

Using Student Focus Groups to Evaluate Academic Support Services

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Focus groups can involve students in evaluating programs that serve them. Advantages of using student focus groups to shape academic support services, especially in advisement and orientation, are discussed.

Evaluation of academic support services is necessary for many university research projects. Typical evaluation methods have included (a) reviewing resources and their effects on a program through **cost/benefit** analysis, (b) gathering facts and opinions through surveys, (c) personal interviews, (d) comparing performance measures and behavioral objectives, (e) observing selected case studies, and (f) self-study using any of the above evaluation methods (Daniels, Mines, & Gressard, 1981). Focus groups have been used infrequently.

A focus group is usually a small, homogenous group of at least 3 and usually no more than 15 people who meet with a trained moderator to respond to predetermined questions. Usually the members of a focus group are the primary users of what is being evaluated. Focus groups have been used to evaluate, for example, subjects such as teenage views (Nix, Pasteur, & Servance, 1988), social and minority concerns (Blackwater Associates & Savage, 1989), company child care programs (Catalyst's, 1983), instructional materials (Morris & Smith, 1988), discipline problems (Krumbein, 1989), and city and county improvements (Mueller & Krueger, 1985).

Previously limited to marketing research, focus groups can impact education (Bers, 1989; Blackwater Associates & Savage, 1989; Engleberg & Cohen, 1989; Kridel, 1983; Jacobi, 1991; Krueger, 1988; Kridel, 1983; Madden, 1987; Stringer, Steckler, & Johnson, 1988). A major benefit of focus group methodology involves group dynamics. Higgins (1988) determined that at-risk youths disclose more information during group discussions than in one-to-one interviews. Stringer, Steckler, and Johnson (1988) added that group discussions benefit from the discovery process:

The products of collaboration are qualitatively new and different from those resulting from dialogue. Within the collaborative experience,

individual points of view are generally not nullified, but rather combined with other points of view to create new knowledge; knowledge, then, becomes something created and recreated synergistically. (p. 51)

The relaxed atmosphere and **discussion-oriented** approach of a focus group appears to produce a good environment for new data to come forth-in. In addition, a focus group directly involves the recipients of services in data collection, thus emphasizing their involvement in the project (Mueller & Krueger, 1985). The low cost of this type of research and the ease with which **results may** be implemented add to its attraction.

After the student activism of the 1960s and **1970s**, administrators were reluctant to include students in **campus** committees and even more reluctant to consider their ideas seriously (Kridel, 1983; Treslan, 1983). Today, however, student input is highly valued, receiving praise from many researchers (Blackwater Associates & Savage, 1989; Krumbein, 1989; Madden, 1987). Engleberg and Cohen (1989) specifically suggest that including student input in administrative decision-making often adds to the wisdom of policies. By having students comment on and suggest improvements for already instituted programs, administrators become more able to provide for students' needs, and students become more likely to abide by new policies because they-or **one** of their ~~colleagues~~—participated in the decision making (Krumbein, 1989).

For example, Krumbein (1989) proposes using students as a resource in curriculum writing. Students are not immune to shortsightedness, but neither are faculty, Krumbein points out, noting that more often than not students are aware of education issues even before faculty are. The myth that student views are typically irresponsible should be put to rest, she continues, concluding that effective curriculum reform, and all reform involving students, must draw on student contributions.

The question is: How much does the institution want to involve students in reviewing the programs, services, practices, policies, and procedures that affect these students? It makes

practical sense to involve students in qualitative ways when dealing with student-related campus issues (e.g., cultural diversity or date rape).

Methodology

Participants

A focus group at Brigham Young University (BYU) was formed to gain student perspectives on advisement services and materials. The Student Advisory Council to the Academic Advisement Office, as the focus group is called, was composed of randomly selected freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. All students invited to participate in the focus group did so. Of the 18 undergraduates, 60% were women, 20% were transfer students, 10% were nontraditional students, and 10% were multicultural. To serve on the council, students were required to attend several two-hour group discussions, usually over lunch or a refreshment break, during the academic year. Because, as Jacobi (1991) says, "students appreciate the opportunity to act as 'consultants' to the university" (p. 197), no other incentive was used.

Procedures

The focus group facilitator was a professor of counselor education who had training and experience in leading groups. A set of questions and related materials was sent to participants before each meeting. This step served not only to inform but also to center the group's attention on areas needing its response. In other words, it allowed the focus group to be focused. Although the topics for discussion were chosen by the Academic Advisement Office beforehand, participants were encouraged to voice concerns freely and to suggest adaptations of the topic under discussion.

Focus group participants responded to such questions as those in the Appendix. For some topics, because the discussion extended beyond the two-hour period, the Student Advisory Council met more than once during the semester to respond to all the questions.

Results

Consensus building is important to this process. Thus the moderator concluded each session with a summary of student comments and then sought at least a majority opinion on each of the items discussed. For example, concerning a

script written to introduce entering freshmen to BYU, the focus group found it appealing to have a student narrate the presentation but decided that the script covered too much material, making it difficult for new students to retain much of the information. In response, the script was rewritten. The focus group was informed, usually at the following meeting, of resulting changes.

The charge given our focus group was to help refine advisement and orientation materials and to suggest program improvements. In response to the focus group's critique and suggestions, BYU has changed the direction and content of orientation and advisement video presentations, program evaluations, the orientation program, and general advisement services. Overall, this research approach (a) provided refinements in program materials and content related to the developmental needs of students, (b) involved students in program evaluation, especially in those areas that directly affect them, and (c) deepened administrators' sensitivity to student needs.

We went into the academic year seeking an evaluation from the focus group of (a) the orientation schedule, (b) new student mailings, (c) advisement publications, (d) an advisement videotape script, and (e) a survey on advisement services. We came out of the year with improved products. For example, the orientation schedule was reworked, and orientation is now better attended and more highly rated. Mailings to new students are better timed and more pertinent (in fact, some mailings were simply eliminated). And the focus group shaped a new student video presentation on university resources and helped identify more relevant questions for our annual academic advising survey.

Conclusion

BYU's experience with student focus groups confirms the opinions of researchers cited in this article about the benefits of this qualitative evaluation method. Student focus groups are perceptive and eager to provide input. They provide a direct, inexpensive, and effective research approach that benefits the institution. More important, focus groups benefit students because these groups involve students in programs that affect students.

Although focus groups provide an effective way to obtain feedback from students about their experiences, there are some limitations.

They are not a conclusive alternative to quantitative studies. One must be careful not to over-generalize feedback obtained from the focus group as being representative of all students on campus. Bers (1989) indicates that because the questions presented to focus groups are relatively open-ended, the findings are difficult to quantify. The focus group is perhaps most effective when used in conjunction with quantitative measures. On the other hand, focus groups can help identify critical issues and indicate the range of student concerns and attitudes (Jacobi, 1991).

Used appropriately, the focus group approach is highly recommended as a way to design or evaluate programs or materials for students, especially programs that affect students directly. I recommend involving student focus groups in the development of new programs and the evaluation of ongoing programs that affect students. Recently, for example, we used a focus group to review the university's telephone registration system and to respond to possible enhancements.

In summary, focus groups are a good way to stay in touch with student needs and ensure that academic advisement is student-centered.

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Appendix

Sample Questions Used in the Focus Group

Orientation Schedule

- Which orientation activities do you think are most important?
- Which activities should be included in the orientation program?
- Which orientation activities can be improved or done differently?
- Which activities should be omitted from the orientation program?

Advisement Center Survey

- What questions would you add to or delete from the survey?
- Does the survey measure the areas of advisement that you feel are important? If not, what should the survey include?

New Student Mailings

- What do you feel are the most important mailings a new student should receive?
- Which mailings from the university should be eliminated?
- Please rank the mailings from most important to least important.

Script to a Slide/Tape Presentation for Freshmen

- What do you like or dislike about the script?
- What information about BYU and university life do you think is important for new freshmen to know?
- As a new freshman, what did you want to know about BYU before coming here?

Advisement Publication Sent to Freshmen

- What do you like or dislike about the "Student Life" section? What would you change or include?
- Is the "First Few Weeks" section comprehensive? Is it useful? What would you change or include?
- How do you feel about the sections on the university's traditions, mission statement, and code of honor? Are they placed appropriately in the publication? Are they meaningful and easy to read?