Student Focus Group Report

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

July 26, 2004

Background

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) administered the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) during the Fall 2002 Semester. It provided insight into the level of undergraduate student satisfaction with a range of college experiences and the level of importance students assign to each of them. The SSI was based on a sample of 1,848 students or about 17 percent of the undergraduate student population. Although the SSI revealed areas in which students were quite satisfied, other areas indicated challenges. Using the SSI results for direction, focus groups were implemented to enrich our understanding of student experiences at IPFW.

Objectives

The purpose of the focus groups was to engage students in a dynamic conversation about their needs and preferences in the following general areas:

- What do you like about IPFW?
- What do you dislike about IPFW?
- How are students treated at IPFW?
- What do you like about being an IPFW student?
- What do you dislike about being an IPFW student?

An additional, specific question was posed in response to relatively low scores on the SSI related to academic advising:

- What are your impressions of academic advising?

Method

Working with Chris Douse (Assistant Director, Multicultural Services), Palermo Galindo (Advisor, Multicultural Services), Don Kreitzer (Organizational Leadership and Supervision), and Robin Newman (Center for Women and Returning Adults), the following student focus groups were identified:

- One regularly scheduled weekend Organization Leadership and Supervision class
- One group from the Center for Women and Returning Adults
- Two groups from Multicultural Services

Each student received a light meal during the session and $5.00 for participating (funding was provided by the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs). In addition, they qualified for a raffle of a $100 gift certificate for IPFW’s Follett’s bookstore (funding was provided by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs).

The focus groups were moderated by Linda L. Hite, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Organizational Leadership and Supervision. Audiotapes were made and used to supplement session notes. The transcripts were analyzed by Hite and Erin J. Frew, Ph.D., Director of Assessment.
Demographics

Thirty students participated in the focus groups of which 14 were male and 16 female. Six
were 20 years of age and younger, 11 were 21-25, 5 were 26-30, 4 were 31-35, 1 was 36-40,
1 was 41-45, and 2 were 46 and older. Fifteen students identified themselves at
Caucasian/White, 7 as African American/Black, 4 as Hispanic/Latin American, 1 as
Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 as “human race.”

Summary of Themes

The following summarizes the major themes uncovered through open-ended inquiry (the full
transcripts are attached):

**What do you like about IPFW?**

Flexible faculty
Practitioners as faculty
Commuter campus
Quality education
Convenient proximity of campus
Smaller classes
Applied nature of learning
Co-op experience valuable
ACCESS
Course offering/availability
Internet classes
English classes
OLS classes
Communication teachers
Exposure to different people
Writing/tutoring centers
CASA
Reasonable in-state tuition
English teachers make sure you can apply knowledge/skills
Group work in classes
Free admission to athletic events
Opportunity to earn extra credit in classes
Campus events
Freshman success class
Access to computers
Out-of-class testing options
Field trips (good learning experiences)
Good SPEA professor

What do you dislike about IPFW?
Parking inadequate
Course scheduling postpones graduation
Inconvenient course scheduling
Not enough activities
Spending resources on “dorms” rather than existing facilities and equipment
Effects of commuter students on creating campus climate
Difficulty uploading Web CT data
Short-staffed
Outdated in-class examples
Some professors are not committed to teaching or IPFW
Tests are too difficult
Some faculty do not encourage students
Workload in courses
Unrealistic performance expectations
Not enough financial aid
Too little advertising for CASA and writing center; students need support to seek help
Lack of student helpers for FAFSA and other forms
Too little interactive teaching
Need to create classroom community
Class notes should be made available
Use Web CT more for class notes
PowerPoint slides change too fast in some classes
Memorization instead of application in classes
Test material not covered well in some classes
No extra-credit on grading in a course
Not enough ways to demonstrate class knowledge; no homework, no quizzes, just tests.
Some teachers are too busy
Math placement tests need a “don’t know” option to avoid guessing & incorrect placement
Some faculty are not helpful when you need extra help
Need to offer a library tour in the freshman success class
Need quicker turn-around time for DDS for students
Web CT glitches
Adult students need computer training
Courses that try to weed-out students
Lack of flexibility in summer schedules (need more classes offered at different times)
Boring classes
Some professors don’t explain things well and don’t provide examples
Unclear grading criteria
Some degree programs not offered
Hard to get internships

What are your impressions of academic advising?
Advisors not available
Advisors are available
Convenience of on-line registration
Better knowledge course substitutes needed by advisors
Some advisors uninformed of courses applicable to degree
Need to update bingo sheets and the websites
Misinformation about courses toward major and graduation target date
Professors need to be more careful when advising
Professors need training in advising
Students should be trained in tracking courses and requirements toward graduation
First-year students need additional help
Advisors are helpful
Advisors and professors should collaborate to help students who aren’t doing well
Workshops and MCS provide good advising
Career advisors need a good idea of students’ skills
Students, advisors and instructors should be more culturally aware
Consider having more professional advisors rather than faculty advisors
Advisors should get to know students so they can be more effective
Need to ensure consistency in advising when a new advisor is assigned
Need more advisors so they can spend more time advising
Need more African American and international advisors
Multilingual advisors needed

How are students treated at IPFW?
Students share responsibility for education
Some professors are too busy
Approachable, friendly, respectful faculty
English professors are helpful
Some professors talk down to students
Some professors embarrass students in class
Hostile, authoritarian teaching is not a proper learning environment
Instructors need to learn to deal with different students, learning styles and cultures
Some professors need to build communication skills
Some professors don’t greet students outside the classroom (ignore them)

Course activities/assignments should emulate a diverse culture in class and out

Diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, and religion should be assimilated into course content

Students are frustrated with financial aid, bursar’s office

Student Life office decisions don’t involve students

Students are treated as adults

Most secretaries are helpful

What do you like about being an IPFW student?

Mr. Wartell is involved in campus and interested in students

People are helpful

Having classes with traditional students is enriching (for returning adults)

Offices in convenient location

Professors are usually available during office hours

Professors are accessible

Develop friendships

Library and computer lab have late hours

SAB activities

What do you dislike about being an IPFW student?

There are no social “internets” on campus

Not enough gender and cultural diversity

No minorities are represented in advertising for IPFW

Many instructors do not interact with students outside of class

Athletes need more flexibility in attendance policies

Athletic department should communicate with teachers

No community environment

Texts are expensive and not always used
OASIS should be clearer about fees when students register

Takes too long to receive resident status

Parking restrictions should be labeled better, can’t see paint when it snows

Shouldn’t allow smoking so close to the exterior doors

Attendance policies in classes

Need more classes designed for returning adults

Need more diversity

Need better emergency funding for adults

Need on-campus child care facility

Need more diversity among faculty

BCC is not treated fairly by Student Life or LRC

Some teachers overlook minorities

Need to advertise events more effectively

Financial aid and bursar’s office aren’t always helpful

Discussion

The following is not a comprehensive discussion of all comments made during the focus group sessions. Instead, it represents a topical organization of some of the highlights.

Faculty are, of course, a salient component of students’ experience at IPFW; consequently, students offered a number of comments about them and their teaching styles. Perceptions of faculty ranged from their being helpful to unhelpful and friendly to unfriendly. Students value the experience and applied knowledge of faculty who are also practitioners. Students indicated that some faculty are busy, making it difficult to arrange for help outside the classroom. Focus group participants would like faculty to be more involved with students outside of the classroom.

Several pedagogical issues surfaced in the groups, including the desire to have class notes (e.g., PowerPoint) made available electronically so that students can focus more on listening and participating in class and less on taking down notes. They also discussed reducing the “workload” of classes, implementing interactive teaching/learning methods, and providing additional or different forms of testing that call on evidence of higher-order learning (e.g., analysis, synthesis) rather than those depending exclusively on recall (e.g., multiple choice). Students appreciate thorough explanations of concepts during lecture and current, concrete, relevant examples of material covered in the curriculum. They would like more extra-credit opportunities and more internships and cooperative education experiences.

IPFW services such as the Center for Academic Support and Advancement (CASA), tutoring services, and the writing center were consistently highly praised. Students recommended additional advertising and promotion of these services to increase student use. Participants recommended including a library tour in conjunction with the freshman success class.
Students expressed concern about the services provided by the office of Financial Aid and those of the Bursar’s office. They suggested that a group of students might be trained in completing financial aid forms and that in turn those students could provide assistance to other students and respond to their questions.

Focus group participants were concerned about gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity at IPFW. Diversity among faculty, students, and interestingly, among academic advisors is important to students. Students would like the curriculum, including course assignments and activities, to reflect a diverse culture. They also believe that minorities are underrepresented in IPFW advertising.

Accurate advising is of utmost importance for students. Errors in advising delay graduation and result in additional expenditures of time and money. But students also want advisors to have a more personal sense of who they are, their strengths, interests, skills, and needs. Students recognize that they likewise play a role in advising and would like better training in tracking their completed courses and the requirements for graduation. They recommended that advisors and professors work closely to help students, especially first-year students, when they are struggling. Again, students would appreciate more diversity among advisors.

**Conclusion**

These focus group data are helpful to gain some perspective on the SSI results. Although IPFW participants focused predominantly on things they would like to see changed rather than on positive factors, this is not uncommon in open discussion settings like focus groups. When asked about satisfaction, respondents often think of a best-case scenario. If that “best-case” is not met, then satisfaction is not complete. Nevertheless, many of the points that surfaced during the discussions are worthy of review and consideration because they enhance and perhaps balance the quantitative data from the SSI. Together, the SSI and focus group data should be useful as the university strives to better serve students.