Supporting Students at UH West Oʻahu

Fall 2021 NSSE/RISC Focus Groups
Summary Report

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Background

The University of Hawaiʻi-West Oʻahu Institutional Research Office (IRO), in collaboration with the Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (AVCAA) and Campus Assessment Coordinator, conducted a series of focus groups with faculty and students over four days in October 2021. The purpose of this initiative was to preserve the voice and perspectives of students and faculty on challenges identified from the 2020 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and 2021 Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) survey.

The AVCAA, in partnership with Student Government (ASUHWO), recruited students and faculty to participate in the focus groups. The Secretary for the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs assumed responsibility for scheduling the focus groups, securing notetakers, and administering student consent forms. The IRO, comprised of a Director and an Institutional Analyst, was responsible for securing UH Data Governance approval for this study, moderating the focus group discussions, transcribing, coding, and analyzing the data, and writing the summary report. The Campus Assessment Coordinator provided quality assurance support by serving as a secondary observer and notetaker and interacting with the moderator when necessary.

Focus Group Goals

The target population for the focus groups was UH West Oʻahu faculty and students. The goal of the study was to gather in-depth, qualitative data on student and faculty perceptions of:

1. Student-faculty engagement.

2. Students' challenges in balancing their education with their personal and work lives.

The reason for focusing on these two issues was to follow up on challenges identified in recent campus wide student surveys. Results from the 2020 NSSE survey (N=416) found that students at UH West Oʻahu rated the level of student-faculty engagement significantly lower than their peers at similar institutions. The 2021 RISC survey (N=735) found that work and personal issues were the top two challenges students said impeded their academic success. This study is underpinned by a body of scholarship demonstrating qualitative data, such as data collected from focus groups, can be a valuable complement to quantitative data derived from higher education surveys (Chambers and Chiang, 2012; Krippendorff, 1980; Kuh, 2003; Mayhew et al, 2016). Following up on the challenges identified from the 2020 NSSE and 2021 RISC surveys by way of active discussion with students and faculty is one step towards "closing the loop".

Research Methodology

Four one-hour focus groups were administered in October 2021. The focus groups were conducted online using Zoom. In total, 20 students and 15 faculty members participated for a total of 35 participants. A diverse group of participants was recruited (e.g., traditional and non-traditional students, neighbor island students, faculty from different fields). The IRO Director moderated the sessions using a consistent script of questions. The study was approved by the UH Data Governance Office (DGP 210825-1) and is exempt from Institutional Review Board review. Student consent forms were administered in advance.

Prior to the beginning of each focus group session, the AVCAA familiarized participants with the goals of the study and lines of inquiry. The moderator outlined the focus group agenda, facilitated introductions of the participants, reviewed the ground rules and guidelines for the discussions, and then commenced with recording each session on Zoom.

The attendees were asked to participate in a discussion and share their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors

surrounding two key topics: 1) Student-faculty engagement, and 2) Students' challenges in balancing their education with their personal and work lives. The moderator introduced/primed each topic and proceeded to ask a series of questions that were consistent across all four focus group sessions. The moderator facilitated the discussions using traditional focus group techniques (i.e., probe, pause, reflect, observe non-verbal cues of participants). The moderator concluded each session by providing a summary of notes taken and acknowledged the participants. The results of those discussions were recorded by IRO and then used to create this summary report.

Study Limitations

Inferences from the findings of this study are limited to the focal institution and may not extend to other institutions with distinctly different students in terms of academic preparation, demographics, and educational aspirations. Second, the analysis is restricted to 35 participants (20 students and 15 faculty) and may not represent the perceptions and sentiments of the student/faculty body as a whole. The student participants may not represent the average student in terms of academic preparation, socio-demographic background, and educational aspirations. Lastly, faculty and student participants may have been overrepresented within some fields of study and underrepresented (or not represented) within other fields.

Data Analysis

The transcription of the focus group discussions was conducted by the IRO. The Zoom audio/video files for each session were imported into NVivo software. Audio was converted to text utilizing NVivo's automated transcription package. The media was partitioned into timespans and the hard copy notes taken by the focus group notetaker were attached to each timespan. The IRO Institutional Analyst manually validated the accuracy of the audio-to-text conversion for each timespan.

A hybrid, deductive and inductive, approach to coding was employed. The IRO staff began with a list of pre-defined codes derived from prior literature and attached these codes to student and faculty comments. Additionally, the IRO created custom codes ad hoc as the data were analyzed, based on common knowledge of the UH West Oʻahu campus environment, student demographics, and campus mission. These codes were structured into meaningful themes, again, largely guided by prior literature. Sub-themes, called "categories", were created, and two additional levels of coding were derived resulting in a four-level hierarchical coding structure. The IRO staff conducted a frequency count of the themes, categories, level-three and level-four codes. The researchers plotted a treemap in order to visualize the structure of the content. The frequency tables are provided in the subsequent findings section of this summary report.

To date, only a content analysis for this study has been conducted. The IRO is currently working on conducting an additional sentiment analysis. The automated sentiment analysis package in NVivo was tested during the data analysis phase of this study but was deemed inaccurate. The IRO is currently working on manually coding sentiment for the participants' comments. As such, the findings section of the summary report includes an analysis of the focus groups' content, but not sentiment.

Focus Group Findings

This section presents a summary of findings from the content analysis for the following two focus group topics:

- Student-faculty engagement
- Understanding and supporting students' work and personal challenges

Student-faculty engagement

The first topic of discussion (Topic 1) in the focus groups was student-faculty engagement. Table 1a reports the number of respondents, codes generated, and code references generated for Topic 1. Table 2a provides the frequency and percentage of code references across the theme groups and categories. Five categories were developed out of the codes emerged from the focus group data. These categories are loosely arranged into three thematic groupings: *Communication, Resources,* and *Accommodation.*

Table 1a. Data and codes/references generated

	Focus Groups
Respondents	35
Codes generated	98
Code references generated	180

Table 2a. Code category, ranking and frequency of list of focus groups

Ranking	Categories	Reference counts	Percentage	Theme groups
1	Availability	56	31	Communication
2	Career Plans	45	25	Communication
3	Career Plans	25	14	Resources
4	Office Hours	19	11	Accommodation
5	Availability	17	9	Accommodation
6	Availability	7	4	Resources
7	Frequency	6	3	Communication
8	Office Hours	4	2	Communication
9	Frequency	1	1	Accommodation

Communication represented 69% of the total code references for Topic 1 and was the most frequently discussed theme. The three most frequently commented categories in the *Communication* theme were *Availability, Email,* and *E Ala Pono*. There were several noteworthy findings across these categories. Students commenting on instructor availability expressed challenges staying online in Zoom after class to ask instructors questions. Faculty reported that facilitating questions and answers after online modality classes was difficult, due to having to establish breakout rooms for individual students for privacy purposes. Students reportedly would often leave the waiting room due to the long wait. Faculty and students were generally skeptical about the effectiveness of the E Ala Pono progress updates. Both groups commented that the progress messages were "boilerplate" and could be more personalized. Students perceived the "kudos" messages as having negligible motivational value towards their academic success.

Resources represented 18% of the total code references for Topic 1 and was the second most frequently discussed theme. The respective students and faculty comments were coded into two categories: *Career Plans* and *Technology*. *Career Plans* was a category comprising a significant number of comments and was code-referenced in both the *Communication* and *Resources* themes. Students and faculty commented that career planning is usually embedded in most of the classes, particularly at the upper-division level. As a result, several students reported having fewer career-planning conversations with faculty outside of the classroom. Faculty commented that they assumed career planning conversations outside of class is the undertaking of the Career Services Office (CSO). Students and faculty expressed an interest in integrating resources/services from the CSO with career planning discussions inside the classroom. A CSO led demonstration of UH's Career Explorer application was one example shared of how the institution could

integrate career-planning resources in the classroom environment. The degree to which more integration of CSO resources/services within classes varied by student major. With respect to technology, a number of students reported that their home internet connection is too slow to support Zoom and would like availability of personal hotspots. Although the campus does have a new hotspot distribution initiative, supported by CARES Act funds, none of the student participants were aware of the program.

Accommodation represented 13% of the total code references for Topic 1 and was the third most frequently discussed theme. Students and faculty comments were coded in three categories: *Office Hours, Availability,* and *Frequency*. Students reported that attending office hours on Zoom was sometimes more burdensome than attending in-person or having discussions after class. Students reported office hours are often not listed on syllabi (or listed as "by appointment only") or were not followed according to the time listed. Most students still reported being able to successfully schedule office hour meetings with their instructors. Several faculty participants recommended surveying students (i.e., by using "STAR Balance") to determine the best time and method for office hours. Several non-traditional students reported that office hours often do not work for their schedules.

Selected Student Comments for Topic 1: Student-Faculty Engagement

- "So, in most cases for me, when I look at my syllabus for professors and instructors, it's usually appointments are created based on contacting them and letting them know the best time. So that actually might be the best way, it has been working for me."

- "I remember, for my example, the professor did have a stated office hours, but because I couldn't hear back from him through email, I would say, Hey, can I meet with you during this time? Didn't get a response…"

- "Like every time I went to office hours, they were always there."

- "I definitely miss that time at the end of class where you're cleaning up and students can just walk by and say, Oh, I have a, you know, I have a question…"

- "…solutions for different methods for faculty and instructors to provide communication with students may be the way because we've moved to a virtual world and it seems a little bit even easier to pick up the phone, to have students dial in via Zoom, or even have a chat going on so that students can feel like they're understanding what's going on in the class."

- "I've had I feel like from my experiences when I tend to fall behind in classes or whatever, I've had more professors who will kind of just do you know the E Ala Pono progress update. And I get like a stock email from academic advising and that's kind of all I hear from it."

- "Particularly when you think about like one of the most important things that professors can do is feedback about what a student is doing correctly or incorrectly, and that feedback comes from assessments. So, whether it's a formative or summative assessment, if you're just getting like good work in a smiley face from a professor that's not considered authentic assessment, it's not actually good. It's great that you get it, but it's not a positive."

- "I've actually reached out to pretty much all of the Business lead instructors to find out what I need to do and what my options are as far as when I graduate. And it was really helpful and that helps me narrow down what classes I need to take. And it was really quick. When I asked them, they all got back to me within a couple of days."

- "[Career planning] hasn't been happening that much this past couple [of semesters]... Yeah, it's more so with the counselors, and you kind of got to go in and make the effort."

- "…I'm in a field that I have access to contacts and I want to make sure that our students get the resources that they need during their degree program and as a faculty contact, for a program, I kind

of feel like it's an onus on me to make sure that they know the lay of the land with job procurement, graduate school, so on and so forth."

- "So, like I was saying, I don't have internet. I have to run down the street to McDonald's or in Chinatown, where I am now in somebody's office. So that's a big barrier for communication."

Understanding and supporting students' work and personal challenges

The second topic of discussion (Topic 2) was Work and Personal Challenges. Table 1b reports the number of respondents, codes generated, and code references generated for Topic 2. Table 2b provides the frequency and percentage of code references across the theme groups and categories. Four categories were developed out of the codes emerged from the focus group data. These categories are loosely arranged into two thematic groupings: *Family/ Personal/Home Setting* and *Work*.

Table 1b. Data and codes/references generated

	Focus Groups
Respondents	35
Codes generated	65
Code references generated	93

Table 2b. Code category, ranking and frequency of list of Focus Groups

Ranking	Categories	Reference counts	Percentage	Theme groups
1	Academic Support	34	37	Family, Personal, Home Setting
2	Institutional Support	17	18	Family, Personal, Home Setting
3	Financial Issues	14	15	Work
4	Academic Support	10	11	Work
5	Institutional Support	7	8	Work
6	Other	6	6	Family, Personal, Home Setting
7	Financial Issues	5	5	Family, Personal, Home Setting

Family/Personal/Home Setting represented 69% of the total code references for Topic 2 and was the most frequently discussed theme. The three most commented categories in the *Family/Personal/Home Setting* theme were *Academic Support, Institutional Support,* and *Financial Issues.* There were several notable findings from the content of these categories. Students commented that they could be better supported in balancing their family/home setting obligations if assignment deadlines were occasionally extended, but with recognition that not every assignment deadline can be extended in reality. Faculty suggested that periodic check-ins are a helpful way of connecting with students and also provide opportunities to check-in on their well-being. This was another area where faculty encouraged the use of STAR Balance for appointment scheduling and check-ins. The majority of students and faculty expressed the need for a childcare facility on campus. Students also expressed a need for more wifi-enabled devices and personal computer rentals to support off-campus learning. Several students asked for reductions in textbook costs and more Open Educational Resources (OER) used in classes. Other students commented that student government implemented a zero-textbook initiative, however several students reported being unfamiliar with this initiative.

Work represented 31% of the total code references for Topic 2 and was the second most frequently discussed theme. The respective students and faculty comments were coded into three categories *Academic Support,*

Institutional Support, and *Financial Issues*. Most students reported that options for class times and modalities were abundant, allowing them to work full-time. A small number of students expressed the need for more evening and weekend classes. The majority of students in the focus groups reported working one or multiple jobs in order to finance school and their personal expenses. When asked how the institution could better support students in balancing work and school, several students repeated the request for more flexibility with assignment deadlines. This was less of a challenge for students employed in on-campus jobs, who reported that they are allowed flexibility in work hours (i.e., "student first, employee second" mantra).

Selected Student Comments for Topic 2: Work and Personal Challenges

- "And also, part of the solution would be professors having maybe like more lenient due dates. Like, for example, I had one class who the professor, wanted everything due on Thursday, and I worked nine to five Monday through Friday. And that made it really challenging trying to get everything in on Thursday. So maybe having weekend due dates."

- "I am on the flexible side because I find that my students are often, you know, if there's a student who's not turning in an assignment and it stretches out, I immediately know there's a problem there, so I reach out to them."

- "I'm not having enough time because of work and family demands and distance learning, even though it is possible to balance and get good grades. I feel like it makes it challenging as a student personally to really learn in-depth the topics that I learned in class and retain them, which I wish that I got to or that I'm able to because it would be useful in grad school and really being prepared for grad school."

- "I wish I could just go to the library and just study over there at times. But our community library, you have to be vaccinated. And the other, I'm over on Molokaʻi, so then our school library is like only has a limited amount of space and computers here. So, it's just very limited in a lot of ways, and it's just trying to find how you can just adjust to everything."

- "And if there's like more instructors that can use open-source textbooks, that for sure has helped me a lot. When it's got the IDAP, I have to opt out and then I'm stuck because I need the book for the class. But then there's no book on reserve at the library that they can scan to me, or there's no books available, used books that I can afford to buy."

- "Something that has benefited me personally is the free textbooks that you can rent at the library implemented by the student government. That was really cool. Just little things like that makes the living easier."

- "I think childcare would be a great element, if possible, to add to UH West Oʻahu."

- "I think that childcare was something that was mentioned on campus, but never implemented. I think that could help a ton of people."

- "My student was talking about her kids at home. Every time I meet with her, she's always apologizing that she said that she can't focus on her research papers she's writing because she was in charge of childcare that day. And of course, she has no reason to apologize."

- "I'd like to share that, it is extremely difficult for some people who, especially in these islands where you know the cost of living is so high."

- "And I saw this notification that said, like basic needs [survey]…and I'm not sure how that's going. But if there is like options for like resources [I would be interested]."

- "As far as a solution…is there any CARES Act that we can give to students who possibly, I don't know what's left with the CARES Act for each campus, I know some campuses have more. Maybe that'll help take away some of the pain."

- "When I first got into UH West Oʻahu, I've heard from students [PII redaction] that there are students who are working two, three, four or five, sometimes even five jobs. You see students working so hard and they still cannot make it. But I see like students, for example, they'd have to go without food."

- "So, coming from someone who works 40 hours a week, while doing school full time, 15 credits. For the past three years, it was very challenging. I'm not going to lie."

- "One of my friends, they're putting themselves through college while working two full-times maybe part times, but she's just exhausted at the end of the day and so like school seems impossible."

- "I had a student tell me two weeks ago that he had to quit his job [PII redaction] because his class work was suffering and because he just had too much to handle."

- "Our advisors are really understanding, and they really encourage that we work as students first and then like everything. So at least our workload isn't as stuffed as compared to other students who don't work on campus. So honestly, I actually like working [on campus] because it has that flexibility, especially with hours and workloads, that kind of works well around my student schedule."

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section provides a summary of the most salient themes from the focus group content analysis. Firstly, the logistics of the online learning experience has challenged the degree to which students and faculty are able to engage after and outside of class. Most students reported working one or multiple jobs, making it difficult to engage with their instructors after class. Students reported office hours are often not listed on syllabi (or listed as "by appointment only") or were not followed according to the time listed. However, most students reported being able to successfully schedule office hour meetings with their instructors. There was a shared sentiment among students and faculty that it would be beneficial if career planning services/resources offered by the Career Services Office could be integrated within classes as appropriate. The need for more integration varied between majors. For example, several Education majors expressed that employment preparation is a natural part of their advising sessions and practicum. Many students reported a lack of sufficient internet bandwidth at home to support online learning. Access to personal hotspots was a common ask of students. One participant noted that the institution is offering more hotspots, supported by CARES fundings, but few students were aware of the initiative. Many students were similarly unfamiliar with the zero-cost textbook initiative. Students and faculty felt that the progress update messages broadcasted through the E Ala Pono early intervention initiative could be more personalized. The need for a childcare facility on campus was articulated by student and faculty participants alike.

A number of actionable steps could be taken based on the findings of this study. Firstly, communication from the institution about posting office hours on syllabi, the personal hotspot initiative, and the zero-cost textbook initiative could be improved. Progress update messages broadcasted through the E Ala Pono early intervention initiative could be personalized to improve the effectiveness of the messaging, with perhaps less attention to the "kudos" messages. Traditional and non-traditional students reported challenges in balancing school with work or their home setting. Related to this, the need for a childcare facility was expressed by the majority of student and faculty participants. Finally, there seem to be opportunities to integrate the career-planning expertise offered by the Career Services Office, such as training in the use of UH's Career Explorer application, within some upper-division classes on campus.

A PowerPoint slide deck for this study can be found at: http://go.hawaii.edu/VuN

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