

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Most Relevant Concerns of UB Students

Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs

Spring, 2009, focus group participants were asked to identify issues they face as they balance student demands with other demands, particularly during a time when the future has a bleak economic outlook. Our goals are two-fold. First, this information is important for campus planning. Second, it allows us to structure future focus group sessions around issues that are meaningful to students and helps us gather information about how student needs can be addressed.

Based on these students' responses, the top ten students concerns are:

- Job Outlook (for summers and after graduation)
- On-Campus Parking (i.e., UB Administrators and staff should show some concern)
- Departmental Support (e.g., advisement)
- Quality of Education
- Safety on Campus (especially on South Campus)
- Consistency in Grading Across Course Sections
- Availability of Resources (e.g., library books, computers, more office hours)
- Career Services Office
- General Advising
- Support From Faculty (e.g., office hours)

The data presented here are based on the responses of 40 students who attended one focus group session (6) or who completed an on-line survey containing questions parallel to those asked in the focus group discussion (34 participants).

BRIEF: Most Relevant Concerns of UB Students

Since 2006, members of *UB Advocates*¹ have been helping us in the decision-making process as we confront and resolve university issues. For our last focus group session of spring, 2009, students identified issues most important to them as they balance student demands with other demands and face a future where the economic outlook is dreary, at best. We hope to achieve at least two purposes. First, this information is important to campus. Second, it allows us to structure future focus group sessions that are meaningful to students and helps us gather information about how student needs can be addressed. This brief presents the primary student concerns identified by our participants.

Participants and Procedures

We conducted one focus group with six students. In addition, UB Advocates who were unable to attend a focus group were given the opportunity to participate via a web survey containing questions parallel to those asked in the focus groups (34). In all, 40 students provided feedback. Around two-thirds of the participants (26) are female, and over half (23) have been involved as UB Advocates for at least one year. Eighty percent (32) of the participants are undergraduates, with 4 freshmen, 4 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 15 seniors. Of the 28 domestic students, 15 identify as white, 4 as African American, 3 as Asian, and 6 as other or unknown. The international students come from China (2), Ghana (1), India (4), Lithuania (1), Malaysia (1), Nigeria (1), Rwanda (1), and Sri Lanka (1). The schools/colleges represented are Architecture and Planning (1), Arts and Sciences (16), Engineering (7), Management (5), Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (4), Nursing (3), Public Health (2), Pharmacy (1), and Social Work (1). On average, the undergraduate participants began the semester with a QPA of 3.19, and the graduate/professional participants began with a 3.47.

The nominal group technique was used in the focus group to facilitate the process of generating a list of the most important student concerns. The nominal group technique is a standardized set of activities to develop a discrete list of items relating to a particular topic. In this case, the topic involved those issues that today's students find to be most concerning. We began the session with an overview of the nominal group technique and an introduction to the topic. Then, the first step was Silent Generation, a period lasting for 10 minutes in which students were to write down as many issues as possible. During Round-Robin Listing (15 minutes), the facilitator led the group as each member took turns sharing the ideas they had written down. The assistant facilitator recorded these ideas on large pieces of paper which were posted around the room and visible to all group members.

Clarification (25 minutes) is the most difficult step in the process. During this step, students were to examine all of the ideas that had been posted and determine if any ideas could be considered overlapping or duplicating any others. Once clarification was complete, students engaged in Ranking (20 minutes) in which they were to individually identify the ten most important characteristics from the posted lists and rank these from 1 (most important) to 10 (least

important). The students turned in their lists, were given the opportunity to discuss the process and/or items on the list, were thanked for the participation, and dismissed. To score each item based on its ranking among group participants, each item received a score for each student with 10 indicating most importance and 1 indicating least importance. These ranking scores are shown in Table 1.

Those students who participated in the on-line survey were provided with the 10-item list generated in the focus group session. They were then to rank these items by successively choosing from the list the item that was most important to them. For example, they were initially provided with the 10 items and asked to select the one that was most important. For the next item, they were provided with the remaining 9 items and asked to select the most important. This continued until there was only one item remaining, which automatically was ranked as the least important item. Once they had selected their top ten items, they were asked to rate each according to the degree to which the issue is currently being addressed on campus, with ratings for those getting the least attention being at the high end of the scale (1=being addressed to the fullest extent possible, 10=not being addressed at all). In order to “score” each item to determine its relevance to students, the ranking of importance (10=most important, 1=least important) was multiplied by the rating to get a score, and students’ scores for each item were summed to get a total. These relevance scores are shown in Table 2.

Results

Shown in Table 1 are the 28 concerns generated by students who attended the focus group session. The ranking score indicates how important each item was to the entire group based on summing the importance scores of all participants. It is interesting to note that, in spite of the recent tuition increase, rising unemployment, and the state of the economy in general, financial concerns were not identified to be the most important. Instead, the biggest concern involved the availability of resources on campus. Students feel that resources, such as library books, computers, and professors’ time, are already spread very thin with our current student population, and their common goal to complete their academic programs successfully is often hindered by their inability to secure these resources. Students fear that the UB2020 plan to grow enrollment will only make resources more difficult to get, and, thus, their goal of completing a degree program more difficult to achieve.

The two financially-related concerns that did make the top of the list, however, are the Career Services Office, and the Job Outlook for both summer employment and post-graduation employment. These two issues are related in that students believe the campus Career Services Office should do more to help them secure employment, including offering more services for those students who plan to move out of state upon graduation.

Safety issues ranked second in importance, although this may be a by-product of the fact that all focus group participants are women and many spend a significant time on the south campus. Quality of education ranked third. Students do care about the quality of the education they receive and the quality of their degree. They do not want the quality, and hence the value of their diploma, to be decreased or watered down.

Table 1: Identified Student Concerns

<i>Concern</i>	<i>Importance Score</i>
Availability of Resources (e.g., library books, computers, more office hours)	43
Safety on Campus (especially on South Campus)	29
Quality of Education	22
On-Campus Parking (i.e., UB Administrators and staff should show some concern)	18
Support From Faculty (e.g., office hours)	17
Career Services Office	16
Consistency in Grading Across Course Sections	16
Job Outlook (for summers and after graduation)	15
Professors Should Make Greater Effort to Enforce Policies (e.g., cheating)	14
Departmental Support (e.g., advisement)	12
General Advising	12
Availability of Library Space	11
Better Overall Campus Appearance	11
Updating UB Web Sites	10
On-Campus Printing	10
More Course Offerings (especially during summer and in the Social Sciences)	9
Impact of Recession on Student Loans and Financial Aid	9
Rising Tuition Costs	8
Graduating on Time	8
More Chances to Participate in Research	8
Quiet Environment to Live In	7
Better Shuttle Service/Alternatives to Needing a Car	6
Reduced Class Sizes	5
Number of Electrical Outlets in Library	5
Time & Stress Management	4
More Foreign Language Course Offerings	2
Availability of Laundry Facilities for Residents	2
Earlier Library Hours on Sunday	1

The initial plan for this study was to present the top ten issues in the on-line survey. However, since both Departmental Support and General Advising were tied for tenth place, both were presented. These eleven are shown in Table 2 along with the average importance score, the average rating of the extent to which the item is being addressed at UB (1 = not at all addressed, 10 = completely addressed), and the average satisfaction score, which represents both the importance and the extent to which it is being addressed. The average satisfaction score can range from 1 to 100.

Among the larger group of survey respondents, Job Outlook remains at the top of the list in importance followed by Quality of Education. Availability of Resources became less important as compared to Safety on Campus, Departmental Support, and On-Campus Parking. Support from the department (e.g., advising within the major) is more relevant for the survey respondents than for the focus group participants. Support From Faculty and Professors Making a Greater Effort to Enforce Policies (e.g., cheating) are rated least important. It is important to note, however, that none of the items are rated higher than a 6 on the extent to which they are being addressed on campus.

Table 2: Top 10 Student Concerns

<i>Concern</i>	<i>Average Importance Score</i>	<i>Average Extent Addressed at UB</i>	<i>Average Satisfaction Score</i>
Job Outlook	7.6	4.9	36
Quality of Education	7.0	6.0	42
Safety on Campus	6.4	5.8	36
Departmental Support	6.4	5.5	31
On-Campus Parking	6.2	3.3	20
Availability of Resources	5.8	5.9	35
Consistency in Grading Across Course Sections	5.4	4.0	22
Career Services Office	5.3	5.6	27
General Advising	5.2	5.1	25
Support From Faculty	4.3	5.8	24
Professors Should Enforce Policies	4.3	5.0	19

Conclusions

These results are based on a small sampling of the most active and engaged students on campus and may not be a true reflection of the concerns that are most relevant for students-at-large. However, these findings can be a catalyst for conversations about, as well as explorations of, issues that may impact students' decisions to select and stay enrolled at UB. Specifically, these issues can inform the content of future UB Advocates focus groups. From focus groups based on one or more of these topics, we can develop a better understanding of how campus offices may address relevant issues in such a way that students are benefitted and satisfied with the outcome.

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¹ UB Advocates are student volunteers who meet each semester to discuss campus issues with trained facilitators. Since students self-nominate into the UB Advocates program and those who attend a particular session do so based on the scheduling of the session, as well as their interest in a particular topic, they may not be representative of the entire population of UB students.