Enrollment Growth Research Report
Campus Focus Groups (DRAFT)

Adams State College
Alamosa, Colorado

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Introduction

In order to gather qualitative information about the internal and external image of Alamosa State College (ASC), Noel-Levitz consultants visited campus to conduct focus groups with current students, faculty, staff, and senior administrators. On February 16, 2011, Ruth Sims, senior vice president, and Pam Blair, market research analyst, conducted nine focus groups and two senior administrator interview sessions on the Alamosa State campus.

The consultants interviewed or received feedback from 88 individuals about their perceptions of the university and their experiences, including 29 students and 59 staff, faculty, and administrators. Participants were candid and forthcoming, and shared many opinions about the ASC’s image and about the strengths and challenges of the student experience.

This report summarizes key findings of the focus groups followed by samples of specific comments. Focus group research is qualitative and directional rather than statistically based; its strength is that it provides details, specific personal observations and experiences, and “color” that supplement other more quantitative research.

Other components that are part of the 2011 ASC enrollment growth research project conducted by Noel-Levitz include:

- Online survey of current students;
- Online survey of faculty and staff;
- Survey of Adams State alumni;
- Undergraduate inquiry telephone survey;
- High school guidance counselor survey;
- Interviews of school district continuing education and professional development directors;
- Community college transfer coordinators survey; and
- An undergraduate competition communications study.
Key Findings

Market Image of Adams State College

The enrollment success of a college or university is closely linked to that institution’s image in the marketplace. As admissions counselors make contacts with prospective students and as direct marketing efforts are executed to support recruitment, they are supported — or undermined — by the presence or absence of a base of knowledge and affirmation that has been built by that institution over time. Where an institution has consistently laid a foundation of mutually beneficial relationships, its enrollment efforts blossom; in places where no groundwork has been done or where it has been done sporadically, enrollment initiatives often fail to take root.

The image and perceptions of Adams State College identified by internal audiences were remarkably consistent. The college was described as friendly, student-oriented, affordable, and accessible, and the home of numerous strong academic programs in areas such as education, business, and nursing.

Knowledge of Adams State outside Alamosa, however, was perceived to be inconsistent at best and nonexistent at worst. There is a high degree of familiarity in some places — for example, among graduates of ASC’s teacher education and counseling programs. However, for individuals without a strong institutional connection, it is not uncommon for ASC to be confused with Mesa State, Western State, or Fort Lewis, or thought to be located in places ranging from Grand Junction, Colorado, to the state of Texas.

Sustaining its recent enrollment successes will require Adams State to tirelessly pursue a consistent and positive marketing presence with prospective students and those who influence them.

Distinctives and Marketing Strengths

In focus group discussions, the following themes emerged as key strengths of Adams State College.

1. A friendly, personalized educational environment

Many individuals used the word “family” to describe the ASC campus culture. “Everyone knows you by your first name,” remarked one staff member. This sense of intimacy was highly valued by students, faculty, administrators, and staff alike. It is evidenced through individual mentoring of students by faculty and the natural development of one-to-one relationships at all levels.

The college’s compact, well-designed campus contributes to this feeling of close community.

2. An affordable college education

Every focus group mentioned that Adams State is viewed as a highly affordable college option. It was frequently identified as one of the college’s top marketing messages. At times, individuals used the word “cheap” as an alternative description of ASC — a word that clearly has less favorable connotations than “affordable.”
3. Accessible and attentive faculty

Faculty members are caring and engaged. They know students well, and students are their first priority. One focus group participant observed that transfer students from other institutions in particularly notice this. “The one-on-one relationships help with grad school preparation,” observed one student. Another student said, “They are very invested in students.”

In addition, Adams State does not use graduate assistants to teach undergraduate courses.

Beyond the personal dimension, there are many examples of faculty research and service to their professions, the campus, and the community.

4. College of access and diversity

Adams State is open to students of all academic ability levels and does a good job serving the 60 percent or so of its students who need some type of remediation. It also was described as “the best place for first-generation students in the state.”

A designated Hispanic-serving institution, Adams State has a diverse campus that attracts a variety of racial and ethnic groups.

5. Adams State is known for strong academic programs such as education, business, and nursing

Although the characteristics of friendliness and affordability tended to dominate descriptions of ASC’s image, a majority of the focus groups eventually arrived at the topic of academics. On this topic, it was agreed that ASC has numerous competitive, challenging academic programs that are the producers of successful Adams State alumni.

A number of students indicated that they chose Adams State because of a specific academic major.

Specific programs that were mentioned in focus groups as noteworthy included:

- Earth sciences/geology
- Nursing
- Health care administration
- Theater
- Creative writing
- Psychology
- Human performance and physical education
- Sport psychology

One of the lesser known academic features may be the flexibility available to ASC students in developing their own majors.
6. Internships and practical experiences for students

Students were able to readily provide examples of internships or other practical experiences in which they were engaged. The specific opportunities mentioned were from the programs in psychology, education, health care, and anthropology. If these opportunities are widespread across the ASC curriculum, they represent an important marketing message for programs and majors and should be featured on Web sites and other marketing venues.

7. Small class sizes

Small class sizes are usually a selling point of private colleges and universities, but Adams State representatives frequently mentioned the college’s class sizes as an asset. This feature is particularly important to the many students who come to ASC from small high schools in the San Luis Valley area and who would find classes of 300 or more students to be intimidating.

8. Opportunities for student involvement and leadership

Because of the campus size, students have many opportunities for involvement and leadership in clubs, organizations, and intramural sports. The recent increase in higher-achieving students seems to have led to more students getting involved in leadership opportunities and in stimulating interest in such opportunities.

9. Athletic opportunities

Many students who come to ASC from outside Alamosa are drawn to the college by athletic opportunities. The track, cross-country, and wrestling programs were mentioned as particularly outstanding.

Institutional Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

Overall, participants in these groups were pleased with Adams State and their experience with the college. At the same time, they recognized the challenges facing the college and identified areas needing improvement.

1. Lack of awareness and knowledge of ASC in the marketplace

Admissions counselors and others noted that, on numerous occasions, they encounter individuals who simply don’t know the basics about Adams State – in fact, even in Colorado, they may have to answer the question, where are you?

2. Negative perceptions of Adams State

While the college has many positive attributes, there are also common negatives associated with ASC. These were generally classified as relating to perceptions of Adams State’s location (cold, boring, remote), relatively open access (we send our remedial students there), and limited geographic outreach (a college mostly for local students).

3. The other side of access

Offering relatively open admission is a two-edged sword: access is keenly important to many people in ASC’s community but, to some, it implies a lesser academic experience. One student
said: “It was too easy to get in, but I came anyway because of the program.” Another remarked, “The school is not very selective; it makes me feel like I’m nothing special to be here.”

In addition, Adams State was described as being viewed as a school where students can come simply to complete their general education requirements and then transfer.

4. Unevenness in academic advising

Students in the focus groups gave mixed reviews of academic advising at Adams State. Comments included: “Advisors often don’t have enough time; students have to keep track of their own degree plans” “(Department name) teachers are more helpful than their designated advisors,” and “Degree plans are always changing.” Note: The quantitative ASC student survey will ascertain whether this issue is widespread.

5. Limited tracking of educational outcomes

Administrators and faculty agreed that the college has not been successful in consistently and systematically tracking educational outcomes for its graduates. While anecdotally there is a sense that alumni are doing well in their fields, and departments can name some individual graduates, there is not an institutional process for gathering and recording alumni outcomes data. This was also true in terms of tracking entrance into graduate and professional schools.

6. Future challenges

Although the college has experienced enrollment success in recent years, campus employees were well aware of the variety of ongoing and future challenges facing ASC. These included balancing tuition increases and decreased federal financial aid against the mission of educational access, successfully serving a large population of underprepared students, competing with other online education providers, and keeping up with the investments needed to maintain the college’s physical plant.

College vs. University Designation

As expected, the issue of whether Adams State should remain a college or move toward university status generated spirited debate. Before asking participants’ opinion of a potential Adams State name change, they were asked to associate adjectives with either “college” or “university.” Following were the representative responses:

Adjectives or phrases associated with a college: small, laid-back, affordable, community college, less rigorous, more personal, less research.

Adjectives associated with a university: prestige/prestigious, large, more majors, four-year, higher standards, research, international students, Ph.D. programs, intimidating, sports, party school, expensive, impersonal, Division 1, overwhelming, better on resume.

The university moniker tended to be more attractive to faculty and staff associated with ASC’s graduate programs – they saw it a source of prestige and support for recruitment efforts. “We need it in order to offer an online doctorate in education like Regis or Phoenix,” said one faculty member.
Those opposing the university name feared that it would raise costs, undermine the personal culture of the institution, and serve as a barrier – real or imagined – to accessibility. In addition, it was viewed as directionally opposite of the college’s history and traditions.

Many students liked the prestigious sound of “university” but they didn’t think it fit their conception of Adams State.

A sizeable number of individuals still remained undecided on the issue.

**Observations**

In general, it was clear that focus group participants had a great deal of affection and respect for Adams State College. There was exceptional clarity and uniformity on institutional strengths.

While there was the usual list of concern and complaints that arise from any focus group process, overall the institutional culture was positive and optimistic. This bodes well for dealing with any changes that ASC will encounter in the future, either from its own deliberate strategic planning process or from influences forced upon the college by its environment.

As the Noel-Levitz consultants place this qualitative research in the context of our experience with other campuses around the country, the following questions arise:

- Is “friendly and affordable” a sufficiently strong market position to carry Adams State forward into the next decade? Especially as economic realities necessitate tuition increases, the “we’re the cheapest” platform may no longer be as valid as it was in the past.
- Is Adams State unintentionally giving a back seat to its academic programs, rather than putting them at the forefront of its marketing efforts – and if so, what price is it paying by doing that?
- Where will small class sizes rank in the hierarchy of college choice factors for Adams State inquiries and applicants? In recent years, Noel-Levitz has observed that the feature of small class sizes has dropped in importance as a college choice factor for college-bound students in general. The quantitative research will demonstrate where this factor falls for the market that ASC serves.
- How does the college vs. university name debate fit into the marketing and recruitment discussion – not simply in terms individual preferences, but in terms of the strategic direction of the institution?

The quantitative research that is the core of this enrollment growth research project will shed further light on these important issues.
APPENDIX: Sample Focus Group Comments

External perceptions of ASC – neutral/positive

It’s either “I’ve never heard of Adams State” or “You have a great program!” (Graduate faculty)

A is for Adams State – we’re the first on the alphabetical list of Colorado schools (numerous mentions).

Small classes.

Inexpensive, local, accessible.

Largest employer in Alamosa.

Pride.

Locally ASC is perceived as a good school.

External perceptions of ASC – unfamiliar/negative

People confuse us with Mesa State and Ft. Lewis. They say, are you in Grand Junction?

Are you a two-year school or four-year?

They are surprised that we have graduate programs.

They think there’s nothing to do here. Alamosa is small and there aren’t any (dance) clubs.

When local students don’t choose Adams State it’s because they want to get out of the (San Luis) Valley.

Some students don’t want to be here; their parents made them choose the school.

It’s a back-up plan, not students’ first choice.

The cheapest school; faculty don’t like that image.

On marketing of Adams State

There is no marketing at Adams State.

We don’t have an integrated approach to marketing. It’s primarily a resource issue – and the board thinks of it as “fluffy.”

We have too many Facebook sites – maybe we need to consolidate.

We could use faculty more in marketing, if we could tap into them.

The science department is a great marketing tool.
We have so many different Adams State logos.

We market our graduate programs primarily through word-of-mouth and through contact with former students.

I don’t feel like we really have a coordinated outreach to the community.

Prelaw and Premed have excellent grad school placement rates (98%) but it’s not advertised.

San Luis Valley should be highlighted, not simply Colorado.

**On recruitment**

Today’s prospective students are really tech savvy – because they grew up with it. They have four or five connectivity devices.

If I text them (students), they will answer. Phone call, no. (Admissions)

Parents are highly engaged: We get a lot of e-mails from parents. Sometimes, we actually use them to get the (student’s) application completed.

Many students have no perception of money. They don’t know the real costs of college. Instead, they ask “What do your dorms look like?”

We could recruit more students interested in outdoor sports and adventure. In the area, we have world-class rock climbing, biking, and skiing.

So many high school counselors and teachers have graduated from here. Do we have a network? If so, we could use more support from them. There should be a pipeline from those groups.

Everyone sees Admissions as solely responsible for recruitment.

We don’t do a good job of reaching out to Valley high schools. Do Valley kids get a chance to come to campus? (Faculty member)

Recruiting isn’t heavy in the community; local students aren’t receiving information.

We get a good share of high-achieving students, like Daniels scholars.

I view promoting Adams State as part of my responsibility to the community. (Graduate faculty member)

We have zero centralized recruitment support for graduate programs. It mostly falls on faculty.

They should allow incoming students to talk to current students about their experiences. (Student)

We need to get high school counselors here more often so they can see for themselves.

**How did you make the decision to enroll? (Students)**

- Made a visit to campus
- Small school atmosphere
• Liked the small community
• Softball program, track program, cross-country program
• ASC offered my program online
• Affordable; the online program costs $200 to $400 per class, much less than other online programs
• My parents liked it because Alamosa offers few distractions
• The Admissions Office was accessible, unlike at other schools
• Eric Carpio (Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Management) sat down and talked to the student
• They could talk to current students and professors
• It was affordable (although out-of-staters pay $26,000)
• The art building and faculty; the theater and art connection to the community
• Incredible facilities (art major)
• High-quality education for the dollar
• Out-of-state (New Mexico): Wanted to get away from home
• Out-of-state (California): Their theater program brought me here
• Campus tour
• Small campus
• Low tuition
• Cross-country program
• ASC reaches out to students in the community

When did you make the decision to enroll?
• May of senior year
• Senior year (most said this)
• Junior year (about ¼ said this)

Describe the undergraduate students who choose ASC (Faculty and staff)
• Minorities
• Coming from small communities
• Colorado natives
• Looking for personal touch
• Front Range students
• Athletes
• Focused on technology
• Love the outdoors
• Need money
• Not wealthy
• PELL-eligible
• First-generation
• Taking a long time to complete their degrees
• Valuing small community
• Legacy (alumni) kids

**Why do graduate students choose ASC? (Faculty and staff)**

• Almost all are career-driven
• Doing it for the pay increase
• Convenience is all-important
• To achieve professional licensure
• Low cost, affordability
• Can do part-time study in the summer (teacher ed)
• Comfortable class sizes
• Accreditation (CACREP)
• Flexibility of MA in music education – students can work full-time and pursue it
• Accessibility of online programs
• Innovativeness of the academic programs, such as electives and emphasis tracks
• Like the fantastic art facilities
• ASC’s Hispanic-serving status
• Attentive, accessible faculty
• Real-world experience such as internships
• Education with a personal touch
• Dedicated faculty – know who students are as individuals

**What Adams State does well**

• Recognized programs, e.g., biology
• High-touch
• Able to build relationships, make friends
• Affordable
• Small classes
• Professors are personal – sometimes give students their cell phone number
• Friendly environment
• State-of-the-art equipment (Smart boards, nursing program technology, computer labs)
• Great learning experiences and opportunities
• Variety of athletic programs
• One on one
• You’re a person
• Sense of community
• Faculty care and get to know students
• Students don’t mind the accountability that comes with a relationship with the professors
• Students feel comfortable here – it’s student-focused
• Big opportunity to get involved – club presidents, leadership
• Professors are top notch
• Great campus
• Good value
• Faculty, staff members are supportive
• Outdoors opportunities
• Opportunities for internships
• Sense of family/community

What might you change if you could? (Students)
• Graduation rate is really low; some kids transfer or just stop going
• The parking situation is bad; very limited parking
• Slow network; they upgraded the computers but now it takes 15 minutes to start them up
• Not enough equipment available for science program; limited number of students can take certain classes
• Faculty are not very diverse; there’s no option to choose different professors; often, there’s only one that teaches the class you need
• Adams State is unprofessional across the board; there’s no follow-through from the college; they don’t even use out-of-office replies; your questions just don’t get answered
• Communication between departments is really poor
• They don’t treat extended studies students with much respect; we seem to always come last
• School might be changing to 15 credit hours to be full-time (from 12), but not all classes are offered every semester, so it would require taking unnecessary classes to keep financial aid
• They need to offer more classes, more often
• School needs better facilities like a better rec center (it wouldn’t pass an inspection); it’s the most used building on campus. There’s a new rec center but only athletes can use it
• There aren’t many night classes
• Too much is spent on vehicles for campus safety personnel that aren’t necessary
• Financial aid is not efficient
• The teacher education program is a mess; no one seems able to outline requirements, or requirements for program are always changing
• Advisors are all department heads, and some are good, some not
• When recruited we were shown the new dorms, but freshmen are assigned to live in the old dorms, so it was deceptive

About the Alamosa area
• The community knows it’s improving
• My perception has gotten better; you get used to the community and it gets comfortable
• There isn’t much to do
• There are sporting events, rock climbing, and theater
• I wish the community would run promotions for college students; discounts on food, college nights, etc.
• There’s an isolation factor; 100 miles from anywhere
• There’s no place to go for a study break at night; McDonalds is the only thing open late
• The community interacts with the school
• There’s no mall (from a student who came from Denver)
• Doesn’t even have a book store

**University vs. College**

*Neutral/Pros*

• University is just a title; it really doesn’t matter
• A name change would be a bigger draw for high school kids
• Change would facilitate growth in college and community
• We “have to” change; other colleges in Colorado are
• More selectivity would be a good thing
• Students might be more motivated
• Would generate more money from more grad students
• We could offer a doctorate in education

*Cons*

• University doesn’t fit this school
• Might mean different academic requirements
• Might change from a liberal arts school (a bad thing)
• Change would eliminate some San Luis Valley students (too expensive)
• There would be too many students for their already limited space
• What’s the cost of that change and who’s going to eat it? Change would be a waste of money
• Loses history; loses connection with alumni
• The infrastructure is not in place
• Concerns that a change would mean less individualized attention
• The Hispanic population might not like the change because it would make the school seem less accessible
• Students come from very small towns, so “university” is intimidating

**Questions for ASC’s future (Senior administrators)**

• How do we sustain the enrollment success of recent years? The playing field is changing.
• Is there a sweet spot in terms of enrollment size for ASC?
• Do we know what we are doing well?
• How do we ensure continuous improvement?
• Can we continue to grow online enrollment in the face of changing accreditation requirements?