FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK WITH STUDENT LEADERSHIP [SUMMARY REPORT]

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Executive Summary

This document provides feedback gathered and analyzed based on two listening sessions conducted on Wednesday, June 17, 2020 and Monday, June 22, 2020. These listening sessions focused on the student experience during the COVID-19 crisis. In total, eleven individuals participated. Executive leadership from the Undergraduate Student Government and the Graduate Student Organization were invited to share information about their experience during the Spring 2020 semester and contribute ideas and concerns about Fall 2020 planning. Key findings included:

- Concerns about health and safety as campus begins to reopen;
- Significant challenges during the Spring semester, including a perceived communication breakdown and increased workloads; and
- Considerations about the modalities of the Fall semester.

We summarize with five recommendations.

Introduction

In an effort to receive more direct input from undergraduate and graduate communities about academic affairs during the COVID-19 crisis, the Office of the Provost organized two listening sessions with student government leaders. The purpose of sessions was to learn about the diverse experiences of the Spring semester, to collect unique insights for future planning, and to foster a culture of collaboration and open discussion. The report synthesizes key findings and themes of the responses.

Methodology and Analysis

Executive leadership from the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) and the Graduate Student Organization (GSO) were invited to participate in 60-minute semi-structured focus group conversations on Zoom. All participants were asked the following questions:

1. Tell us what you found most challenging about the shift to remote instruction this Spring.
2. What surprised you about this experience, both positive and negative?

3. In your experience, do you think our academic efforts this Spring helped students meet the learning objectives? Why or why not?

4. When you think about the possibility of remote instruction for the coming semester, what needs and concerns do you think should be taken into consideration?

5. What ideas do you have about how we can address those needs and concerns?

Separate gatherings were hosted for each group, with seven people partaking in the GSO session and four people partaking in the USG session. To encourage candor in the discussions, only Laura Lindenfeld and Kara DeSanna ran the meetings, with Lindenfeld serving as facilitator and DeSanna serving as note taker. Participants were advised at the start of each meeting that the sessions were recorded for transcription purposes, that their confidentiality would be maintained, and that no comments would be attributed to a particular individual. After an analysis of the transcripts, we organized the responses into codes that were developed through the emergent themes.

Limitations

We deliberately limited the scope of inquiry to participants who serve in student leadership, as they are tasked with representing the interests of the general student body in their respective roles. We nevertheless understand the information we gathered is not broadly generalizable, but rather represents the perspectives of the individuals who participated. Participants volunteered to be interviewed, which could lead to self-selection bias in the data. The student make-up of the sessions did not reflect all of the academic areas on campus, suggesting the omission of some nuanced perspectives. Due to the qualitative nature of this feedback, it is important not to generalize these findings, but rather view them as an opportunity to add nuance to our understandings of people's experiences during the COVID-19 crisis.

Findings

There was considerable consensus between the undergraduates and graduates about the experience of the Spring semester, along with ideas for future planning. Both groups also

shared concerns and feedback that were unique to their academic levels. Participants expressed deep gratitude for having a forum to share their thoughts and welcomed the opportunity for further engagement through additional focus groups, surveys, and greater committee representation.

Spring Semester Discussion

The most consistent concern that emerged was the perceived lack of central communication during the height of the crisis. Students explained that the delay in initial messaging resulted in people relying on unofficial and unreliable channels, such as Reddit and social media, for information. Students expressed strong feelings of mistrust and confusion that arose when no official announcement was made in the week leading up to Spring Break. While there was acknowledgement that this timeline was influenced by external stakeholders, one student shared that *"it just created a level of anxiety that people almost never experienced before."* This sense of frustration is most vivid in the response to students being advised to move off campus with limited notice. One student noted, "*there were a lot of students who were frustrated and upset because some of them were on Spring Break at the time. And it was like, come get your stuff by Wednesday."* One student highlighted how expensive appliances and other belongings were lost in the move, especially for students who *"lived far [and couldn't] make more than one trip."* Participants also emphasized that graduate students in particular were left scrambling to find alternative housing, with the exemption request process being slow.

Students also discussed the challenges of going to school remotely. Some living arrangements were not conducive to studying or teaching. One graduate student explained, *"I live in a small apartment with four other people and finding a place and a time and necessary internet resources to be able to instruct online was a major difficulty."* Technology issues also presented a challenge, with some students not having adequate resources. One participant highlighted that when students' devices broke in the middle of the semester, they were oftentimes left unable to "*complete their projects."* Students also pointed out that some professors were better equipped to work in the online format than others. One student shared

that they would receive some class material in the mail and at least one professor never posted a syllabus online.

Fall Planning Discussion

Participants in both groups expressed significant trepidation about returning to class in person. Rationale included concern for those with vulnerable conditions, a desire to keep public transit use to a minimum, and a lack of interest in coming to campus for only one class. The students also mentioned the imminent second wave as reason why they are less eager to attend in person. Participants exhibited confusion over the concept of a "flex" model in which students could choose whether to stream or physically attend class. One person questioned the logistics of determining who can enter the classroom, especially with respect to managing overall campus density.

Despite both groups' preference for online instruction in the Fall, there was strong agreement that flexibility is paramount. Students emphasized the importance of having time to plan for the Fall semester, especially if schedules shift and affect other obligations. They also noted that students are hesitant to commit to campus housing without more clarity about Fall. Students emphasized that the key is to work towards a dynamic Fall semester that is of high academic quality. One participant pointed to a national trend of students *"losing faith in higher education"* and feeling underwhelmed by the online format. Another stressed that now is the time for Stony Brook *"to find ways to differentiate our university."*

Several other questions and concerns emerged during both conversations. Students shared their worry about the safety of campus and the effective implementation of social distancing protocol. One participant questioned whether there would be an enforcement policy for students not wearing masks in classrooms. Students asked how a truncated in-person timeline will impact course workloads. Participants also raised the issue of whether the fee structure will change with a transformed Fall semester.

Graduate Student Considerations

Graduate students endured unique challenges in the Spring semester that will have lingering effects on their academic careers. Participants explained that the burden of transitioning courses to the online format fell on Teaching Assistants *"because faculty don't know the resources or don't have the technical abilities to do it."* This added workload became cumbersome for students *"who have their own classes and have their own research."* Graduate students also experienced a dramatic impact on their research and dissertation projects. One person shared, "*they can't come into the lab anymore. And so, they're either having to figure out something new to do for their dissertation. Or they're just having to sit on their hands and there's a really big psychological cost to that."* With these research delays, graduate students expressed their worry about funding. One person stated, *"I'm having to push my research a whole year. So, we would love to be guaranteed an extra year of funding because of this situation."* Graduate students also expressed concerns about fees, an ongoing issue that they have brought to the administration's attention. Likewise, some of them reiterated previously expressed concerns about the cost of living and their stipend levels.

Undergraduate Student Considerations

USG underscored the importance of promoting a vital student experience in spite of the challenging conditions. While the group applauded the various clubs and organizations that innovated ways to stay connected, the undergraduates nevertheless lamented losing this core component of college life. One participant shared, "*for a lot of students who had worked very, very hard on their events, or just for a lot of seniors obviously trying to have those last few months on campus reminiscing and remembering our campus experience, that was pretty hard."* The participants also pondered how this current environment would appeal to students entering college for the first time. One student acknowledged how some freshmen *"would love to have their first year of college in person and would love to have the dorm room experience."* Another student recognized that a hybrid model could address some of these concerns by fostering a semblance of normalcy.

Recommendations

1. Demonstrate to all community members, including parents, how the administration is prioritizing health and safety as students, faculty, and staff return to campus.

2. Reinforce a uniform, consistent, and empathic communication strategy from the upper administration to the general student body:
   a. Ensure, as best we are able, that important information is communicated to students with adequate notice;
   b. Include graduate students on communications related to course instruction.

3. Facilitate ongoing collaborations with student constituencies:
   a. Consider more listening sessions with other student groups;
   b. Consider administering a student survey about the Fall semester;
   c. Consider including student representatives on additional campus-wide committees.

4. Remain mindful of how current conditions are affecting students both personally and academically:
   a. Evaluate workload concerns presented by the graduate student population.

5. Encourage flexibility and innovation in all Fall planning endeavors:
   a. Take into consideration the campus climate with regards to in-person activity;
   b. Make sure that all materials are readily available online for students unable to return to campus;
   c. Examine how to foster meaningful virtual student experiences.