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High-Impact Recruiting: A Focus Group of Prospective Honors Students

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In 2013–2014, the Governors State University (GSU) Honors Program was faced with a need to evolve from a two-year honors program serving juniors and seniors only to a four-year honors program. This need was born out of the university's transition to a four-year university in 2014–2015. This mandate led to some concerns that I, the newly installed director of the program, needed to address. First, I needed to recruit traditional high-achieving freshman students to a university honors program that, as of fall 2013, did not exist. Second, because GSU has never had freshmen, the university and its honors program were little-known among local high school populations. Third, the typical GSU undergraduate student in 2013–14—average age 31.5, Generation X, non-traditional (University Fast Facts)—was a stark contrast to the type of student I was recruiting—average age 17–18, Millennial, traditional—and was not a good fit to provide guidance on the needs and interests of the forthcoming traditional freshman population. Fourth, past scholarship suggests that minorities are an underrepresented population in honors programs (McKay) while GSU serves the ethnically diverse Chicago Southland with a population of 2.5 million (Chicago Southland News). This diversity is evident in GSU's undergraduate population, which is 49% minority (University Fast Facts) and enrolls hundreds of first-generation college students. In the context of all these factors, I needed to find a way to gather data on the needs, interests, and expectations of our forthcoming new honors program population.

To address these concerns, I worked with our director of recruitment and outreach. We used high-impact educational practices (Kuh) as a tool for recruitment, information gathering, university and honors program exposure, community development, and leadership development among prospective GSU honors students. Creation of a prospective honors student focus group allowed the GSU Honors Program to engage in multiple high-impact educational practices (HIPS) to give students a role in developing the honors program and to give them exposure to the faculty, staff, and university they would encounter as a cohort at GSU. The success of this focus group at GSU might serve as a model for other institutions whether they are expanding into a four-year institution or not.

HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

High-impact educational practices have benefitted the educational and learning experiences of students from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Kuh 1). The effectiveness of these practices, identified by the American Association of Colleges & Universities in their Greater Expectations initiative, is supported by additional data collected in the National Survey of Student Engagement. The practices include (a) first-year seminars, (b) common intellectual experiences, (c) learning communities, (d) writing-intensive courses, (e) collaborative assignments and projects, (f) undergraduate research, (g) diversity and global learning, (h) service learning and community-based learning, (i) internships, and (j) capstone courses and projects.

Kuh has shown that some of these benefits for first-year students include higher grade point averages in their first academic year and improved retention rates. While all of the HIPS can benefit the first-year learning experience, the HIPS that were shown to have the greatest impact on learning and on personal and practical gains for first-year students were learning communities and service learning. These benefits existed when controlled for ethnicity and precollege standardized testing scores such as the SAT and ACT.

INCORPORATING MULTIPLE HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

A focus group can help honors program directors infuse multiple HIPS into the learning experience for prospective students:

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities encourage attention to “big questions” (Kuh 10) across multiple learning experiences and courses. In this context, prospective students can address questions relevant to a learning community that they are already part of. As students get more time to meet, they get to know and interact with the other focus group participants and visualize what it will be like to be an honors student at the institution. Kuh’s evidence suggests that this kind of interaction has some of the most positive learning and personal impacts among newer students.

COLLABORATIVE ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECTS

An advisory focus group allows students and faculty to engage in a collaborative learning experience that will benefit both the honors program and the student. An important part of this experience, Kuh argues, is collaborative assignments that help students learn to work together, develop problem-solving skills, and enhance their understanding of concepts, the honors program itself being the primary concept in our case.

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

An advisory focus group also gives students experience with a systematic investigation of knowledge. The level of involvement with the research can be determined by both the students and those involved carrying out the focus group. In addition to introducing students to basic research, the director of a focus group can add ethics and IRB approvals to the experience and can expose prospective students and parents to consent and assent forms. Once data are collected, participants might be given the option to further their research experience by participating in the data transcription, data analysis, and writing portions of a paper for which they could receive authorship credit. Throughout such a process, the focus group project director continues to work with the prospective students, thus furthering the personal and learning gains they can get from the experience.

THE RATIONALE FOR A FOCUS GROUP WITH HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

Evidence about HIPS suggested to us that a tactic like an advisory focus group could have numerous benefits for a university like GSU in terms of honors program recruitment. First, by spending time interacting with the students, we could learn their interests and needs as well as their expectations of a university honors program. Second, the participating students would get the opportunity to learn about our campus and our new four-year program, to interact with our faculty, staff, and administration, and to share the experience with their peers in high school. Prospective students could visualize what it would be like to be at college, interacting with professors and peers, engaging in a learning community, and grappling with leadership challenges in a collaborative project. Participants could become spokespersons for our institution so that more students would learn of our new four-year program through their friends' experiences in the focus group. Third, the focus group would allow us to focus on the specific population we are recruiting from schools around our region and help members of this ethnically diverse community learn for themselves that they have a lot to contribute to and gain from participating in a university honors program.

With no first-year freshman students to whom we could expose prospective students, we hoped to use HIPS to excite prospective students about the idea of helping to build an honors program. The honors advisory focus group, which was a joint venture between the GSU Honors Program and the GSU recruitment office, started in the fall of 2013 in order to benefit GSU, its honors program, and students involved in the group. We wanted to take high-achieving high school seniors who were already in leadership roles on their respective campuses and ask them to apply their expertise in a university context.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS AND PROTOCOL

In our first experience, we recruited eleven participants (two men, nine women) from three different kinds of institutions within twenty miles of GSU: seven students from a public high school, three from a public charter high school, and one from a homeschool cohort. Our group was ethnically diverse with one Caucasian, two Hispanics, and eight African-Americans. All eleven students met the GSU Honors Program's admissions criteria. We recruited the seven public high school participants by reaching out to their assistant principal and college guidance counselor; the high school officials then identified the students best suited for our initiative. Our director of recruitment and outreach contacted the other four participants directly.

In the six weeks prior to our institution's early-action application deadline, the participants attended three on-campus focus group meetings. Each meeting focused on a different theme related to the honors program experience, e.g., honors program expectations, proposed curriculum ideas, co-curricular interests, and honors program integration. We used a digital audio device to record each meeting. Participants were asked some questions for substantive discussion, some round-robin questions where each participant provided a quick response to the question, and some brief survey questions about the level of importance of various honors program activities such as the speaker series or study abroad.

The meetings were held in the early evening to minimize the potential for conflict extracurricular activities. Each meeting ended promptly after seventy-five minutes to be respectful of the student's homework and family time. All students received food at each meeting and, at the first meeting, a few thank-you items such as T-shirts and folders; we hoped that they would wear and use these items so that their high school classmates would see the university name and logo. Senior-level administrators, including our president and provost, made brief appearances to greet the students and share their excitement for the upcoming academic year. The focus group also maintained a virtual meeting site at *wiggio.com* to facilitate interaction among the students beyond the on-campus meetings. Participation in the focus groups entailed no obligation to attend the university, but students were welcome to stay involved in the focus group and participate in any research efforts that resulted from the experience.

FOCUS GROUP EXPERIENCE

Our experience with the focus group was successful one. We found targeted students and institutions eager to be involved in an activity like this, and the targeted students participated regularly in the focus groups with over ninety percent attendance at each of the three meetings. Over the course of these meetings, a cultural lifecycle developed among the prospective students in their learning community. The beginning of the first meeting had a formal tone born out of the necessity to do introductions, have assent forms signed, and reiterate the purpose of the focus group. Students were nicely dressed, likely to speak and sit next to students they knew, and concerned about saying the right thing.

However, as the first meeting progressed and people began participating, the formalities in the interaction began to subside. The prospective students got more comfortable interacting with one another, allowing for the collaborative project to take off, and responses to questions got longer and more open. By the second meeting, the students were more at ease with each other; many students wore T-shirts and jeans, and they spoke openly and freely from the start. A similar ease appeared during the third meeting along with the desire of a number of students to maintain involvement with the learning community and the research project after the final on-campus meeting.

BENEFITS OF FOCUS GROUP FOR RECRUITMENT

We are already experiencing recruitment benefits from the focus group. Our partnering high school institutions and homeschool cohort were enthusiastic about having their high-achieving students participate in the focus group, especially because of the opportunity for their students to apply their leadership skills outside of their high school, the opportunity for their students to get exposure to a collegiate campus and feel the reality of a college experience, and the fact that the ideas their students contributed would help shape the honors program.

This experience also allowed the GSU recruitment team, with the collaboration of the high school principals and their executive teams, to solidify a partnership that enabled GSU to become more visible among local high school students, parents, and teachers while at the same time creating new initiatives to help high school students achieve their goals.

BENEFITS OF FOCUS GROUP FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Responses from the participants are having an important influence on the honors program's development in three primary ways: de-emphasizing scholarships, adopting a points system, and adding experiential components to the curriculum.

DE-EMPHASIZING SCHOLARSHIPS

One finding we learned in our first meeting is that our participants valued an enriched learning experience more than a potential scholarship as a reason to join an honors program. In a round-robin question, we asked the students, "Between scholarships, hands-on/immersive learning, and mentoring/close faculty relationships, which one would most positively influence your decision to join an honors program?" None of the ten participants at the meeting mentioned scholarships as the most positive influence, seven mentioned immersive learning, and the other three mentioned mentoring/close faculty relationships. This finding is not to suggest that honor students are against earning scholarships, but it did tell us that we need to be more concerned about the student learning experience than the scholarship dollars awarded.

ADOPTING A POINTS SYSTEM

Curriculum was an important focus of our second meeting. We asked the participants several questions about two models the honors program was strongly considering: a points system, where students earn points for approved curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular endeavors, or an upper-division/lower-division honors model that focuses on general education in the lower division and allows academic programs to set their own upper-division requirements. Participants had a strong preference for the points system, emphasizing two themes: (1) the positive value of earning honors program points for co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, e.g., earning a double major or authorship of a paper presented at a regional conference, and (2) the potential for elitism and cliques in an lower-division/upper-division honors model, in which students completing both levels might feel superior to those completing only one. These comments were influential in our decision to move forward with a points-based curriculum.

ADDING EXPERIENTIAL PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The third meeting was focused on co-curricular activities. We gave the students ten potential co-curricular programming activities—including a speaker series, volunteerism, mentoring, leadership, study abroad, and cultural engagement—and asked them to rate the importance of each on a 6-point Likert scale (6 = essentially important, 1 = not very important). While all the activities attained some level of importance, when we asked students to identify their top two choices, three stood out: eight of ten respondents listed international study abroad in their top two, and four of ten listed leadership and volunteerism in the top two. Of the other seven items listed, none received more than one top rating. This finding is influencing several programmatic decisions. First, we are looking at ways to include an honors study abroad opportunity for students in their second or third year of the program. Second, we have decided that, in addition to using the points system toward completion of the honors program, some experiential requirements should be added to ensure a volunteerism and leadership experience. Not only will volunteerism opportunities be offered throughout the year, but we will build volunteerism into a service learning course that students will complete in their second year of study. In the fourth year of study, students will need to complete a leadership experience that might occur within the university by serving as, for instance, a student senator, club president, or mentor for honors freshmen. The leadership experience can also be in the community at large like directing a fundraiser or implementing a public relations campaign for a local nonprofit. We will partner with the office of our dean of students, which facilitates various leadership institutes at GSU so that our honors program students will have the mentoring and training necessary to be the leaders we hope they will become.

FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Our initial experience highlighted some ideas for improving future focus group. First, having meetings on campus was invaluable in getting students to engage with the campus, faculty, and one another face-to-face. While the virtual site was helpful at getting information to the students, the primary student-to-student interaction occurred in the on-campus meetings where prospective students can visualize what it would be like to be a student at GSU, can connect with our faculty, and can imagine the kind of friendships they would make as honors students here. Second, we saw the value of having the same students meet more than once. Because students must devote so much effort to introductions and to getting comfortable with faculty and each other in an unfamiliar environment, most need the time that two or three meetings afford to start expressing their feelings and ideas.

CONCLUSION

Although this prospective honors student focus group was developed with an evolving honors program in mind, many of the benefits for the GSU Honors Program can be realized in an honors program at any stage of development. Bringing prospective students to campus for focus group meetings gets them involved with the university's current students and faculty, thus improving the likelihood that they will apply and matriculate (Nichols & Chang). The students can visualize the bonds they will build at the institution with faculty and peers. In addition, the information gleaned from the meetings can help honors programs maintain relevance and meet the needs of student populations as they change over the years. Focus groups are also an excellent way to develop and strengthen partnerships with regional high schools and homeschool cohorts, thus enhancing the reputation of both the university and honors program. Finally, the meetings can serve as evaluation tools for honors program directors to help determine which prospective students are best suited to participate in their program and to serve in leadership positions if they decide to matriculate.

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