



Santa Rosa Junior College

Office of institutional Effectiveness, Research
and Planning (IREP)

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



Introduction

Purpose

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).

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 degree and certificate earning programs. 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 student 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.



Summary of Findings

1. **Strong Preference for Two-Noun Pathway Names (Option 2)**

Across all focus groups, students consistently favored Holland Code Option 2 (table 1), which utilizes two-noun titles. When reviewing names alongside associated majors, Option 2 earned the highest ratings from participant data workbooks. This preference was further reinforced when the full set of pathway names was presented (table 1), generating the most discussion and positive comments – indicating stronger clarity, resonance, and appeal.

2. **Website Design is Critical to Student Understanding and Engagement**

Students emphasized that how AIAs are presented online through the college website significantly shapes their ability to understand academic options. They strongly preferred a website that is:

- Highly visual (images or graphics that reflect what’s inside each pathway)
- Intuitive and interactive
- Allows easy browsing and discovery *within* a pathway (not just clicking a narrow route to a single endpoint)

Participants consistently pointed to Long Beach City College’s website as the model most aligned with their expectations and needs.

3. **Desire for a Short Motivational Descriptor – Needs Refinement**

Students responded positively to the idea of including a brief (1–2 sentence) motivational descriptor for each AIA that conveys purpose, personality, and outcomes. However, they felt the examples provided require further refinement, as many did not yet feel it to be inspiring, student-centered, or aligned with their expectations.

Focus Group Procedures

In Fall 2025, IERP, in conjunction with the Academic Senate President, implemented a focus group protocol to gather student 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 students' current major/program of study and formally began by asking participants to describe in their own words their current understanding and meaning of the term '*Academic Pathway*'. Following this discussion, facilitators provided a brief clarification regarding the purpose and intent of AIA groupings at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Naming convention

Participants were presented and guided through the six AIA groupings of associated programs of study, each with their own six possible naming options. Student 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

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, 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

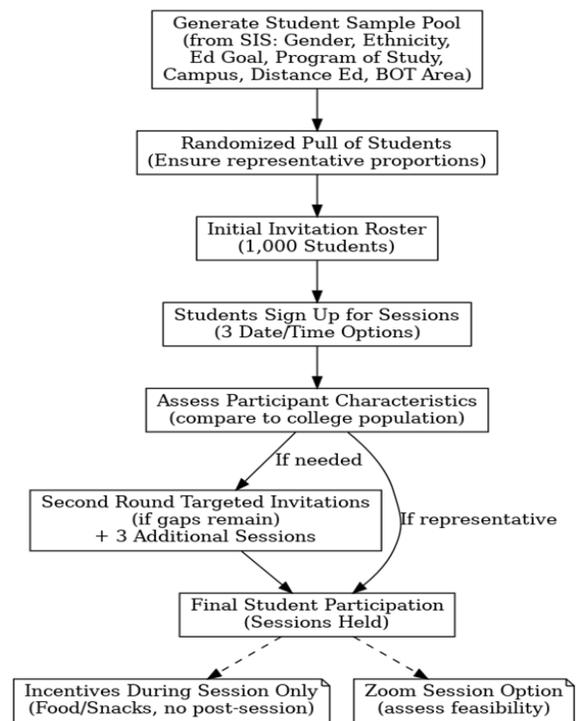
The facilitator thanked the participants, expressing value and gratitude for their voices, and in a general way, described the process that will follow for the district to implement the work that the focus group has supported. Ending by reiterating the importance of their contributions to improve SRJC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



Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

Efforts were made to recruit a participant group that reflected the college’s overall student population. To accomplish this, IERP developed a series of randomized sample pools of 1,000 students, each proportionally matched to SRJC’s enrollment and demographic profile. Matching attributes included key factors such as academic program distribution, enrollment status, course modality behavior, gender, ethnicity, and other relevant student characteristics.

After each round of invitations, the attributes of the students who registered for upcoming focus groups were analyzed to identify any emerging disproportionalities. When over or under representation appeared, adjustments were made to the next invitation pool to rebalance participation. This sampling and adjustment process was repeated three times, ensuring that final participant groups were as representative as possible of the broader college community.



Incentives utilized for participation included food and snacks, as well as a Certification as Research Participant signed by both the College and Academic Senate Presidents.

Participant Demographics

Forty-two students participated across six sessions and were more representative than the general SRJC student population in regards to being younger, full-time, low-income, and pursuing a degree and transfer with clear educational goals. Hispanic/Latino and African American students were also overrepresented. In contrast, students who are part-time, enrolled in noncredit programs, or pursuing CTE or personal enrichment goals were underrepresented. White students were also present at a lower rate compared to their district proportion.

Data

The data sources collected for analysis included the completed student 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.



Findings

Students' understanding of academic pathways

As an introduction, students were asked what the term 'Academic Pathways' means to them. While some students understood that Academic Pathways are designed to support educational navigation and pathway clarity, most participants approached the concept with limited familiarity. Their feedback reflected assumptions about how AIAs might operate, rather than awareness of the existing intent or structure. After receiving a brief explanation during the session, many students noted that having access to this information earlier in their SRJC experience would have meaningfully supported their initial academic decision-making.

Naming Preference

Thirty-five of the forty two (83%) of participants preferred the two-noun naming structure (Option 2) for AIA titles (Table 1). Students regularly described these titles as broadly intriguing, inspirational, and accessible. This set of names, both individually and as a cohesive framework – was referenced most frequently and discussed in the greatest depth across all focus groups. Quantitative results from the handbook materials, using a 5-point Likert scale, reinforced this preference, with Option 2 receiving the highest overall rating (4.4), notably exceeding the next-highest option (3.7). Participants further emphasized that the two-noun structure felt flexible and inclusive, particularly for students who were undecided or still exploring potential academic pathways.

Participant statements

- *The bigger category of what you might find interesting before you really get into the specifics, like a STEM, or social, or business'*
- *I think of certain routes or guides that the school has that someone can take to officially complete certain academic goals.*
- *To me it means being here at school and doing book work and taking tests and getting some kind of degree.*
- *Different pathways for students, cuz some students are here for different reasons and pathways get them where they want to be.*
- *I just honestly picture going to a counselor to figure out what you want to do in your future.*
- *The pathways are like branches, but they, you know, have little twigs that stick out.*

- *My favorite was #2; especially if thinking about broad spectrum of population of all age ranges like high school grads and older adults.*
- *Option two is the one that feels closest to what the programs are offering. Some of the other wordings felt like from the 1950's.*
- *Option two has most of my favorite single terms, and when looked at as a whole compared to others, it makes the most sense to me. It has balance.*
- *I Think that having 'and' in the title is good as well as two words to cover programs in an inspiring, yet not necessarily too specific of a way.*
- *Many of the other examples seem like they could be condescending and simplistic, we are adults right, this is college.*
- *Option 2 is favorite. I am still exploring and those titles feel the most optimistic to me.*



Website Interface/Navigation

Students emphasized the importance of a clear, intuitive, and visually engaging college website to support exploration of AIAs. Participants expressed strong preferences for the use of icons, images, and visual cues that invite exploration and assist with quickly identifying areas of interest, particularly for visual and kinesthetic learners.

A high value is placed for streamlined navigation, dropdown menus, and technical flexibility that allow users to move between sections without becoming disoriented. Comparisons to peer institutions noted that modern, responsive designs better align with student expectations and support sustained engagement during program exploration.

- *I feel it's important that it is easy to find programs with icons that make you want to click around to explore.*
- *I appreciate having pictures due to being visual and kinesthetic learner, even if I was undecided I would like to explore the pictures.*
- *LBCC was very precise with what they were presenting, easy to find the area that I am pursuing and liked dropdown menus.*
- *The technical flexibility to easily view and move between screens without getting lost down a rabbit hole, that's when you lose me.*
- *I like pictures of both professionals in their jobs and students in the class for what it will be like.*
- *For me, it needs to be as intuitive as gaming or a modern website, it is 2025. I'd say Long Beach is the closest to this.*

Use of Descriptive Sentence

As a supplement to the AIA name provided, students expressed mixed reactions to the proposed motivational call-to-action statements. While some participants appreciated the encouraging tone, others felt the statements were overly narrow for the breadth of programs within each pathway or risked sounding condescending. Specific language choices, punctuation (e.g., exclamation marks), and certain terms were noted as potentially unappealing. Overall, students are not opposed, but clearly more development is required.

- *I don't mind the idea, but they seem like maybe too focused for the large academic variety in the pathway.*
- *Get rid of the explanation marks, are you yelling at us?*
- *I like what is written on the top of the slide better for each of them, its more descriptive less condescending.*
- *I like it, but the word 'structured' I don't think is appealing.*
- *It is motivating like a coach. Maybe only one general sentence for each to go with the main name?*
- *It's cute, especially if it stays broad and just gives me a sense of what I can do without boxing me in or yelling at me.*



Conclusions and Recommendations

Analysis of the focus group data indicates strong and consistent agreement across all six sessions that participants favored the two-noun naming structure (Option 2) for Naming of Academic Interest Areas, citing greater clarity, interest, and overall appeal when selecting a pathway.

Website user interface: Students emphasized that sustained web interaction and engagement is closely tied to the online user experience, expressing a preference for a highly visual, intuitive, and exploratory website design, most closely modeled after Long Beach City College.

Lastly, participants stated an interest in short Motivational Descriptors to accompany each pathway; however, feedback indicated these statements should be refined to remain broadly inspiring, student-centered, and clearly aligned with realistic academic and career outcomes.

Additional Findings

It was evident that most students are unfamiliar with the concept and meaning of the term: Academic Interest Area. The few students demonstrating an accurate understanding were more often full-time and personally clear on their ADT pathway. Additionally, participants expressed confusion about perceived incongruities in the placement of specific majors within certain Academic Interest Area groupings, noting that some programs did not intuitively align with their expectations.

Population differences. Participant representation was skewed toward younger, full-time students with clearly defined long-term educational goals when compared with the district population overall. To ensure broader representation, a focused analysis was conducted on feedback and outcomes from underrepresented student groups, including older students, noncredit students, part-time students, and those not pursuing a degree or transfer. Findings from this analysis did not demonstrate meaningful deviation from overall results, though these groups engaged less frequently in verbal discussion related to website functionality.

Limitations

Extensive efforts were made to recruit participants and conduct uniform yet flexible focus group sessions, ensuring the consistent presentation of complex information across six distinct student groups. While the resulting data are robust and internally consistent, findings are limited by the relatively small sample size and should be interpreted as indicative rather than fully generalizable. Validity is supported through the use of a standardized facilitation protocol, consistent materials across sessions, multiple data sources – including participant workbooks, audio recordings, and full transcriptions—and the convergence of themes across groups. The consistency of responses and observed patterns suggests the findings accurately reflect common student perceptions and experiences related to Academic Interest Areas within the study context.



Recommendations

Assessment of findings supports the following recommendations.

1. Proceed with Hollands' Code Option Two. Its interest-based and two-noun wording appears more inclusive for undecided students, reduces confusion for those exploring multiple directions, and aligns with how students naturally search for and make sense of academic options, thereby improving clarity, engagement, and equity in pathway navigation.
2. SRJC website design implements a highly visual, intuitive, and exploratory design modeled most closely after Long Beach City College, which allows users to easily browse and discover programs within a pathway. Together, these improvements are expected to enhance navigation, increase engagement, access, and strengthen the alignment between student interests and academic decision-making.
3. Regarding integration of accompanying *motivational call to action taglines*, further development utilizing learnings obtained in this report are required at this time.
4. Regarding the fact that most students are currently unaware of AIAs at SRJC. This is a likely result of the present lack of a guided pathways structure at SRJC and may be remedied when such efforts are complete.
5. Participants found confusion regarding how the pathway groupings were configured. It is currently not clear whether pathway content is an issue, or rather the result of not describing the details on how the groupings were established. Efforts to lead with the grouping methodology are recommended and may preempt any such confusion moving forward.



Appendix

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

| | <u>Example Majors:</u> Dental Hygiene Fire Technology Culinary Landscape Design | <u>Example Majors:</u> Physics Math Biology Computer Science | <u>Example Majors:</u> Floral Design Music Fashion Studies Studio Art | <u>Example Majors:</u> Social Work Child Development Communication Nursing | <u>Example Majors:</u> Hospitality Mngt Real Estate Business Admin Wine Marketing | <u>Example Majors:</u> Human Resources Admin Assistant Paralegal Studies Accounting |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| Option 1 Traits-Based Adjectives | Hands-on | Analytical | Creative | Social | Entrepreneurial | 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 |