

Focus Group Summary

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Adam Flagg, student, for the
Office of Institutional Research
University of Hawai'i at Hilo

Advising

The poor perception of academic advising was something addressed in every focus group. Students expressed that they most often did not know who their advisors were and did not know where to find that information. There were some students who did know who their advisor was but a common concern in this regard was that teachers are not the most effective advisors. It is difficult for students to coordinate their times around the teacher's office hours and it is sometimes difficult to have an advising session with a teacher that you may be taking a class from. The solution to these concerns put forward was to have full time academic advisors whose job it was to assist students through the complications of the university system. This solution would also solve the most common complaint about advising which was that the advisors are not knowledgeable enough. Advisors currently seem to give broad ideas of what classes to take instead of understanding each student's priorities and needs. With an advising staff that was dedicated to nothing else each student would get the advising they need to complete their education in the expected amount of time. Each student could be contacted by the advising staff and appointments could be made so that each student understood his/her place in their path towards graduation. If a student chose not to attend their advising session then the University would have done its part in helping the student and no blame could be placed on the administration for the complaints of not graduating on time, taking unneeded classes, lack of attention paid to students and so on.

Records

The status of the university's records department was also a concern. Students found it difficult to access their transcripts and even more difficult to deal with the people in that department. The staff was said to have had a history of losing transcripts, the information in degree audits is not current-only through the end of last springs term-, and the new system of audits is vague in the sense that it does not indicate the specific classes taken rather a general category in which the credits fall. Students indicated that degree audits were available online in the past and this was very helpful and detailed but are not any longer. The solution to the records problem is three fold. First, put students records back online so they can track their own progress,

secondly, ensure that these records are up to date and current, and finally make sure the records department is competent and willing to help students with any records questions they have.

Transferring

The process of transferring seems to be quite a difficult one. Credits in all of Hawaii's community colleges easily transfer between each other. However, it is difficult to transfer these credits into the UH system and even more difficult to transfer credits between UHH and UHM. The fact that credits earned at UH Hilo might not be recognized at UH Manoa and vice versa seems ridiculous.

Financial Aid, Scholarships

The financial aid concerns seem to be one of poor communication, which happens to be a comment about many other areas of the university system. To start, students would like better information about how to go through the financial aid process and generally what aid is available to them. This requires more helpful assistance from those working in that office. Perhaps these duties could be worked into the duties of full time advisors. Once the paperwork has been filed, an efficient and timely processing of the information would be very helpful. This would help students know earlier the important results of their applications. The saying goes, "Money makes the world go round," so if a student cannot acquire it through financial aid then they need to have the time to find alternate sources of income. For those students who do receive aid a better way to notify them when their checks come through was requested.

Classes

Again and again students noted that the small size of classes with stronger interaction with professors was the most outstanding aspect of attending the University of Hawaii-Hilo. A few students mentioned that the Univ 100 class was helpful in beginning their college careers.

The most common complaint about UHH's classes was that there is simply not enough of them. This statement is two-fold. First and foremost, students complain that there are not enough sections of the classes that are offered. The courses are often limited to a few sections that are quickly filled and unavailable after that. Perhaps a system could be developed where the demand is met with supply. There is also frustration at certain classes being offered only one semester per year or even once every two years. Students see classes in the catalog that they would be interested in taking but it doesn't seem to come up. Then the first problem mentioned compounds the frustration when after waiting for a class to become available it is full before they can register for it. The lack of choices hinders students' progress towards graduation

and leaves them feeling as though they are forced to take what is available rather than what is desirable. In relation to the subject of class availability, UHH students would like more night and online classes for those that must work or go home for the summer.

The second request students make is to offer a greater variety of courses. Although this was the general suggestion made by many there were those that made specific requests as to what courses and programs would be desirable. Several noted that the art department should be expanded and emphasized the lack of photography and pottery classes. More business degrees, like finance, were requested, as well as a media production major or a concentration of this within the rapidly expanding communication department. Students would also like to see an expansion of the service learning component where credits can be earned while participating in the community. Finally, a greater graduate program is needed especially in the areas of Psychology and Sociology.

It will be noted more with regard to teaching styles but students have made a significant statement about their desire to see more interactive classrooms where teachers and students participate rather than the traditional one-sided lecture courses. Not that the traditional method can ever be replaced but incorporating some discussion into lecture classes would be greatly appreciated. There were also some miscellaneous comments about duration of time between classes, teachers instructing classes that they are not familiar with or qualified in, and the lack of challenge to some students but these seem to be isolated instances that were not addressed by a number of students.

Teachers

UHH students consider the personal involvement with professors to be one of the most positive aspects of the school. One student noted that of the three universities she has attended, UHH was the only one in which teachers gave an adequate degree of interaction. This is clearly an invaluable asset the administration must keep in mind as the school's enrollment increases over the next few years. Students noted that the care teachers put into their subjects truly translates into a more enjoyable and understandable experience. Moreover, what sets great teachers apart seems to be their personal involvement with students. In other words, teachers are viewed more positively when they teach life lessons as well academic lessons.

On the flip side, teachers can be looked upon negatively if they don't make an effort to connect with students. There were several instances mentioned where students did not feel they could interact with their professor because he/she put off an attitude that was condescending to the student. Teachers must empathize with their students, common knowledge instructors is often new to students. No student should ever be made to feel stupid or belittled by their professor because they do not know or understand something. It is understandable that some students are on a different par than others but students complained that it is not fair for teachers to play favorites and pay more attention to some students while ignoring others who are often the ones most in need of guidance.

Students also noted that attendance should not be a basis for grades. If students are able to master the material on their own time and pass the tests that the teachers give then why should they be penalized? College students are free to come or not to come to their classes. A teacher could give quizzes to encourage class attendance but it is entirely unfair to affect a student's grade based on the amount of time they spend in class. UHH students noted that there are some teachers who are not prepared for the classes they are teaching and therefore students feel like they are teaching the class and the professor is along for the ride. A final negative occurrence that students found unacceptable was teachers not being available during their office hours.

Some recommendations made by students were they would like to be challenged more and held accountable for assigned work. It is unfair when some students finish the work on time but because others have not the deadline is extended. In treating every student fairly, teachers should encourage participation from every student and not just those who are accustomed to speaking. The students will be more comfortable to speak if the teacher builds a relationship with each and this will in turn encourage attendance and further participation. Some students do not like the increased usage of computers in the classrooms and find it difficult to submit assignments when they don't have computers in the home. Students would like more enthusiasm from their instructors and for them to give better explanations as to what direction the class is going. Due to the ever increasing cost of books students would like more textbooks put on reserve. Finally, it would be helpful if students could access their current class grades by logging into an online "grade book".

Students said again and again that they would like to see classrooms that are more interactive and less lecture filled. By incorporating discussion into the classroom teachers can make every student involved in the learning process. Visual materials are very helpful in relating concepts to students but PowerPoint presentations are usually just a different form of lecture. It keeps students awake and involved when teachers use a variety of teaching styles and presentation methods. Students feel that the teacher should have an understanding of the material. It is discouraging when the teacher presents material in class that is identical to what was read in the book.

The issue of teacher evaluations came up a few times and students really value it but wonder about the effect it has. One suggestion was to do evaluations in the middle of the semester so that professors would have an opportunity to curb their class to the needs and wants of each particular class. This also brings up an important point about accountability. If an assessment determines that a teacher has noticeable flaws then these need to be addressed by the administration. Students complained that there is no way to confidentially verbalize grievances. If these concerns can be voiced through evaluations and students are confident that results will follow then the student body will feel like their voice is important and recognized.

Orientation

The orientation program seems to be a mixed bag. Students thought the information was useful but that it could be better organized, such as paperwork compiled in order of importance. One student noted that being required to meet with an advisor was very helpful and she has been able to continue this relationship ever since. It was also enjoyable for some students to meet new classmates and professors. The integration of the family into the sessions was also valued. The people who did not find orientation helpful noted that the organization was not done well and a lot of students did not participate. The free mug was helpful and generous but students thought that some type of UHH clothing might help them feel immediately connected.

Campus Environment

"Life is a vacation in Hilo." The school reflects that lifestyle with its laidback attitude and slow pace. People feel more relaxed in this environment and the lack of constant activity helps students stay focused. The small campus, small student body, and small class sizes keeps everyone connected in a way not found at typical universities. The cultural diversity is also amazing here.

This environment is lacking in several ways though. We live in a gorgeous environment but the classrooms seem to disconnect us from it with the use of fluorescent lighting and extreme air conditioning. A suggestion was made to develop a shaded outdoor classroom environment where learning could stay connected to the nature. This is quite a valid point when noting that our windward air is some of the cleanest in the world whereas the piped in air conditioning is known to be mold infested.

Art students note that they use a variety of bulky materials but their classrooms are located in a somewhat distant location. Several complaints were made about the lack of enforcement of the smoking bans. It is also troubling that none of the emergency boxes on campus are functioning and theft of bicycles happens regularly. Security is not a visible presence around campus yet parking violations are quickly ticketed. Students would also like to see more partnerships with the community such as advertised discounts for students or a subsidized transportation system with the mall and Wal-Mart shopping centers.

Facilities

The facilities at UHH have a lot to be desired. The technology is "antiquated" in a majority of the classrooms, the desks are dirty, damaged and some are even dangerous, bathroom stalls don't close and lock, and some classes, notably computer science, are in shabby temporary structures. The chemistry department has no place to conduct research and uses marine science labs to do their work. Workout and gym machines are outdated and some are outside rusting. The university needs to invest in its infrastructure and bring its equipment up to date. There should be a place where the gym equipment could at the least be housed, possibly in the basement of the UCB.

On top of basic improvements students feel the university should have its own pool and recreation area for students. They also feel that some type of transportation system is badly needed.

Student Center

Along with the academic infrastructure mentioned in the last paragraph, students made repeated requests for a student center where they could gather and socialize. The current "student center" deals primarily with functional concerns like health care and does not give students a gathering place that they are looking for. They would like to see a "coffee house" atmosphere that is open late, until midnight for instance, where students can socialize, read poetry, have culture nights, or just play some games. They are searching for ways to build a cohesive college community, which is a desperately needed element at the University. The next subject deals with students' ideas to bring this about.

Build College Community

There should be more activities that bring people together on campus like free concerts, dances, cultural nights, festivals, and luaus. This campus is more like a community college because there aren't many activities outside of academia. Students come to class and leave when they are done. There are no reasons for them to stay and be a part of a campus community. There is a lack of school spirit because people don't know anything about the sports programs. There are no announcements as to when games are being played and where. There is no information as to what intramural sports are being offered. There are no sororities and fraternities and very little cultural and political activities. Considering the purpose of these focus groups is student retention it seems that the element most lacking at the school is student body cohesiveness. With these groups it is clear that students are interested in having it so the focus must be on organizing it. This must first be accomplished through communication to and among the student body.

Communication on Campus

"There needs to be more opportunities and communication that unite the student body, events that every student can be a part of. Mass communication to let each student know that this activity is happening at this time every week at this place. There are intramurals but people do not know about it."

There are three resources that already exist on campus that can be better used to accomplish these means. The first is the school newspaper. Students complained that the newspaper does not accomplish the goal of informing students what is happening on campus. There is no calendar of events and notification of upcoming

events. It does not seem like this would be a difficult undertaking but the paper has yet to go in this direction.

The second resource is the bulletin boards all over campus. Most of the time they are cluttered with car sales and advertisements that deter a majority of people from looking at them. This also means they miss the activities posted and attendance to them suffers. If the University could regulate the use of these boards and designate some for campus activity announcements and others for advertisements then students would be better able to know what is happening on campus. The Library Lanai board would be a perfect place to announce campus activities as it is the central gathering place for the school.

The third media that can be used to advertise campus activities is email. MyUH should be able to inform students of activities on campus, cultural gatherings, political activities as well as Vulcan athletic contests. Other suggestions are for better signage around campus. The use of banners and posters is an excellent way to bring visibility to an event. There is a banner hanging in the Lanai for Vulcan athletics but it is old and tattered. It looks as though it was once used to announce events but is no longer in use. Students have demonstrated that they would like to converge on campus like a common university but someone must step forward and initiate this gathering by announcing it.

A side note on the subject of communication on campus has to do with the administration. It seems that individual departments have a lot of trouble communicating with each other and students are the ones that suffer. If they need work processed in more than one department it is usually up to them to walk the departments through the process or else it will get completely bogged down in the bureaucratic red tape. This subject was primarily addressed in the topic of financial aid. There were also complaints about how a student was notified of academic probation and the hierarchical system students must go through to get the information they need.

Students would also like to know more about their administrators. They have no idea who the chancellors and deans are and would like to see them address the student body. This would let students know what the direction of the University is and enable them to help the school move in the desired direction.

Employment

Students' requests regarding employment are three pronged. First they would like to see more employment opportunities on campus especially for those who do not have work study grants. It seems that a lot of work study positions do not get filled while students needing employment but without work study are left without jobs. Another way to help students find jobs is to work with the community to list off campus jobs along with the on campus ones. Finally, graduating students would like some help in obtaining employment after graduation. These last two could be combined into one so that students are aware of what options they have outside of the university and

could help build relationships with the community because they would save time and money on searching for employees.

Housing

Students would like to see more housing available to them as the cost of living in Hilo continues to rise. Students suggested the University invest in apartment like structures that the school could run but not like a dorm. The existing dorms could also use significant improvements such as internet, phone, and cable installations. A student also mentioned a roach problem in the dormitories. Several students made comments about the new quiet hours being ridiculous and RA's overstepping their bounds.

On Campus Food

Lots of students said that they would like to see more options for food on campus, notably franchises like Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, and Starbucks. Sodexo's quality is sub par but their prices are expensive especially for college students. There is much better food available off campus for a better price but some students don't have the transportation to access it. Concession stands on upper campus by UCB and agriculture were requested as well as an indoor cafe with food, drink, and music.

Registration

There were a lot of complaints about the new online registration system. Students found the interfaces difficult to manage and the search options unreliable. It was difficult to search in and out through the various windows to find available classes especially for those without access to high speed internet at home. Points were also made that there isn't really anyone to speak to about your problems with this system. Some interesting solutions were put forth in that phone options should be given to students until the new system is in perfect working order. Paper copies of course listings should also be made available for those that have trouble with the system.

Computers

As is the constant case with computers, students noted they need to be updated. All the machines should have compatible programs so that students can work wherever they wish rather than needing to find certain computers with the right software. There should be training programs for students to learn how to use the universities systems more efficiently. The records databases should be updated, as they are not current through this year. The graduation audits that were available in the past are no longer accessible. The website needs to be updated and made more user friendly and

students would like to see some Macintosh computers on campus. Finally some 24 hour facilities for computer usage and study hall would be desirable.

Library

The primary problem with the library is its limited hours. Students would like it to be open before 8am, say 7am, and close later than 10:30pm possibly midnight. The fact that lots of people are getting kicked out at that time shows the need for an extension of the hours. The weekend hours are also viewed as extremely limited. Other than that more resources are always helpful. Training students on how to use the system would probably go a long way in making them more comfortable with the resources that are available to them. More computers are also needed, especially for the mid term and finals rushes.

Parking

Several responses were made about the parking situation on campus. One student said that parking should be part of tuition and a few others called for at least some free parking other than what is to be found on the roads surrounding campus. Another student suggested that the zoning be changed so that certain lots, like the one next to the theater, could be offered at a lower price. It was also noted that designated parking areas cause problems.

Athletics

Students would like to see more athletic programs offered at both the collegiate level as well as the intramural level. Volleyball and soccer were two sports specifically named. A comment was made that it is the school's intention to grow and athletics is a primary means of attracting people to a school. In fact, the baseball program at UHH draws lots of athletes because the program is in division 1. However, little attention is given to the program and the player's dissatisfaction with the coaching staff. The student stated that several baseball players have come to UHH in the fall and started practicing with the program. However, they transfer for the spring semester because they can see ahead of time that the program is weak and they will not get adequate instruction from the staff. If this is the case then the coaching staff of the Vulcan baseball team needs to be assessed because "good coaches build good programs which in turn build up the school," and not vice versa. Finally, harking back to the communication issue, there should be more athletic publicity says students. Announce when and where Vulcan contests are, how to participate in intramurals, and how to organize your own sports gatherings.