greatest weaknesses**?

3. **Opportunities:** An opportunity is an external trend or situation that, if acted upon, may have a positive impact on the institution. Please review the following prompts and respond to any that resonate with you. Consider programs, services, facilities, resources, technology, and the image and reputation of what the college should be known.
 - Describe the most important **attributes or elements** of a desired future.
 - How can the college turn its **strengths into opportunities**?
 - How can the college turn its **weaknesses into opportunities**?
 - What could we do today that **isn't being done**?
 - What **internal/external changes** are most impactful to the college? How can we leverage those changes?

4. **Threats:** A threat is an external trend or situation that, if not acted upon, may have a negative impact on the institution. Please review the following prompts and respond to any that resonate with you.
 - What **obstacles** does the college face?
 - What is happening **outside the college** that may have an impact?
 - What might cause the college **problems in the future**? In what ways?

- Are there any **standards, policies, and/or legislation** that might negatively impact the college?
5. **College Identity:** Discuss attitudes/perceptions regarding college identity. Please review the following prompts and respond to any that resonate with you.
- What **word or phrase** comes to mind when you think of LAVC?
 - How would you describe the college?
 - What is the **community's perception** of LAVC?
 - How is LAVC **different from other community colleges**?
 - Why do **students choose to attend** LAVC?

Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, the RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

Project Team

Al Solano

Michelle White

www.rpgroup.org