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# A Focus Group Assessment of College of Agriculture Seniors

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## Abstract

Focus groups with graduating seniors in the College of Agriculture were used to gain insights into students' satisfaction with their courses and experiences. Overall, students were satisfied with the teaching and advising they had received. They had specific comments about teaching methods they liked and disliked. As freshmen, they had not expected college to be so demanding; as seniors, they had not expected jobs to be so hard to find.

## Conceptual Framework

Universities expect their undergraduates to attain competence in an academic discipline and to develop the skills needed for a productive career. Faculty are expected to design and implement effective instruction. The departments are charged with providing helpful advising and club activities. In addition to college expectations, there are student expectations. Students come with preconceived ideas about what they will find at colleges and what they will have when they graduate. Assessment programs are needed to measure to what extent student and university goals have been met.

The use of focus groups was one component of a plan developed by the College of Agriculture to assess student outcomes. Focus groups are an alternative method of measurement that yield qualitative data. A focus group consists of 10-12 people who participate in a guided group discussion around a single theme. Usually there are two or more focus groups in a set. Because focus groups consist of people with similar interests, participants are likely to enjoy themselves and communicate their true feelings (Krueger, 1988).

## Purpose and Objectives

The purpose was to help determine student outcomes for the College of Agriculture. Specific objectives were

1. to determine if students' expectations were being met,
2. to evaluate the curricula, and

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3. to assess students' levels of satisfaction with their courses and experiences.

## Methods and Procedures

The population for the focus groups was all College of Agriculture seniors who were graduating in the fall semester of 1992, a total of 200 students. The classification office supplied their names and schedules, and a research assistant sorted them into groups according to the two-hour blocks of time they were not in classes.

Students had coffee around the conference table with the Associate Dean of Agriculture, who read an introductory statement to each group and then asked a series of predetermined questions, which were developed by a committee of graduate students and faculty from the Department of Agricultural Education and Studies, using guidelines from Krueger (1988) and Mertens (1989).

The research assistant who helped with the groups taped each focus group's answers to the questions. She listened to the tapes once and the researcher listened to the tapes twice. They each identified the main points discussed and then combined them into the following findings:

## Findings

### Expectations of Students

1. They didn't know what to expect, but they had become more independent and responsible while being on their own.
2. They didn't expect it to be so hard and so stressful. One student said he had no time for a social life because of all the class work he had to do. Students were not ready for the intensive study habits necessary in college. A suggestion is for high schools to prepare seniors for what would be required in college.
3. They expected huge classes with professors uninterested in their welfare and were surprised at the willingness of teachers to help students.
4. They expected classes to be more related to industry. They felt that classes should not only be taught for students going on to graduate school, but also for the majority of students who would finish with a bachelors and would be going out into the work world.

5. They expected it to be easier to find a job at graduation time and had some horror stories about four-hour interviews with no breaks and illegal personal questions. They needed to be prepared for interviews with information about corporate politics and what questions might be asked.
6. They were surprised at how involved they had gotten in organizations and activities, including departmental and religious groups; they had not expected this.

### What Students Learned

One of the questions asked "What have you learned here that will be useful in your future, in a job, for example?" A follow-up question was "What specific courses or experiences have been useful?"

The students said they had learned communication skills, problem-solving skills, technical terms, basic sciences, chemistry and biology that would be beneficial to them in the future. They appreciated hands-on learning, interaction with other students in class discussions, and the opportunity to learn at their own pace. They enjoyed working with professors who showed an interest in them participating in organizations, such as being officers and chairs of committees. They wanted to learn how to interact in the international arena. They felt that there was a need to get international students actively involved in organizations.

### Comments About Teaching

There were two questions about teachers and teaching methods—likes and dislikes. The students' concerns were as follows:

1. Too many overheads.
2. Improper use of blackboard (talking to the board, standing in front of writing).
3. Unclear goals and objectives.
4. Need for more student participation and interaction in class.
5. Out-dated notes.
6. Regurgitation of facts.
7. Attitude of "I am in a hurry to get back to my research."
8. Material presented in a detached, impersonalized manner.
9. A need for more experiences, perhaps with large farming operations. They used just their own experiences, which usually were limited to a certain type of operation.
10. A need for commodity marketing classes.
11. A need for more help with English.

They said that good teachers smile, use repetition, give examples, draw pictures, write legibly, demonstrate, give time for practice, and explain how information could be applied. Examples were given of a teacher who told jokes and stories to illustrate points and another who drew pictures on the blackboard. Both practices helped students remember what was important.

Students had mixed feelings about a teacher whose tests were very much harder than usual, some thinking it was chal-

lenging and others thinking it was demeaning. They also had a difference of opinion on the value of social science courses, such as sociology and anthropology.

On advising, one recommendation was to use upperclassmen, juniors and seniors in the major, to do academic advising. The focus groups indicated while professors were good advisors peer senior students were most helpful about which classes to take and how to go about things such as taking tests. Graduate students needed better and more training on how to be advisors. Some advisors who were overloaded with students did not have time to advise.

Students appreciated the open-door policy whereby students could visit any time without an appointment. Most of them felt close to their advisors and thought that students should be notified when their advisors retire or leave campus.

### Suggestions for Improvement

Students had the following suggestions for the College of Agriculture:

1. Sustainable agricultural practices should be out in the forefront in college farms. Farms should provide them with experiences that would be beneficial for future reference in their classes.
2. Some classes were very boring. It was suggested that professors reevaluate these courses and provide a better overview and more interesting material.
3. More computer classes should be taught so that students would be better prepared to compete in the business world. Students believed that computer training was very important to their future.
4. When there is more than one professor teaching the same course, students feel that their classes should be taught the same, regardless of which teacher is teaching the subject. The methods could be different but the content needs to be consistent.
5. There needs to be an employer-based class with some interviewers talking to the classes or professors from various departments giving feedback on resumes. In other words, more emphasis should be placed on interviewing. Departments might add a one-credit or a required class on interviewing and resume writing.
6. Students were concerned about their communication skills and would have liked more help. "English courses should teach students how to prepare themselves for job interviews, proposal/resume writing, speaking and writing correctly."
7. They wanted to be able to "take information and use it". "Create activities that will provide this type of outcome." "Explain how what is taught can be applied."
8. The importance of internships should be emphasized. "I learned more in my internship than in four years of college."

9. There are some good teachers and good courses and some that needed improvement. "Teach students how to think and solve problems, not regurgitate facts."
10. The College should encourage professors to have a higher interest and concern for students who are not doing well.

### Conclusions

The students were very concerned about getting jobs and wanted whatever was needed to prepare them for the work world, especially communication skills, computer expertise, and internships. They were generally satisfied with the teaching and advising they had received, but had suggestions for improvement in specific courses and areas. Only a few students were willing to come to focus groups, and they might not be representative of the whole population.

### Recommendations

Because focus groups consist of purposively selected individuals and not randomly selected ones, the results from focus groups cannot be generalized to the population. Therefore, the findings need to be interpreted as the opinions just of the graduating seniors who participated. However, one of the strengths of the focus group procedure is how it identifies possible items for corroboration by other data collection methods. Therefore, these recommendations are offered as suggestions that need further study before being implemented.

1. The College of Agriculture should try once more to get input from focus groups, being sure to follow procedures recommended by Krueger (1988).
2. The qualitative input from focus groups should be compared with the quantitative results of a mailed questionnaire to all graduating seniors.
3. The Associate Dean should suggest that all departments include a required course for seniors that would include attendance at the interview and job resume seminars presented by the placement officer.
4. Upperclassmen who could serve as assistants for academic advising should be identified and trained. This might be done on a pilot basis with an interested department.
5. The university should be asked to provide training to graduate assistants who will be serving as advisors.
6. Departments that favor research over teaching should be encouraged to reallocate some of their resources to undergraduate teaching and advising.

### References

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