

# Student Perception of Community Colleges

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## Abstract:

Community Colleges are often stigmatized throughout America. Through media and family influences, the status of attending a community college is not judged favorably by mainstream society. However, there is a remarkable lack of study about how the students of these institutions view their college. This study was conducted to discover how Palm Beach State College students perceive the College and what factors might influence their perception. 292 student surveys were analyzed to discover student perception and potential influencing factors. An overwhelming majority of respondents felt positively toward their time at Palm Beach State College. Beyond this, results are mostly inconclusive, although it is indicated that the opinion and support of family and friends can significantly impact how a student feels about the community college. This study is designed to be a stepping stone for future research to study the changing perceptions of community colleges and their students.

## Introduction:

Perception plays a key role in college selection. How much prestige, honor, or academic glory can be attained by attending an Ivy League institution, such as Harvard? What about a state university, such as the University of Florida? Or, in contrast, consider the perceived status of a community college, such as Palm Beach State College? Image plays a huge role in any company's success, and colleges are no different.

In America, there is a characteristic stigma surrounding the idea of attending a community college. Partially due to a misinterpreting of the community college's mission and open door policy, ideas portrayed in the media and supported by family, friends, and colleagues depict community colleges as "second rate schools" (Tucciarone 2007), or as a last resort option if students are not accepted into any prestigious state university.

There are many factors that go into college selection, as well as college perception. The main socializing agents of family, friends, school, and media can all help to create how community colleges are perceived; perhaps that is where America's bias begins. Research suggests that some agents have more influence than others. A study on the family dynamics of community college selection by Bers and Galowich (2002) was conducted with a focus on the parents' role in selecting a community college over another university. Despite only one school being reviewed, the purpose of the study was to illuminate parents' views on how they affect their children's decisions and influence their college careers. An important point made by the researchers is that the current literature and research available is remarkably silent on community colleges; meanwhile, four year institutions have been studied in depth. This lends itself to the stigma associated with community colleges: that they are not seen as equals to four year universities and thus not worth equal study or research. But more importantly, it creates a void in the current information available and justifies continued investigation.

The study reveals an interesting association made with community colleges by the parents. It is stated that when helping their children decide which college to attend, parents said that "factors related to money and to students' uncertainties about college were more influential than college reputation or the importance of friends or family members" (Bers and Galowich 2002). Although on the surface this appears to negate the existence of a stigma, it reveals one

that is hidden in the underbelly of the situation. A common perception, according to Dr. Gallon, President of Palm Beach State College, is that many people attend Palm Beach State College because they simply cannot afford to attend anywhere else (Dr. Gallon Interview). The same study supports this, showing that for most of their participants, finances played a large role in deciding which college their child would or could attend, with 89% of middle class parents citing finances as a factor in the decision (Bers and Galowich 2002). Unfortunately, in today's society, it is very often found that wealth is associated with status; this explains part of the lure of attending universities that cost tens of thousands of dollars a year, and also part of the stigma that comes with attending a two year, more fiscally responsible institution. For example, Harvard University in Massachusetts costs \$59,680 in the 2010-2011 academic year (Harvard). In a society where wealth is glorified and associated with the best things in life, the assumption is that if something costs more money it must be better. Prestige is often tied with cost; these are two areas where community colleges are lacking.

A focus group, conducted as a part of the aforementioned study by Bers and Galowich, illuminates another potential reason for stigma. The study shows that most parents said their children did not have strong academic skills when entering the community college level courses. Remedial courses offered at two year colleges are designed to help members of the community become ready to take upper level courses. It is quite possible that this open door policy, taking students as they are and taking them to where they need to be, is the root of the prejudice against community colleges: an overall impression of lack of academic rigor. Founded or unfounded, remedial courses add to an overall impression and image of community colleges that society has been firmly established and recognized despite advances in community college programming, funding, teacher quality enhancement and so much more.

Although family may be a large contributor, research indicates that community colleges have been pigeonholed by the media into an inferior status to four year institutions. A 2007 study, “Community College Image – by Hollywood”, shows that movies such as *Evolution* (2001) portray community colleges as “second rate institutions” that do not deliver the same quality of instruction as a four year university. TV show hosts, such as Jay Leno from *The Tonight Show*, degrade community colleges on the air as lacking academic rigor (*Community College by Choice*). Entire television shows have been created around the now stereotypical concept of a community college. NBC’s sitcom *Community* depicts an odd cast of characters attending community college filled with moronic figures, incompetent faculty, and inept administration (*Community*). Indeed, it would appear that popular media is bent on portraying community colleges as inferior whenever given the opportunity.

Although the popular media may be all too ready to mock community colleges, news organizations are beginning to take heed, thanks to prominent community college graduates making their voices known. President Obama is one such advocate; along with Dr. Jill Biden, he brought community colleges into the spotlight in October 2010 by calling the first White House Summit on Community Colleges. The national climate on community colleges may be beginning to change, with President Barack Obama and congress committing \$12 billion to fund community colleges and increase graduation rates exponentially by the year 2020. This renewed public expression of faith in community colleges certainly has potential for changing the national perception of community colleges, but the movement already has critics. An article by Bailey and Jacobs titled “Can Community Colleges Rise to the Occasion?” elaborates on the long list of things that must be addressed and fixed within the community college system before it can take its place among the ranks of higher education institutions, such as increasing perceived teacher

quality and gaining more support from the legislature through funding and awareness. Although this may not be their intention, articles such as these reinforce the idea that there is something innately inferior about community colleges in general; whether it is their quality of education, standards of academic rigor, low financial impact, or open door policy, the media is often ready to pounce on community colleges if given the chance.

However, it is unclear if this overall sentiment of disapproval and shame resides with the students of these institutions. Research is remarkably quiet on the topic of student opinion of their two year college, a subject that should be of interest to administration, lawmakers, and citizens alike. But while researchers do not feel the need to make the students' voices heard, the sheer enrollment numbers around the nation speak for themselves. In 8 years, from 2000 to 2008, America's student enrollment in community colleges has increased by 17%. With such increases despite a failing economy, it is obvious that community colleges are doing something right to attract such a large student base. (Department of education, 2010) This growth is seen and expanded upon at Palm Beach State College as well, with a 26% increase in the past 4 years, business is booming, so to speak. According to internal statistics records, Palm Beach State College has been steadily growing over the past 25 years, growing from a little over 7,000 FTE (full time equivalent) students to over 21,000 FTE since 1985.

This continuous increase in enrollment begs the question: why are students choosing community colleges? "It cannot be as simple as the need for more remedial courses," says Dr. Gallon, "or even the downturn in the economy" as is often portrayed. No, something is certainly different about the perceptions of students than the perception of the media and the nation. An illuminating notion is that there has been an increase in the enrollment of high-achieving students as well as remedial students. According to the article, "Community College by Choice," many

high achieving students are realizing the quality of education offered at community colleges, for the significantly lower price, and are choosing to take advantage. There is nothing particularly different within the colleges themselves, but more and more honors students are choosing community colleges even though they qualify for more prestigious or respectable institutions. An article titled, “Not Your Father’s Community College” emphasizes this point; it opens with “Public perception of two year community colleges has improved so much in the past two decades that they are no longer regarded as higher education’s last resort.” This overall change in image has not yet been acknowledged on a larger scale, but slowly and surely community colleges are gaining the respect they deserve.

Dr. Gallon, president of Palm Beach State College, advocates that the enrollment increase is for a combination of reasons, not the least of which is quality education. Other factors could be convenience, low cost, location, and committed faculty members. What is remarkable is that the literature available is remarkably silent on student motivation for attending a community college, and their associated views of their college. This gap in the present data begs many questions. Are students satisfied with the level of education they are receiving at community colleges? To bring this to a local level, what is the students’ perception of Palm Beach State College? Why do students choose to come to Palm Beach State College?

Is the students’ perception of the college determined by their motivations to attend? For example, are students more satisfied if they chose to attend when they had other options or less satisfied if they were forced by their financial circumstances? This is the aim of this study – to determine the perceptions and motivations of students attending Palm Beach State College.

**Method:**

An anonymous survey was given to Palm Beach State College students from the Palm Beach Gardens and Lake Worth campuses. The sample included classes in the morning, afternoon, and night; and sampled a variety of subject areas from Mathematics to Fundamentals of Speech Communication. Thirteen hundred and nineteen surveys were administered from 19 classes. Due to incomplete responses and various other complications, the final sample size is 292 students.

The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 56 years old, with a mode of 19 years old and a median age of 20 years old. One hundred and eighty nine were females, 103 were males, representing 65% and 35% of the surveyed population respectively. One hundred and twenty one respondents were white, representing 41% of the sample. Sixty two were African American, representing 21%. 55 respondents were Hispanic, 19% of the sample. 11 were Asian, representing 4% of the sample, and there was 1 Pacific Islander, coming in at 1%. In addition to these provided categories, 30 self-reported multiracial respondents made up 10% of the sample population, and there were 12 respondents of other races.

**Instrument:**

The survey was created to isolate and measure several areas of interest, to see what variables affect the others. The first section of 10 questions covers some basic demographic information such as age, gender, race, and education level. The second section of 6 questions, 11 – 16, was designed to determine how active the respondents are in the college, campus, and local community. The third and final section of questions, 18 – 28, and a word association section

evaluates respondents previous college enrollment experiences and measures their satisfaction level with Palm Beach State College.

**Results:**

Of the 292 surveyed subjects, 268 were satisfied with their decision to attend Palm Beach State College, 20 were unsatisfied, and 4 were unsure if they were satisfied or not. This remarkably high level of satisfaction was attributed, by the respondents, to various factors including small class sizes, convenience, understanding professors, and affordability. Of those unsatisfied, a mere 7% of the total population surveyed, 6 respondents did not report why they felt that way, 7 attributed it to the quality of the college, and 7 indicated displeasure at their academic performance and choices, rather than the college itself.

A notable difference between those who were satisfied and those who were unsatisfied was the distribution of degrees being sought by the respondents. Throughout those who were satisfied, 204 were seeking an AA, 31 were seeking an AS, 3 were seeking an AAS, 1 was in a Certificate Program, 18 in the BAS program, 4 were non degree seeking, and 7 were seeking multiple degrees, representing a wide variety of programs and tracks of study. However, among those unsatisfied, all 20 respondents were seeking an AA degree.

The age ranges of respondents varied from 18 to 56 years old; and some groupings are of interest to this study. In the group of satisfied students, the ages ranged across the board from 18 to 56. However, the unsatisfied group's age range was limited to 18 to 25 years old only. A mode of 19 and a median of 20 were standard across both groups.



The survey indicated that a typical conception of community colleges, as a last resort or last choice, is quite possibly inaccurate in today's day and age. From the sample (n = 289), 187 indicated that Palm Beach State College was their first choice to attend; this is confirmed because 181 did not apply to other colleges. Also disproving the image of a last resort school is that, out of the 107 who did apply to other colleges, 67 were accepted to other colleges but chose instead to attend Palm Beach State College. However, there is a difference in percentages between those who are satisfied with their decision to attend versus those who are not. Out of those satisfied, 66% indicated that Palm Beach State College was their first choice to attend, compared to only 30% out of those unsatisfied.

The second section of the survey was designed to measure level of activity, to discover whether individuals who were more involved in their college community were more satisfied, overall. However, in this study the results were inconclusive pertaining to a correlation between activity level and satisfaction. Out of the 268 who were satisfied with their decision, 123 were active in the college or in the community and 145 were inactive, representing 46% and 54% respectively. These numbers were rather similar to those percentages among the unsatisfied; of those unsatisfied, 40% were active and 60% were inactive.

Certain students are of interest to measure their perception, specifically honors students and high achieving students. Stereotypical community college students do not fall into these categories, but as the role of community colleges is changing, so do the students. The survey indicated that 152 of the 292 respondents had a grade point average (GPA) over 3.2, the standard for admission to Phi Theta Kappa, the Honors Society of two year colleges; out of these, 24 respondents indicated that they were a part of the Dr. Floyd F. Koch Honors College at Palm Beach State College. The satisfaction level of students with a GPA over 3.2 was 92%; the

satisfaction level of members of the Honors College is 96%. Reflecting slightly greater numbers than overall satisfaction rates, it is clear that the majority of high achieving students have a high perception of Palm Beach State College.

The vast majority of respondents indicated they had friends, whom they had met outside of the College, who also attend Palm Beach State College. The findings are similar across the satisfaction level. Out of those satisfied, 229 had friends who attended and 39 did not; of the unsatisfied respondents, 17 reported having friends who attended and 3 did not. For the undecided respondents, 3 had friends who attended Palm Beach State College and 1 did not. The percentages are similar across the board, so this does not appear to be a determining factor.

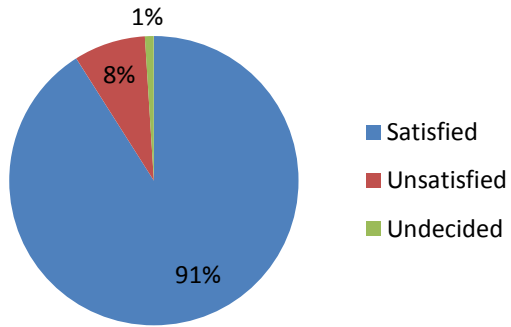
The most remarkable and consistent result is the correlation between the support of family and friends with overall satisfaction rate. Out of the satisfied respondents, 89% felt support from their family in their decision to attend PBSC, 9% said their family was indifferent, and less than 1% said their family was disappointed in their choice. In comparison to the results for those unsatisfied, only 65% felt support from their families, 15% indifferent, and 20% disappointed. These numbers reflect significant differences, but the numbers are even larger when reflecting friends' influence. Among those satisfied with their decision to attend, 78% felt support from their friends, 19% said their friends were indifferent, and 2% said their friends were disappointed. Among those unsatisfied, only 40% felt support from their friends, while 45% said their friends were indifferent and 15% said their friends were disappointed. These significant differences in levels of support are possibly just correlative and not conclusively causal, but the difference is significant enough to heed.

Due to lack of response concerning motivations for attendance, it is difficult to identify primary reasons for attending Palm Beach State College. However, some themes are still evident. Many respondents decided to attend Palm Beach State College for financial reasons, to live at home, or to remain close to family. Despite the stereotype that many students attend Palm Beach State College because they were not accepted anywhere else, hardly any students indicated that accessible admissions was a reason for their decision to attend; however this result may be skewed due to an overall lack of disclosure on this question.

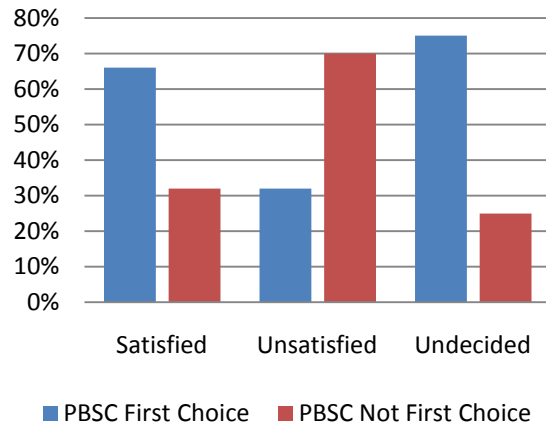
An optional qualitative portion of the survey asked respondents why they felt satisfied or unsatisfied with their decision to attend Palm Beach State College. Although it is difficult to gather any actual results from these statements, due to lack of response, some themes are evident. Among those satisfied, common things cited were the small class sizes, excellent professors, flexibility, and an overwhelming approval of the low cost. In those unsatisfied, only one third attributed their dissatisfaction to the quality of the institution itself. A third indicated that they were disappointed in their high school performance, and wished that they had been accepted into another school; the remaining third did not indicate why they were unsatisfied.

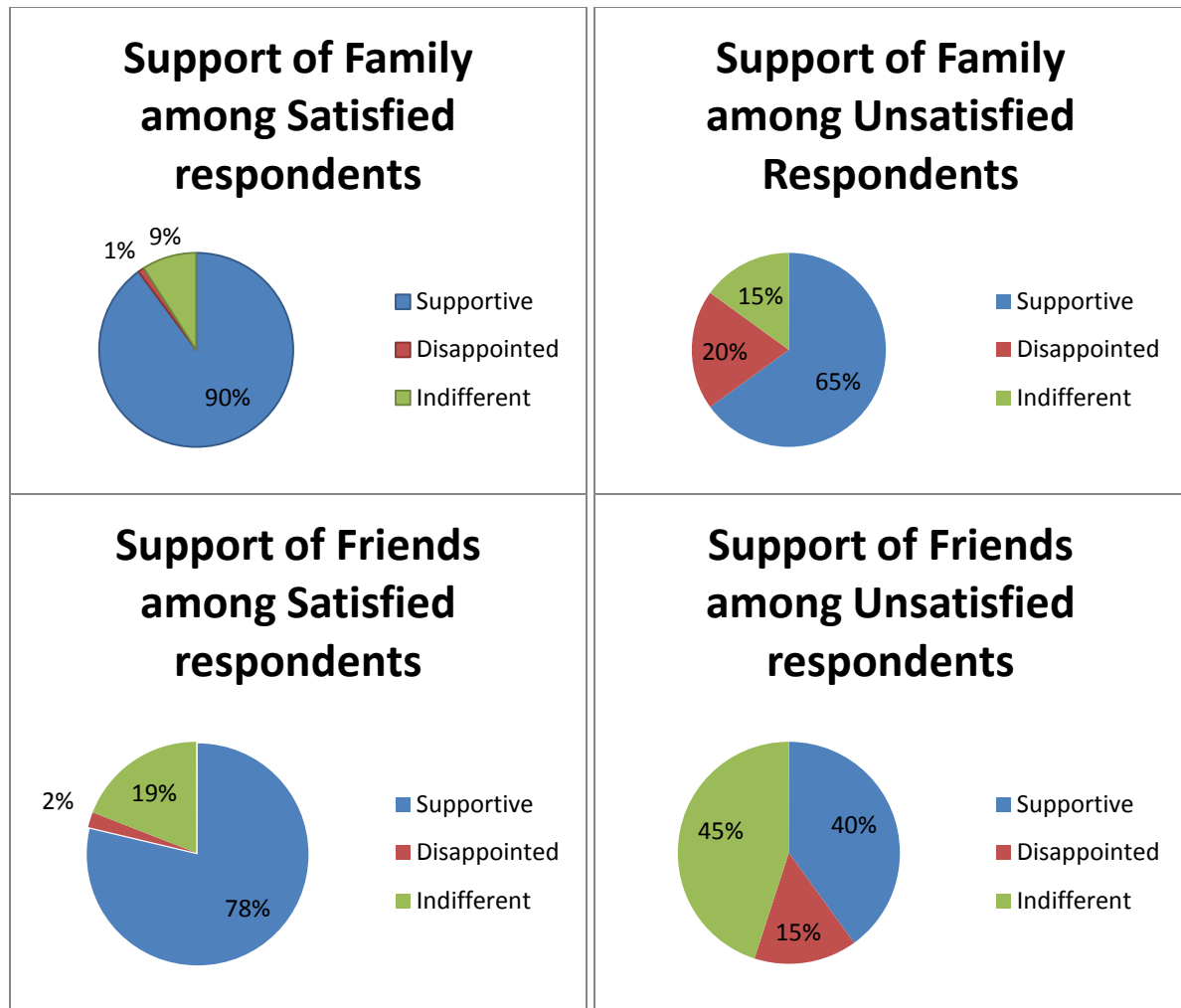
The qualitative portion of the survey provides further insight into the overall sentiment of the students. In the section for word association, common words repeated over and over again in association with “Community Colleges” regardless of satisfaction level, were “cheap,” “convenient,” and “small.” “University” elicited words such as “hard,” “expensive,” and “big.” In comparison of the associations with “Palm Beach Community College” and “Palm Beach State College,” the results were either extremely similar or just slightly more favorable to “Palm Beach State College.”

### Satisfaction Rates



### PBSC First Choice to Attend





### Discussion:

The primary focus of this survey was to discover how students perceive the college they attend, Palm Beach State College. An extremely high satisfaction rate indicates that the majority of students perceive Palm Beach State College as a positive part of their lives. Whether this is caused by any of the other factors measured is left up to speculation, but such a strong correlation between the support of family and friends, whether Palm Beach State College was their first choice to attend, and satisfaction demands further study.

An interesting note is the age range of those unsatisfied versus those satisfied. The range of those unsatisfied is significantly narrower than among those satisfied; they are consistently younger responses. This indicates that older, more mature students recognize the potential and value behind the community college. However, this does not indicate that younger students are more inclined to be unsatisfied. The age range of those satisfied had as young of respondents as the satisfied group. This is simply a reflective on the nature of how the older student feels about the opportunities available at the community college.

The numbers and satisfaction rates among high achieving students are astounding. In direct contradiction to the stereotypical community college student, many honors students attend and are satisfied with their choice to attend Palm Beach State College. The amount of honors students in the sample is not the only remarkable result; out of those high achieving students surveyed, there was a 92% satisfaction rate, and out of the honors students there was an even higher 96% satisfaction rate. This shows that the level and quality of education available at the community college is significant enough to keep academically gifted students challenged and willing to keep pursuing excellence.

The weaknesses of this study are numerous. Due to time and access constrictions, only two campuses of one institution were surveyed, thus not providing as complete a picture as would typically be desired. Because the sample is not entirely representative of the general population, it is difficult to make general statements about the entire population, but the results of this study indicate that the support and influence of family and friends is a strong force in determining how the student will view their college.

However, there are many strengths of this study as well. Primarily, it is a solid stepping stone to base further research on. Before this study, the literature was remarkably silent on the perception of community colleges; their low status was treated more as common knowledge instead of something to measure. Hopefully, this study will start a new precedent for future studies to conduct themselves upon.

Future implications of this study indicate a possibly rising trend in the way community colleges are perceived. If perception levels are high among students, it is only a matter of time before the stigma associated with community college begins to disappear. Just as community college graduates are beginning to reshape the way the nation views them today, with more graduates every year and high perception rates, there will soon be even more community college graduates forging the way for community colleges to claim the respect they deserve. Sociological theory says that roles change before the stereotypes associated with them will change; this seems to be the case surrounding community colleges today.

This study leaves much potential for exploration in this field. Since the arena of community college research is relatively silent already and perception of colleges even more so, there is certainly the need for further research. It is suggested that future studies focus on more articulated and concrete means of measuring perception. Adding in the measurements of perception of quality of teachers, admissions, student activities, and so on will allow for a comparison with current studies available from four year universities. More study is needed to further discover how the community college is viewed in comparison with four year institutions. There are many other aspects of perception to be measured, including school spirit, school pride, and desire to recommend community colleges to friends and family. Larger studies across

institutions and geographical boundaries are needed to gather more complete data to substantiate the findings of this study.



**Appendix A****SURVEY**

Section I. Please complete this demographic information to the best of your ability.

1. Age \_\_\_\_
2. Sex: Please Circle One  
Male                  Female
3. Race: Circle all that apply  
White                  African American                  Hispanic  
Asian                  Pacific Islander  
Multiracial (please list): \_\_\_\_\_  
Other (please list): \_\_\_\_\_
4. Which campus do you primarily attend?  
 Lake Worth  
 Palm Beach Gardens  
 Boca Raton  
 Belle Glade  
 Online courses
5. Select your highest level of education completed:  
 High School Diploma  
 GED  
 Some College  
 Associates Degree  
 Bachelor's Degree
6. What degree are you currently seeking at PBSC?  
 AA Degree  
 AS Degree  
 AAS Degree  
 Certificate Program  
 BAS Degree  
 Non degree seeking  
 Dual Enrollment
7. Do you receive financial aid from Palm Beach State College?  
Yes                          No

7a. If yes, what types of financial aid do you receive?

- Grants
- Scholarships
- Loans
- Third Party
- Bright Futures
- Other (Please Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Select your parent's highest level of education completed; Check Selections Below.

Highest Level Earned	Mother	Father
No degree attained		
High School diploma		
GED		
Some College		
Associates Degree		
Bachelor's Degree		
Graduate Degree		
Doctoral degree or above		

9. What is your current GPA?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. How many credit hours have you completed?

\_\_\_\_\_

Section II. These questions will help determine how active you are in the college community. Please answer to the best of your ability.

11. Are you a member of any clubs or organizations at PBSC? Please circle your answer.

Yes                                          No

11a. If yes, please list which clubs/organizations you are a member of within PBSC.

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Are you a member of any community organizations?

Yes                                          No

12a. If yes, please list which community organizations you are a member of.

\_\_\_\_\_

13. Do you participate in any extracurricular activities at PBSC within the course of a semester?

(E.g. Athletics, Theater, Movie Events, Guest Speakers, etc)

- No
- Yes, 1-2 events a semester
- Yes, 3-5 events a semester
- Yes, over 6 events a semester

14. Which option best describes your status at PBSC? Please circle one.

Full Time Student

Transient Student

Non Degree Seeking

Dual enrollment Student

Other (Please Specify): \_\_\_\_\_

15. When do you take classes at PBSC? Please select all that apply.

- Morning
- Afternoon
- Evening
- Weekend Courses
- Online

16. How many credit hours are you currently enrolled in at PBSC?

- 1-3
- 4-6
- 7-9
- 10-12
- 13-15
- 16+

Section III. Please answer these questions about your previous college experience and enrollment choices.

17. Did you come to PBSC directly after graduating high school? Please circle one.

Yes

No

18. Have you attended any other colleges before attending PBSC? Please circle one.

Yes

No

If "yes" to question 18,  
please answer part a & b

If "no" to question 18,  
please skip to question 19



26. Are you satisfied with your decision to attend Palm Beach State College?

Yes

No

Why or Why not? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

27. Why did you choose to attend PBSC? Please Circle All that Apply:

- Finances      Close to family      Live at home      Work      Honors Program  
 Academics      Remedial Classes      Attain AA for transferring      Accessible Admissions  
 BAS Program      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

28. Out of the reasons circled above, please list your number one reason for attending PBSC:

\_\_\_\_\_

What word(s) come to mind when you think of the topic word?

Please list up to 3 words for each topic word.

Topic Words	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
Palm Beach State College			
Community Colleges			
Palm Beach Community College			
University			
University of Florida			
Harvard University			

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your input is appreciated!

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