Qualitative Approaches to Evidence-Based Evaluation in the Self-Study Process

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Abstract

This session will focus on the rationale and process behind the development, implementation and analysis of information received from focus groups and semi-structured interviews at a research intensive institution. Focus groups support and enhance the evidence-based evaluation when no other form of systematically collected information is available to contribute to the analysis. Qualitative techniques were used to develop information bases on a variety of topics including student learning, student engagement with the research process, and faculty, administrator, and community perspectives on university engagement.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Data

Quantitative Data:

• Numbers of students, grant dollars, etc.
• Collected from Units or Institutional Research
• Necessary, but won’t tell complete story, for instance it does not answer:
  – How do community leaders view our commitment to engagement?
  – How do students perceive efforts to measure and improve student learning?
  – How are planning and budgeting efforts coordinated at different levels in the institution?
Data & Evidence Collection in a Large University Environment

- **Problem**
  - An over-surveyed university community almost 40,000 strong
  - A metropolitan area of 1 million people

- **Need**
  - Collect systemic evaluative information for the self-study

- **Solution: Qualitative Research**
  - Representative case study survey,
  - Semi-structured interviews,
  - Focus groups

**Need of Evidence**

- **Assessment** of learning outcomes and student experience (Criterion Three)
  - Triangulated case study survey, focus groups

- Faculty and administrator experience with **planning and budget** processes, as well as program and personnel evaluation processes (Criterion Two)
  - Focus groups and semi-structured interviews

- Community-based experience with **university engagement** (Criterion Five)
  - Semi-structured interviews

**Why and How We Developed the Instruments**

**Student learning outcomes and experience**

A Triangulated case study survey to learn how students and faculty perceive how learning assessment occurs in the classroom and the unit; and how they evaluate the UA’s teaching and learning infrastructure. It includes closed and open-ended questions. Heads and coordinators of participating units critiqued instrument and pre-tested it. The survey was subjected to standard survey and textual analysis.

We Selected 11 academic units. These units were selected to get a representative range in:

- Numbers of majors (undergraduate, graduate)
- Professional accreditation
- On/Off campus
- Many/few transfer students
- Range of Colleges (arts & sciences, health sciences, etc.)

**Survey Topics**

- **Departments**
  - Use of various **assessment tools**, e.g., exit surveys, comprehensive exams, embedded questions, portfolios, pre and post-tests, etc. How they are used, at what level and with what frequency
- **Feedback.** How are assessment results communicated to the faculty; how critical course sequences used in assessment are.

- **Career tracking.** Which tools do departments us to track the careers of their graduates? How often do they assess careers of graduates? How is this information used for program improvement?

- **Communication.** How do departments communicate with students and graduates?

- **Student Preparedness.** What is the department’s perception about the preparedness of their students and why.

- **Norms of the discipline.** What tools do departments use to introduce students to the norms of the discipline?

- **Critical Skills.** What do departments do to develop critical college level skills like writing, critical thinking, Collaboration, Dealing with ambiguity and complexity, Problem Solving and Mathematics?

- **Infrastructure.** What is the need, the current availability and the quality of the resources that departments must have to teach students effectively (Laboratories, Classrooms, Technology, Library)

- **Support for students and instructors** How often do departments connect students and instructors to the support units available to them? How much are these units used? How effective are they?

### Faculty

- How does each faculty use various **assessment tools**, e.g., exit surveys, comprehensive exams, embedded questions, portfolios, pre and post-tests, etc., at what level and with what frequency.

- **Feedback.** How does each faculty report assessment results to department and students

- **Student workers.** How many students does each faculty have working (not part of a course)

- **Preparedness.** What does each faculty think about the preparedness of his/her students and why

- **Norms of the Profession.** What does each faculty do to introduce students to the norms of the profession

- **Infrastructure.** What is the need, the current availability and the quality of the resources that each faculty must have to teach students effectively (Laboratories, Classrooms, Technology, Library)

- **Student Support.** Does the faculty refer students to student support services? How useful are these?
Instructional Support. Has each faculty used any of the instructional support services available on campus? How useful have they been?

• Students

  • Preparedness. What do instructors do to make sure students are ready for the next level/course in their program

  • Critical Skills. What do instructors do to develop critical thinking skills in their classes? (Writing, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, …)

  • Norms of the Profession. What do instructors do to introduce students to the norms of the profession?

  • Care. Do students believe their professors genuinely care about their success?

  • Teaching Assistants. For those with an appointment. What do they do as TA’s? How much do they work? Were they trained to do the work? How? By whom?

  • Instructional Support. For TA’s. Have they used instructional support services? Were they useful?

  • Student Support. Have students used any of the student support units available? Why? Were they useful?

• Key Findings from the Survey

  • Assessment of Student Learning

    • Departmental Leaders

      • Comprehensive exams, exit surveys and capstone projects (graduates); exit surveys, capstone projects and meetings with advisors (undergraduates) at the program level; embedded questions and pre-test/post-test (graduates and undergraduates) at the course level.

      • Some departments identify and keep track of performance in key course sequences

      • Program level assessments communicated primarily at faculty meetings

      • Broad range of use (or lack thereof) of assessment data for program improvement.

    • Faculty

      • Comprehensive exams, capstone projects (graduates). Comprehensive exams (only 8% report mandatory use), capstone projects (undergraduates).
• Great diversity of ways to communicate course level assessments to department level

• **Students**

  • Except for embedded questions and online assignments, over 2/3 of all students report a wide variety of assessment tools including exams (89%), graded projects or presentations (74%), in-class assignments or discussions (67%)
  
  • Critical skills (communication, broad knowledge, critical thinking) are promoted and assessed primarily through team work, presentations and essays.

– **Norms of the Profession**

  • **Departmental Leaders**
    
    • ‘hold informal meetings with visitors’, ‘attend seminars / colloquia’, ‘engage in public speaking’, and ‘attend regional and national meetings’ (graduates); ‘working in teams’ and ‘department sponsored student clubs’ (undergraduates)
  
  • **Faculty**
    

  • **Students**
    

– **Learning Infrastructure**

  • **Departmental Leaders**
    
    • laboratory equipment and classrooms: sufficient, but may be below standards
  
    • library resources and support: ‘sufficient’ and ‘up to standards’
  
    • technology: might not be sufficient and even split between up to standards and below standards
  
    • The number of assistant professors and TAs was ‘inadequate’ to meet its programmatic mission.
• positive impact on students referred to most student support services.

• Recommend most teaching support services. Observe low use to most

• Faculty

• Most physical resources either sufficient or up to standards. Few indicated that resources were state-of-the-art

• Need to equip more classrooms with technology

• Positive impact on students referred to most student support services.

• Very low use, and uncertainty about usefulness, of most teaching support services

• Students

• Major departments are genuinely interested in their learning and advancement.

• most students do not use or use only occasionally most student support services

• Graduate students are required to attend university-wide or departmental training in preparation for their teaching duties. Only a few believe these were not useful

Student Focus Groups on Experience

We asked questions related to institutional issues, opportunities for making connections (with faculty, other students, and the external community,) and their overall academic experience. Focus groups addressed our concern for over-surveying and our need for in-depth evaluative information.

We formed 9 Focus groups, each with facilitator and note-taker. 3 Groups each for lower division (16), upper division (17), and graduate students (15). Most students were recruited through student organizations.

Take Home from Student Focus Groups

• Lower Division Undergraduates
  – Institutional Issues
    • Teachers take stock in/are more passionate about what they teach.
• Came for the opportunity to participate in research. Research is an advantage in the job market.

• The campus community is like family—students can find a place to fit in.

• Concern that transformation may cut attributes that drew students to the university.

— Connecting

• extreme satisfaction with clubs and residence life

• Training is helpful but value recognized later

• Much dissatisfaction with Centennial Hall classes: rampant cheating; embarrassment and fear of walking to the front to ask a question; disruptive loud classmates; smaller discussion sessions for these classes are needed.

— Academic Experience

• Most accurate academic information from: advisors; “rate my professor” sites; older students; professors.

• In general faculty and staff are committed to helping; mixed feelings about TAs;

• confused about the UA as a land-grant university;

• Market better; web-site more up-to-date, should showcase diversity and opportunities that go with this; update some buildings; showcase newer facilities and ranked departments.

• Upper Division Undergraduates

— Institutional Issues

• Some research experiences were not guided enough. value of these experiences questioned

• Many major required classes are scheduled at the same day and time. Scheduling conflicts

• UA has a true campus feel

• world-class instructors and opportunities for first-hand research

— Connecting

• Benefits include: meeting more people; developing campus community; honing leadership skills; opportunity for public speaking experiences; develop love for teaching; develop social skills; these experiences make life more meaningful.

• The university could do a better job of promoting these opportunities.
• there is not enough time to study and participate

– **Academic Experience**
  • Helpfulness is variable; smaller departments more willing to help;
  • compared to other schools the UA is above average in willingness to help.
  • feeling that UA cares only about science and cuts the humanities.
  • Students do not want the UA reputation sacrificed but are not happy with increasing tuition.

• **Graduate Students**

  – **Institutional Issues**
    • To work with, do research with; be mentored by leaders in their field.
    • to apply new found skills and knowledge to the community
    • Lack of faculty diversity
    • Need to invest in faculty. Faculty and staff are under-valued.
    • Students with interests other than research are ignored; ability not well distributed across disciplines.

  – **Connecting**
    • Many opportunities; benefits include: learning about Tucson; finding outlets to escape campus; opportunities to work with underserved students. Disadvantages include: time consuming; lack of family friendliness.
    • It was felt that this was an attempt to dampen criticism. Students would have liked to have been able to discuss accreditation and UA problems in many areas.

  – **Academic Experience**
    • departmental handbooks are helpful but sometimes confusing
    • Faculty advisors are good at steering students towards/away from certain professors but don’t seem to understand graduate requirements
    • students frustrated by feeling: uncertainty about RA or TA work; faculty only care about tenure; fear of voicing own opinions; no interest in students who fail to bring in money; disconnection due to off campus work; some professors do not value transfer students; loosely structured programs; required classes outside of major make formation of committee more difficult.

**Faculty and Administrator Opinions on Business Processes**
We asked questions aimed at understanding and evaluating processes, particularly Budget, Planning and Academic or Professional Reviews. The strategy consisted in conducting semi-structured interviews with 11 deans and vice presidents, and facilitating focus groups with 70 department heads and directors.

- **Key Findings from Faculty & Administrators**
  - **Planning and Budgeting**
    - Better alignment and inclusion at and across all levels
  - **Academic Program Reviews**
    - Tremendous effort with few benefits perceived, need to streamline procedures
  - **Personnel Reviews**
    - Reviews not serving purpose of enhancing performance; need to rethink criteria and aims

**Community Perceptions of University Engagement**

We wanted to learn how engagement relates to core research, instruction and outreach as defined by the UA Mission and Strategic Plan, How much the administration fosters engagement and empower our partners, How are the faculty and staff contributions to engagement recognized and rewarded, and How the institution communicates the value of engagement to constituencies, faculty, staff, students, and volunteers, among others. We had a strong desire to include the voices of constituents outside the UA.

- **Engagement Interview Questions**
  - Identify three examples of activities, projects and/or programs that demonstrate “best practices” of community engagement and the factors that are key to the success of these endeavors
  - Identify three examples of activities, projects and/or programs that demonstrate “unsuccessful” community engagement and the factors that are key to the lack of success of these endeavors
  - Provide recommendations for the most important things the UA could do to improve community engagement

- **Key Findings from Engagement Interviews**
  - **Successful Projects**
    - Most come to the UA from the community
    - Follow from consultation among the partners
    - Depend on mutual respect, collaboration and common goals
    - Depend on expertise and commitment of UA students and faculty
    - UA partners should remain cognizant of the UA’s primary role as an academic institution and not act as a competitor to private enterprises
Lessons Learned

1. Qualitative methods result in new information
2. Start early (it takes time to put together and analyze qualitative data)
   a. Be prepared for use of methods & analysis: Software; staffing; expertise; time; money.
3. Plan on how you will share results with those who have participated
4. Engage team members (you can’t do it all yourself!)