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Improving Teaching-Learning Process and Experience Based on Students, Faculty, and Staff Perspectives

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Abstract

In order to make strategic decisions, the new leadership team at the College of Agriculture at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona conducted a series of focus group interviews with its students, faculty, and staff members. The purpose of this qualitative study was to poll the opinions of these important stakeholders to improve the teaching-learning process in the college, to promote job satisfaction among the employees, to better fulfill the college's mission of advancing learning and knowledge, and to prepare students for lifelong learning and leadership in agricultural careers. Six themes emerged from student groups and four from faculty/staff groups, with lack of resources emerging as a common theme from both groups. The leadership team deliberated on the findings, and the results of this study provided the leadership team with specific items to solve needs.

Keywords:

teaching-learning process; job satisfaction; learning experience; strategic decisions

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INTRODUCTION

Student enrollment is on the rise in colleges of agriculture across the United States with diverse majors to pursue and exciting career possibilities at stake (USA Today, 2012). Major land-grant institutions have reported record increases in student enrollment in their Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences (Iowa State University, 2016; USA Today, 2012). The U.S. economy is projected to generate about 54,400 job opportunities annually in agricultural, food and renewable natural resource sectors, and individuals with professional training at baccalaureate or advanced levels in these fields will be in demand (Goecker et al., 2014). Future graduates in related majors will need varied skills to be competitive in these job markets.

The quality of education delivered at higher education institutions is under constant scrutiny by various stakeholders (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005) as they prepare students for careers that need varied skills in addition to technical subject matter competence. Yet, higher education methodologies have remained largely traditional and unchanged for more than a century (Molebash, 1999). Holz-Clause and Guntuku (2010) stated that the changing situations and expectations of learners indicate a transition from this traditional model of education. Scanlon, Bruening, and Cordero (1996) emphasized that agricultural education programs have to be dynamic and capable of adjusting to new situations and environments to facilitate on-job effectiveness of future graduates.

Administrators need to continually appraise the existing situations in their colleges to ensure students', faculty and staff members' needs are being met. Holz-Clause and Koundinya (2012) noted that persistent efforts are needed to refresh the systems as changes occur. One way of doing it is to gather stakeholders' inputs on the existing situations and future needs. This study reports one such effort taken up by the leadership team at the College of Agriculture at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

A transition in the leadership at the College of Agriculture at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona in fall 2014 necessitated that this research study should be conducted. It was important for the new dean to identify the

perceptions and opinions of employees and students to assess the current situation and strategize a course of action to span the next five years. Collecting this data soon after the new dean assumed office was even more important, because the College of Agriculture and the university as a whole were facing severe budget cuts (CalPoly Pomona Budget Services, 2014; Garcia, 2011; Lynch, 2012; Polycentric, 2010).

A series of focus group interviews were conducted with students, faculty, and staff of the college. These focus groups were conducted for multiple reasons, with improving the teaching-learning process in the college and job satisfaction of faculty and staff being the two most important reasons. Other significant reasons included informing the college administrators of issues, concerns, and suggestions of their constituents, and, when published, to be shared with other leaders in university agriculture programs in an effort to improve responses to common problems. Focus groups methodology was selected for this study after a careful consideration of literature and also based on the authors' experiences of utilizing focus groups for studies with similar purposes.

Literature highly recommends the use of focus groups to inform such decision making in university settings (Kessler et al., 2010; Nordstrom et al., 2000). Focus groups have been used to help with strategic planning (Allmang & Ouimette, 2007; Higa-Moore et al., 2002; Seymour, 2004). Focus groups also provide an opportunity to learn from students, faculty and staff how to improve their work/school place satisfaction (Gillespie et al., 2001; Douglas et al., 2006). Kitzinger (1995) stated that focus groups can be used not only for exploring peoples' experiences, but also to examine what people think and why they think that way. With a focus group interview, researchers can see a topic from the participants' perspectives, which is helpful for further exploring their opinions (Litosseliti, 2003). In addition, the iterative nature of focus groups reveals beliefs and attitudes (McLafferty, 2004) as well as providing a rich source of information, especially in groups where the participants already know each other (Heary & Hennessey, 2002). This study was conducted for all of these stated purposes.

Purpose

The project was carried out to identify the opinions of the students, faculty, and staff in the College of Agriculture at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona in an attempt to improve the teaching-learning process in the college, their job satisfaction, and to better fulfill the college’s mission of advancing learning and knowledge by linking theory and practice in all disciplines; and to prepare students for lifelong learning and leadership in agricultural careers in a changing multicultural world.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Institutional Review Board at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona approved this qualitative research study. The population consisted of 1,822 students, 73 faculty, and 31 staff members in the College of Agriculture. E-mail invitations were sent out three times, the information was posted directly to the target population through the college electronic bulletin board, and in the monthly newsletter inviting prospective research participants to take part in focus groups relevant to them. The self-selected participants received a small (\$4 value) gift bag as appreciation for their participation. Before the focus groups began, one of the co-investigators reviewed the consent form and obtained informed consent. After informed consent was obtained, demographic data was collected via an anonymous written survey. Five focus groups were held for students, three for faculty members, and two for staff members. All the focus groups were held during the months of January and February 2015.

The principal investigator or one of the co-investigators served as the facilitator for the sessions to ask questions, keep the group on

track, and ensure the audio recorder was working properly. The focus groups were conducted according to standards set forth by Krueger (1994) and Creswell (1998) and as recommended by Grudens-Schuck, Allen, and Larson (2004). Facilitators opened each group with the same welcome, introduction, and explanation of rules and procedures. The focus group questions for the student groups are presented in Appendix A. The questions asked of the faculty and staff members are presented in Appendix B. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Recorded data were transcribed verbatim. Research team members reviewed transcribed data independently and identified themes using the constant comparative method, an analytic technique first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later expanded on by Neuendorf (2002). After reading the responses to the questions, each researcher proposed emerging themes. The three researchers then discussed those themes and agreed upon six distinct themes for students and four distinct themes for faculty/staff. Researchers followed the “thick description” technique, which involved providing enough verbatim citations from the interviews, so readers can see how the themes were drawn (Zhai & Scheer, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics

The sample consisted of 48 students, 21 faculty, and 12 staff members. This was a convenience sample of participants who volunteered to participate in this focus group and signed consent forms. The student sample was dominated by females (81%) from Hispanic/Latina (44%), Asian only (21%), and Caucasian (19%) ethnicities (Figure 1). Nine-

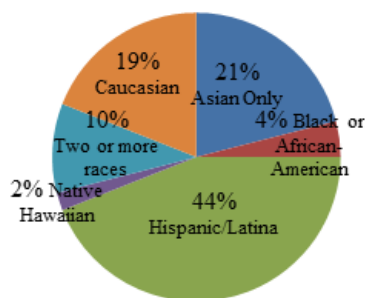


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of student sample according to their ethnicities

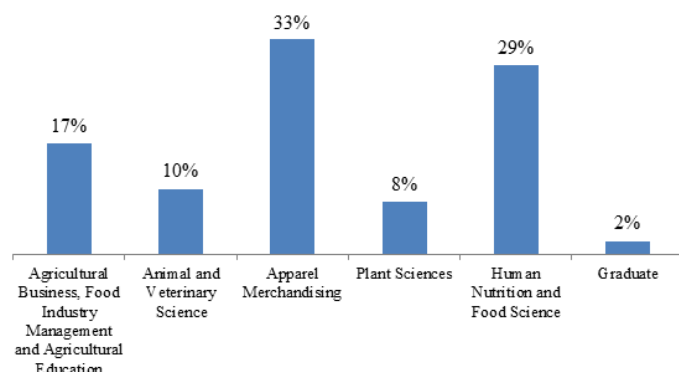


Figure 2. Frequency distribution of student sample based on their majors

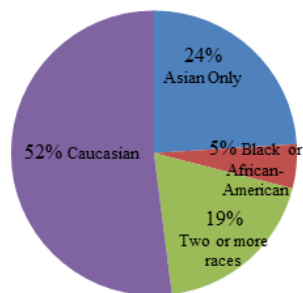


Figure 3. Frequency distribution of faculty sample according to their ethnicities

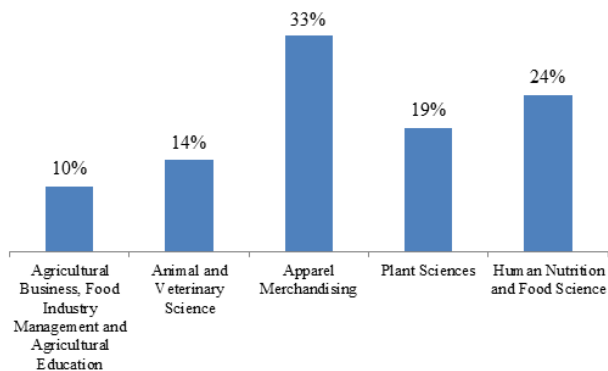


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of faculty sample based on their departmental affiliation

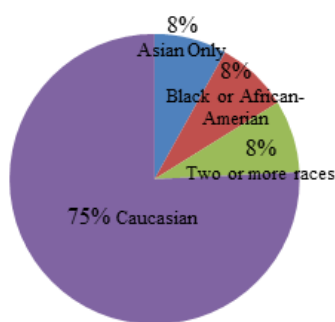


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of staff sample according to their ethnicities

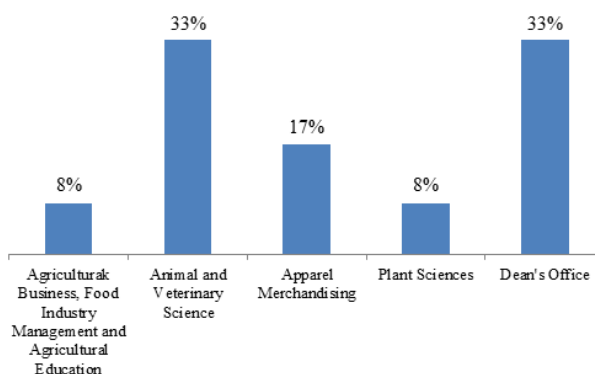


Figure 6. Frequency distribution of staff sample based on their departmental affiliation

ty-eight percent of the sample consisted of undergraduate students with a majority of students from Apparel Merchandising (33%) and Human Nutrition and Food Science (29%) departments (Figure 2). Exactly half (50%) of the sample started school as freshmen and half were transfers. The mean age of the student sample was 24 years, which is reflective of the student demographics.

The faculty sample consisted of more than 50% Caucasian females. Other main ethnicities included Asian only (24%) and two or more races (19%) (Figure 3). Faculty departmental representation included Apparel Merchandising (33%), Human Nutrition and Food Science (24%) and Plant Sciences (19%) followed by two other departments (Figure 4). The average time worked at this institution was seven years.

The staff member sample consisted of predominantly Caucasian (75%) females (67%). Eight percent each were from Asian only, Black, or African-American and Hispanic/Latino ethnicities (Figure 5). About two-thirds of the staff

members represented the Dean's Office and Animal and Veterinary Science departments that were followed by three other departments (Figure 6). The average time worked at this institution of the staff member sample was nine years.

Chi square goodness of fit analysis revealed that the gender, ethnicity, and departmental representation of the sample of students, faculty, and staff members were representative of the College of Agriculture demographics.

Themes from student Focus Groups

Theme 1: Concern over things that directly affected them such as availability of classes and quality of some professors. Concerns related to issues that directly affect students were evident in student responses. One of the students said, "I couldn't get into the major core class for three years and now I can't graduate on time." Another student stated, "Some classes don't offer enough." A different student expressed, "I am also concerned with how few classes are available." These clearly indicate a worry related

to class scheduling conflicts and non-availability of classes so students can graduate on time.

A concern over the quality of some professors was also obvious from these interviews. One student emphatically said, “I feel like some professors really have an organized plan for the lecture and you can tell they have put a lot of work and time into preparing, but others are just rambling on for hours.” From another student, “I know that in my department the professors are hit or miss, either a really good professor that drives you to do your best and is difficult or a careless one who is disorganized.”

Theme 2: Worry about finding a job. Another concern that emerged from the study was related to finding jobs once the students graduate. One student said, “There doesn’t seem to be any positions open.” Said another, “I am terrified that I will get a degree and they will ask for five years’ experience to start. So how do you get there?” These two quotes among others indicated a clear concern over future jobs. One student commented, “For dietetics, I have heard that it is very competitive and I am discouraged.” Another said, “A lot of people expect they will get a job as a vet [erinarian] right away, but they don’t know the business side. They don’t teach you enough about the management and business side of things to be a vet.” These two quotes among others in the transcripts indicated concern among students about their future job potential.

Similar concerns were expressed by senior agriculture students at Iowa State University (Gamon & Chestnut, 1995). Further, a study at Michigan State University found that only a few agriculture and natural resources graduates developed all needed employable skills before they graduated (Shrestha, 2009). In 2009-10, recent agriculture graduates had an unemployment rate of 7.5%, which improved a bit to 4.5% in 2011-12 (Carnevale & Cheah, 2015).

Theme 3: Lack of awareness of issues affecting the field of agriculture. A lack of awareness of the issues affecting agriculture was clearly discernable among most of the students. In response to the question, “What are the important issues that your discipline is dealing with?” four out of five of the groups responded with total

silence. One group brought up water conservation and resource management. The response was similar when the question was rephrased to, “What are the issues that affect agriculture today?” Participants were silent or a few talked about going back to their home countries and working. Others talked about agricultural events on campus and their worry about jobs. Very few of the students were able to discuss or even identify the issues that affect the field of agriculture today. This is in line with the findings of Pfeiffer (2008), who studied freshmen at the West Virginia University and found that these students did not have a good understanding of agriculture.

Theme 4: Concern over poor and deteriorating resources. A concern over the poor quality of physical resources was prevalent. One of the students said, “...some of the ceiling tiles are falling They are very old and starting to disintegrate.” Another said, “The wifi here is also unreliable. I don’t know if it is because of the building, but it is slower here than in other buildings. In this room it fluctuates.” A different student said, “...it would be nice if some the electrical outlets – if they were more and if there would be more space...” another physical resource that students noted as requiring upgrades were eating spaces and restrooms. Literature suggests that good physical environment is important to providing a good learning experience. Lippman (2010) emphasized the contribution of social and physical environments to learning.

Theme 5: Desire for more internships and industry interactions. An important theme that emerged was the students’ desire for more internship opportunities and agriculture industry interactions. One of the students stated, “Our major is required to do an internship and many companies require an internship. I think we need a better way to get internships and more hands-on work experience.” Another remarked, “I think guest speakers in clubs are helpful. They help you decide which career you want. You can get contact information.” And another added, “More information on dietetic internships needs to be publicized.” Students indicated they liked it that more emphasis is being put on

careers and internships. One expressed, “I like how they are having new activities like Ag Career Day. Doing more stuff like that would be beneficial to all the students.” In addition, students indicated they valued the experiential learning approach followed in the College of Agriculture, which emerged as the next theme. The views expressed by the students were in agreement with the findings of [Shrestha \(2009\)](#), who found that opportunity for internships was a key factor influencing students’ choice of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. [Novotorov \(2001\)](#) found that internships and other practical training programs had a positive impact on the professional and personal growth of agriculture graduates.

Theme 6: Appreciation for hands-on learning approach. Most students noted appreciation for the hands-on learning approach followed in their classes. One said, “I like working and getting hands-on experience in labs and getting outside of the building to get hands on.” Another supplemented this by stating, “I really appreciate the additional facilities like the beef unit, the swine unit, the horse stables, and the labs. I feel these are emphasized in every class.” One more student shared a similar feeling with, “I definitely like the hands-on, which is why I am here today. I wish there could be more labs.” Additional similar student opinions follow here:

- “I like when there is inside teaching and outside teaching. I like the little outside teaching; just little trips outside to look at things like looking at the plants and trees outside. For horticulture, we are going outside a lot of labs and looking at trees. That is cool.”
- “I want more hands-on. Instead of talking about intercropping, get out in the field on a tractor and actually drive it.”
- “I think that they do a good job at learn by doing. In the classes I have taken, I learned to drive a tractor and identify plants, which is better than just sitting and reading about it.”

Themes from faculty and staff member Focus Groups

Two themes represented a positive impression about participants’ work place and two related

to negative perceptions.

Theme 1: Feeling that the college is a good place to work. Most of the faculty and staff members were satisfied with their workplace culture. One of the respondents said that it was a “friendly place to work.” Another participant said, “People are collegial.” A different respondent added that the college was a “vibrant and energizing place.” Yet another described the atmosphere this way: “There is good collaboration” among different faculty in the college. All the quotes clearly indicate that the participants like their work place. The findings conform to the results that faculty members in the colleges of agriculture were satisfied ([Castillo & Cano, 2004](#)) and moderately satisfied ([Foor & Cano, 2011](#)) with their jobs.

Theme 2: The importance of being appreciated. Almost all the faculty and staff members expressed that a significant, satisfying part of their job is being appreciated by the students they serve. One of the participants said, “It’s all good when I receive a letter or a note from a student after they complete my class or graduate expressing how much they learned from my class and how thankful they are for their job skills.” Another person stated, “I like the students. That is by far the best for me. I love helping them. They are always thankful, grateful and very appreciative.” Similar feelings were expressed by a few other respondents, including: “Very rewarding to give them a helping hand.” “The most satisfying thing in my job is getting a thank-you card from a student and I love heartfelt thank-you notes.” A faculty member expressed a similar feeling for the staff members with whom he/she works, stating, “We enjoy when staff acknowledges our well doing.”

Theme 3: Lack of resources. Faculty and staff members echoed student comments about a lack of resources in the college. One responded, “We have a pathetic level of funding.” Another person related, “... need better, new tables and chairs; desperately need this.” A different participant stated, “We need more lab space for those who want to do research.” An issue that emerged under the umbrella of lack of resources was the need to have more faculties on board.

One of the faculty suggested, “We need to hire more faculty,” while another expressed, “There are not enough of us to accomplish all that the college needs to be done.”

Theme 4: Frustration with administration and a sense of being the “lesser” college. This was an interesting theme that emerged from the study. One participant said, “I have problems with people having meetings, seeking input and then nothing comes of it.” Another respondent stated, “Higher administration does not seek faculty input and that is frustrating.” Yet another said, “The more you do; the more they give you to do. It’s like having initiative is kind of a mistake against yourself.” A different respondent said, “We need to constantly justify why we need what we asked for. Why can’t we be trusted?” Another person summarized with: “They (management) don’t know what we do.”

Two participants suggested ways to overcome this issue. One noted, “We need a leader to speak the truth to power,” while another expressed, “We need a college champion to go to the provost to get the money to hire more faculty and another champion to go to the provost to get the money to fix the place up.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were developed to address the issues identified from the research themes. The recommendations are applicable to administrators facing similar situations in their colleges.

1. Student advising needs to be strengthened, and class scheduling conflicts need to be addressed.

2. More career seminars and student-industry interaction opportunities need to be provided so students become aware of the current issues and future job opportunities. There is a need to create awareness among students early in their academic careers about how issues, events, and regulations affect agriculture. This may help to develop and propel students who are aware of the global aspects of their professions and how events can change markets, consumer preferences, and other aspects of agriculture.

3. More teacher and new faculty orientations should include the need for discussions in classes about issues affecting the industry.

4. Some physical resources in the college need to be upgraded.

5. Leadership team needs to have more communication with employees to address some of their frustrations.

6. Low to no cost strategies (e.g.: thank you notes, appreciative luncheons, etc.) may be implemented to boost the morale of students, faculty and staff.

Implications

As indicated earlier, this study was conducted to gather data that the leadership team could utilize in setting the direction for the college for the next five years. The study assumes a higher significance in the wake of steep budget cuts to the California State Polytechnic University system. Over the last few years, state budget cuts to the tune of \$50 million have affected everyone on campus. Faculty did not have any salary hikes in the last five years, yet the workload increased due to a hiring freeze (Lynch, 2012). In the last five fiscal years from 2010-11 to 2014-15, there has been an approximately 10% cut in the allocation of state general funds (Calpoly Pomona Budget Services, 2014). The California State Polytechnic University, Pomona is using various means to cope with these budget cuts (Garcia, 2011). However, the budget constraints continue, and the college leadership is trying ways to optimize ends with scarce resources. Low to no cost morale boosting strategies like to host “lunch and learn” activities with guest speakers to promote professional development, purchasing resource library books that faculty and staff can share and holding appreciative luncheons were taken up based on the results from this study. The findings from this study will help plan how to address the identified needs with available resources. While, these findings are not generalizable, they should be useful to administrators facing similar situations in their planning and decision making.

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Appendix A

Student Focus Group Questions

1. What do you like about the College of Agriculture/ your department and/or your major?
2. What concerns do you have about the College of Agriculture/your department and/or your major?
3. How are you treated by the staff and faculty here at the college?
4. What is your opinion of our college's physical resources?
5. How knowledgeable were you going into college about what to expect from the experience?
And where did you obtain the knowledge you had?
6. How did you find out about the College of Agriculture at Cal Poly Pomona?
7. How good of a job is your college doing at meeting your expectations?
8. How would you describe the student – faculty interactions?
9. What do you think about the career opportunities that exist for your particular field/major?
10. What are the important issues that your discipline is currently dealing with?
11. What is the best way to communicate with you?
12. Anything else you would like to talk about?

Appendix B

Faculty and Staff Members Focus Group Questions

1. What is the general work environment like at the College of Agriculture?
2. How well does the college help its employees balance work responsibilities and other important life responsibilities (family, personal, civic responsibilities, etc.)?
3. How would you rate the quality of supervision and leadership you receive?
4. How well do you feel managers and supervisors communicate?
5. How fairly are you treated here?
6. What is most satisfying about your current job?
7. What is most frustrating about your current job?
8. What changes would you make here in the College of Agriculture?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences working in the College of Agriculture?
10. What suggestions do you have to improve the College of Agriculture?
11. What is your preferred mode of communication?
12. What are the biggest opportunities for the college in the next two years?
13. What are the biggest challenges for the college in the next two years?
14. What would "success" for the college look like in two years? How would you measure "success?"

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