Santa Rosa Junior College

Fall 2025 Academic Interest Area (AIA) Naming: Faculty Focus Groups

Santa Rosa Junior College

Office of institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning (IREP)

Introduction

In alignment with the SRJC Forward Workgroups' efforts to develop academic pathways that make selecting a major or certificate clearer, and to ensure naming uses language that is understandable, positive, and inviting – the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research & Planning (IERP), in collaboration with the Academic Senate President, facilitated a series of student focus groups to gather feedback on proposed naming options for Academic Interest Areas. Final naming for the grouped programs of study (Pathways) has yet to be determined. For the purposes of this document, these groupings will be referred to as Academic Interest Areas (AIAs).

Faculty input was sought to ensure the proposed Academic Interest Area names are clear and inviting to students while remaining academically accurate and representative of the programs of study they include. Their subject-matter expertise and knowledge of curriculum, transfer, and career preparation help ensure the names support coherent pathways and align with educational and workforce expectations.

This report, together with the results of the student focus groups, provides the SRJC Forward Workgroup with an appraisal of both student and faculty perspectives on the proposed Academic Interest Area naming. In short, student feedback helped to ensure the names felt clear, inviting, and meaningful from a user perspective, while faculty were consulted to safeguard those same names remained academically sound, discipline-informed, and aligned with real program structures and outcomes for pathways that are both student-centered and educationally thorough.

Background

The AIAs presented in this study are grounded in the Holland's Theory model, which organizes career-related interests into six broad clusters of <u>degree and certificate earning programs</u>. This approach is intended to align with students' strengths, goals, and preferences by helping them identify academic areas that resonate with their interests.

Expected Impact

Implementation of this evidence-based framework is expected to:
- Increase student access and engagement
- Strengthen academic satisfaction
- Improve long-term success outcomes

Study Scope

In addition to collecting faculty feedback on the naming of individual AIAs, the research team also sought input on website presentation and functionality, and the value in adding an additional short descriptor as a call-to-action tagline per Academic Interest Area.

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Summary of Findings

1. **The majority of faculty prefer the Two-Noun Pathway Names (Option 2)**
   Holland Code Option 2 (pg. 10) received the strongest participant support with 16 of 22 of faculty selecting it as their preferred choice. Four participants preferred equally Option 2 or Option 3, while two members preferred Option 3. When faculty reviewed the individual Academic Interest Areas grouped by programs of study, individual names from option 2 consistently scored highest – earning an average Likert rating of 4.2 out of 5.0 across participant workbooks.

2. **Website Ease and Visuals**
   When assessing AIA website examples from other colleges, faculty compared and discussed how peer institutions organize programs of study, names utilized, visual design, and overall accessibility. Across discussions, several consistent themes emerged:
   - The value of a highly visual design, including images or graphics that clearly represent the contents of each pathway and enable students to see themselves reflected in the options presented.
   - The importance of technical accessibility, allowing related subcategories and programs to be viewed together intuitively without users losing context.
   - A recurring recommendation for an "Explorer/Undecided" option to support students who are still exploring and unsure of how and where to best proceed..

3. **Mixed reactions for Short Motivational Descriptors – Needs Refinement**
   Faculty understood the intent behind using broad motivational statements; however, there was limited agreement regarding their overall value and the specific examples provided. Many participants expressed a preference for language that is aligned with AIA content-specific descriptors, rather than a generalized call-to-action tone, which some viewed as overly narrow in appeal and potentially patronizing to students**.**

Focus Group Procedures

In Fall 2025, IERP, in conjunction with the Academic Senate President, implemented a focus group protocol to gather impressions and feedback related to proposed naming options for Academic Interest Areas. The procedure was designed to explore three central topics:
- Input for pathway naming conventions that elicit curiosity
- Preferences for website navigation and user-interface elements related to pathways
- Impressions of proposed two-sentence descriptor as a *motivational positioning statement*

Session Flow

Introduction

The focus groups began with informal introductions that included participants name and department they teach in, and formally by asking participants to describe in their own words their current understanding and meaning of the term *'Academic Pathway'*. Following this discussion, the facilitator provided a brief clarification regarding the purpose and intent of AIA groupings at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Naming convention

Faculty were presented and guided through the six AIA groupings of associated programs of study, each with their own six possible naming options. Participants received a data collection workbook that mirrored the presentation in which they:

- Select their preferred name for each pathway through a 5-point Likert Scale
- Provide written comments or a rationale
- Offered alternative naming suggestions
- Select one of the six complete naming group options

Web interface

To stimulate feedback for effective student facing web design, participants were shown examples from five California Community Colleges that offered a range of approaches – illustrating how each institution titles and displays its academic pathways on their websites. Facilitator communication was limited to introducing each example and describing the framework and titles each website incorporated for its pathways (i.e., "this college calls their interest areas '_____', groups them into '#' pathways, and names them '_____'. What are your thoughts on this design?").

Pathway descriptors

Lastly, in addition to establishing the broader naming convention (*Area Names*), each AIA was shown with a two-sentence descriptor as a *motivational positioning statement/call to action tagline*. Participants were asked to discuss and offer their thoughts on such statements, and/or if they had examples of their own to share.

Final statements

The facilitator thanked the participants, expressing value and gratitude for their voices, and in a general way, described the process that will follow for the district to implement the work that the focus group has supported. Ending by reiterating the importance of their contributions to improve SRJC ability to support students and their needs to be successful.

Participant Recruitment

Efforts were made to recruit up to 50 faculty participants across five scheduled focus group sessions, conducted both online and in person on the Santa Rosa and Petaluma campuses throughout November 2025. Participation was voluntary. A series of invitation emails were sent by the Academic Senate President to all faculty, inviting them sign up and engage in discussions related to the proposed Academic Interest Areas. In addition, regular announcements and verbal invitations were shared through Academic Senate meetings. Associate faculty were eligible for compensation at their base hourly rate for up to two hours of participation, while contract faculty were invited to participate as part of their college service.

Senate President invitation email.

Good morning and Happy Tuesday, Fellow Faculty Members:

The Academic Interest Area (AIA) Naming Focus Group Facilitators - Blair Lamb, Jenna Ausiello, and myself - invite you to participate in upcoming focus groups to help shape the naming of SRJC's AIA's. Your insights as Faculty are invaluable in ensuring that these names are meaningful, inclusive, and student-centered.

Focus groups will be held on the following dates and locations:
Thursday, November 13th (12:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.) | Plover 526
Friday, November 14th (10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.) | Plover 526
Monday, November 17th (4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.) | Online Zoom
Wednesday, November 19th (5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.) | Online Zoom
Tuesday, December 2nd (3:15 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.) | Petaluma Call 690

Please RSVP for one of the available sessions here: Naming Academic Interest Areas - Focus Group Registration.

Space is limited and will be accommodated on a first-come, first-served basis.

If you experience any issues signing up, please contact Blair Lamb at blamb@santarosa.edu.

If you have any questions regarding the purpose of the focus groups, please contact Dr. John Stover at jstover@santarosa.edu.

Thank you for contributing your perspective to this important campus initiative.

Warm regards,
AIA Naming Focus Group Facilitators

Participant Demographics

A total of twenty-three faculty members participated across four sessions. Participants included one associate and 22 tenured faculty members.

Discipline representation and distribution are summarized in the table below.

Faculty Focus Group Participation by Discipline		
(1) Astronomy	(1) Humanities	(2) Sociology
(2) College Skills	(1) Math	(1) WL: ASL
(1) Counseling	(3) Philosophy	(1) WL: French
(1) Disability Specialist	(1) Psychology	(1) WL: Spanish
(1) EMLS	(2) Public Services Librarian	
(2) English	(1) Technical Services Librarian	

Data

The data sources collected for analysis include the completed faculty workbooks, audio recordings, note taking, and electronic transcriptions of participation. Together, these data provide the comprehensive foundation for evaluating naming preferences, understanding of Academic Pathways, and user experience considerations related to the proposed pathway design.

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Findings

Naming Preference

A solid majority participants preferred the two-noun naming structure (pg. 10) for the Academic Interest Area titles. Faculty engaged in substantive and critical dialogue regarding the extent to which the language signaled inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, as well as how effectively each option might invite student inquiry and exploration. While Option 2 emerged as the most favored overall, a notable proportion of faculty also expressed equal support for the two-gerund structure (Option 3) as well. In marked contrast, options 4 and 5 generated a fair amount of strongly articulated opposition, with many faculty expressing clear dissatisfaction and concern about their tone, clarity, and appropriateness for students.

Faculty statements:

- *I very much don't like the identity base (option 5), because they're essentializing in a way that I think I'm, like, not helpful to our students, to reduce them to that one identity.*
- *I'm am finding a sense of either corporatization or personally limiting tones in many of these, and when looking at them in their total grouping, I think option 2 is by far is the most inspirational.*
- *Option 2 is the most descriptive and inclusive of the programs that fell under it.*
- *From a student perspective, I like option 2 which would name… something that maybe they're familiar with, like when I look at tools and trades, like, they've probably heard trades, or they've heard, like, I want to work with my hands.*
- *Students are showing up asking what's my area of study? What am I going to study? As opposed to like a trait or an identity, who am I? This is why I lean towards option two.*
- *Nothing with the word 'structure', never. (Option 4).*
- *None of these words to me in the two-noun group, seem too academic or too steeped in our college brains, and are relatable to students and what they're… aiming for.*
- *The blue group (option 2) is the best I think, because it offers two nouns for descriptors that are different in meaning and may be more broad and inclusive, whereas the other two words groups seem to be describing the same idea.*
- *Option 2 I think it gives students a couple of different points that they can anchor to, I also like that there is some connection there to action… without the emphasis being on the doing of the thing right away. Sometimes students are intimidated, so the idea of learning about it first is important, it takes a little of the pressure off of that. I wouldn't opt for ones that are immediately verb-based.*
- *The identity-based names are excluding people rather than inviting them in.*
- *I prefer the dark blue (option 2) when you tell somebody what they will be studying you are inviting them to ask am I interested in this? That can be then an invitation for them to look closer. That somewhat happens with option 3 as well.*
- *Two or three, with plenty of room for improvement, because they focus on what will be learned or what they will be learning. I slightly prefer 3 because they are action focused which are what our SLO's are supposed to be.*
- *Option two seems the most logical for what we're trying to do, and if within it we could add more adjectives to help students understand. I absolutely hate 4 and 5.*
- *I am on the fence between 2 and 3 – they are very similar. Maybe we can get the best of both?*

Website Interface/Navigation

Faculty reviewed and discussed how other colleges organize and present their Academic Interest Areas. Although there was some variation in specific model preferences, there was strong alignment around overarching themes related to student needs, stylistic considerations, and functional design. A clear priority emerged regarding visual layout: participants emphasized the importance of allowing all programs within an Academic Interest Area to be viewed side by side to support exploration, rather than requiring users to navigate through multiple layers of narrow topics. The use of inspirational, topic-specific visuals was widely regarded as essential. Photographs were the preferred visual medium, though high-quality graphic art was also considered appropriate and valuable. Faculty further agreed that artistic expertise should inform website design and content presentation. The model most consistently recommended for emulation was that of Long Beach City College; however, a substantial portion of faculty also expressed strong preference for elements of the College of Marin's website design and functionality.

Faculty statements:

- *I so much appreciate selecting an area and then be able to see all the categories and majors within, because if I'm a student and I'm looking at entrepreneurship and business, I have no idea what goes beyond that, and I've got to click that to then get into what that list is. And so it's just having that dynamic… ability to see everything all at once, but in different levels, that I think is really helpful.*
- *The overarching name is not the main point and it should be minimal clicking for a student. I think we underestimate how impatient our students can be, and if you have to click four deep, you're gonna lose them.*
- *I don't think the visual emphasis on career pathways as the sole reason for college and there should be something about shaping the human experience through being at college with graphics or pictures.*
- *I feel like having visual images do cue things for students, but please SRJC no clip art.*
- *Technically, I love a sidebar, where it lists them all, so if I'm like, oh, I think I like digital media, oh, film and film studies, that's related, okay. It's really offering a lot of… options on every screen, so that nobody feels like they've fallen down like oh, I'm in the psych hole, and I now's only doing psych, but… you know, all these things are related. I think it really lends itself to student exploration.*
- *I have my preference, but acknowledge I am not a student in this day and age and would differ to the student voices regarding what appeals to them.*
- *I wouldn't have thought I liked pictures, but I think real-life pictures is far better than clip art and representative. We have all these ADT videos that they made, so we probably have fantastic… films or videos that can go into these different areas, too.*
- *I think its very important for students to have an explorer pathway option to click on like College of Marin, not all of our students know and are coming to our website to investigate.*
- *What I like the most about this example (LBCC) is the fact that there's not multiple layers to getting access to the majors that sort of fit into the pathway.*
- *I do appreciate the photography, and the access to videos, and the imaginative photorealism art.*
- *Our students are incredibly talented at reading visuals, sometimes better than words.*
- *I prefer icons to photographs but if they're visually stimulating and not boring. I also wonder if there's a way to have them human created not generic computer made, could we make our own homegrown icons from students or art people work on them to capture what these examples try to do?*

Use of Descriptive Sentence

As a supplement to the proposed Academic Interest Area names, motivational *call-to-action* statements were presented for each area. Overall, faculty expressed limited enthusiasm for incorporating the provided statements. Perceptions of statement quality varied by Interest Area: some elicited critical reactions, while others were received more favorably. However, there was general agreement that including more specific, program-descriptive language may be appropriate given the current non-specific Area naming conventions.

Faculty statements:

- *The text at the top of your slide with the plain language details for group is much better.*
- *I get it, I know I'm not 19, but this just doesn't work…it feels very advertise-y, I don't like it. It just feels really cheesy, it doesn't feel SRJC, it doesn't feel like we're projecting what it is that this is actually going to be in terms of a major – I would think AI wrote it.*
- *This implies exclusivity, like if you choose something else, you're not a compassionate individual?*
- *Get rid of the explanation marks.*
- *I feel like this is such a big decision for students that a quippy sentence isn't going to grab their attention, I actually like what's at the top if the slide, it gives more information.*
- *This doesn't feel like you're taking my career seriously with these statements.*
- *These feel anti-intellectual.*

Understanding of the phrase Academic Interest Areas

This question was originally included in the student focus groups to assess each participant's baseline knowledge and perspectives as current members of the student body. The same question was subsequently retained for the faculty focus groups as a structured prompt for discussion. Faculty participants demonstrated a solid familiarity with the concept underlying Academic Interest Areas; while not all were explicitly acquainted with the current terminology, most were familiar with its prior iteration; Guided Pathways, and its intended purpose and value within the institution.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A summative analysis of the four focus group sessions showed that the majority of faculty favored the **two-noun naming structure (Option 2) for the Academic Interest Areas**, citing themes of inclusiveness, broader appeal, and stronger alignment with the programs encompassed within each area. Participants also viewed this option as more accessible for both decided and undecided students while maintaining an academic legitimacy. Although Option 2 emerged as the clear preference, a notable subset of faculty equally supported the two-gerund structure (Option 3), describing it as dynamic and conceptually engaging, though some felt it was overly abstract and less clearly tied to specific academic programs.

Faculty further recommend the need for an intuitive, visually coherent, and student-centered website design that allows users to view all programs within an Academic Interest Area side by side without navigating through multiple layers of pages. Participants agreed that clear, streamlined navigation is essential to support exploration through an understanding of related programs of study within disciplines. The importance of topic specific visuals was also noted, generally preferring authentic photographs while recognizing that well-designed graphic art may also be appropriate. Subject matter relevance should inform the visual and content areas with the actual programs of study.

Overall, **Long Beach City College's website** was most frequently cited as a strong model for organization and navigability, while some preferred the aesthetic and user-experience features of the College of Marin's website.

Lastly, Faculty participants generally expressed limited support for the proposed **motivational call-to-action statements**. While reactions varied by Academic Interest Area, there was consistent agreement that broadly inspirational language was less effective given the non-specific nature of the current AIA names. Accordingly, if supplemental language is retained, it should be more program-specific, descriptive, and academically grounded to better clarify the types of disciplines and programs of study represented within each Interest Area.

Additional Findings

Faculty perspectives proved highly valuable to the primary areas of interest discussed within the focus groups. The materials presented stimulated robust conversations, with two topics consistently and emphatically raised by participants.

The first concerned the categorization of "departments." Faculty identified perceived incongruities in the groupings and questioned the underlying method and logic used to construct them, as well as whether these decisions were final. These discussions revealed a limitation in how the focus group model was initially presented: the framework is not organized by traditional academic departments but rather by Programs of Study – that is, pathways leading to attainable degrees and certificates. When interest areas are organized around Programs of Study, conventional department-based groupings necessarily become less distinct and more interconnected. This was particularly evident in disciplines such as Business and Computer Studies, each of which encompass a broad range of degrees that align with notably different areas of interest. Going forward, clearer presentation for the basis of categorization and its application to the Academic Interest Areas would strengthen shared understanding and support district-wide alignment.

The other recurring concern and recommendation was the need for a clearly defined "pathway" for undecided or exploring students, which participants consistently described as essential rather than optional. Faculty emphasized that many students enter SRJC uncertain and to explore their options, and argued that any pathway model must explicitly support exploratory decision-making rather than presume early program selection.

Limitations

Although 23 faculty participated across four sessions, this represents a small proportion of total SRJC faculty; therefore, findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than fully generalizable to all faculty perspectives. Disciplinary representation was uneven, with some fields represented by only one participant while others had multiple participants, potentially giving greater weight to certain viewpoints. The sample was also heavily weighted toward tenured faculty (22 of 23), which may underrepresent associate faculty perspectives. Because participation was voluntary, the results may reflect self-selection bias, as those who chose to participate may have held stronger opinions about Academic Interest Areas than non-participants. Additionally, early presentation framing that didn't take into consideration the understandable "department-based" mindset created confusion for some faculty, suggesting that the study materials, not only the underlying model, may have shaped certain responses.

Appendix

Table 1. Presented naming options. Option 2 (in red) is the preferred naming preference.

	Example Majors: Dental Hygiene Fire Technology Culinary Landscape Design	Example Majors: Physics Math Biology Computer Science	Example Majors: Floral Design Music Fashion Studies Studio Art	Example Majors: Social Work Child Development Communication Nursing	Example Majors: Hospitality Mngt Real Estate Business Admin Wine Marketing	Example Majors: Human Resources Admin Assistant Paralegal Studies Accounting
Option 1 Traits-Based Adjectives	Hands-on	Analytical	Creative	Social	Enterpreneurial	Structured
Option 2 Area of Study Name (Two Nouns)	Tools & Trades	Research & Discovery	Vision & Expression	Connection & Care	Leadership & Innovation	Systems & Solutions
Option 3 Action Based Name (Two Gerund Verbs)	Building and Serving	Discovering and Analyzing	Creating and Expressing	Helping and Connecting	Leading and Influencing	Organizing and Optimizing
Option 4 Identity Based Name with Adjective (Nouns)	Hands-On Innovators	Curious Problem-Solvers	Creative Visionaries	Compassionate Helpers	Bold Leaders	Structured Achievers
Option 5 Identity-Based Name (Nouns)	The Builders	The Solvers	The Creators	The Helpers	The Leaders	The Organizers
Option 6 Action-Based Name (Two Verbs)	Build & Fix	Discover & Solve	Create & Express	Connect & Serve	Lead & Launch	Organize & Optimize