Student Voices in Curricular Design: A Case Study

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Abstract

Traditionally, curriculum design and revision have been guided by faculty and accreditation criteria needs. Students who were enrolled in the curriculum have had limited direct involvement in this process. This study was designed to collect and apply student feedback specifically for the revision of a therapeutic recreation program curriculum. Simultaneously, it was a response to student concerns about excessive course content during their final semester prior to internship. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from these students through questionnaires and a focus group. Results indicated a need to move some course content from senior level courses to courses taken earlier. Application of these results includes the development of new courses for professional development that are taken earlier in the curriculum and shifting one senior level course to an earlier semester. Other recommendations concerning teaching methods and student advisement are also being implemented.

Keywords: curriculum design, student input, focus groups, higher education

Biographical Information

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Introduction

As more and more educational institutions shift to student-centered learning environments, students' roles in the teaching/learning process are becoming increasingly participatory (Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Kliewer, 1999; O'Banion, 1997). Student-centered environments emphasize the learning of process rather than content and place high importance on problem solving (Kliewer, 1999) and autonomous learning (Clifford, 1999). Changes in pedagogy from traditional lecture/discussion to methods such as learning communities and Problem Based Learning (PBL) reflect this trend. The shared learning experiences that take place in a learning community cohort facilitate integration of cross-disciplinary content and pedagogy (Landis, Peace, Scharberg, Branz, Spencer,

Ricci, Zumdahl, & Shaw, 1998). The Problem-Based Learning approach facilitates autonomous learning and problem solving process through peer interaction (Glasgow, 1997)). As part of this trend, soliciting student participation for course and program evaluations is also gaining importance (McCormick, 1994; Singer & Miwa, 1997) as students are delegated more responsibility for their learning process. This study investigates student input obtained for curriculum revision in higher education.

Traditionally, curriculum design and revision have been guided by faculty and accreditation criteria. For some therapeutic recreation (TR) programs like the one discussed in this study, feedback solicited and received from graduates, practitioners and an advisory board has also influenced curricular change. However, rarely have students been directly involved in this process. Their contributions have been restricted to evaluations of individual courses, not overall curricular design. Providing them with an opportunity for guiding curricular change supports the concept of a participatory academic environment. It is in this light that the current study was undertaken.

The majority of the literature related to this study concerns student evaluations of academic programs and courses. These include evaluations of general education curricula (Hendershott & Wright, 1993), undergraduate courses (Powell, Hunt, & Irving, 1997), and nontraditional learning programs (McCormick, 1994). The emphases of these studies are on the evaluation process involved in assessing program or course outcomes and student experiences.

The intention of this study was not to evaluate the effectiveness of the TR curriculum, but rather to involve students in guiding the revision of their curriculum. A search of the literature specific to the topic of student guided curricular revision resulted in only one report. Gee (1997) surveyed graduate and undergraduate students who provided recommendations for future revisions of the professional preparation aspects of an education curriculum. The current study sought to address immediate needs for curricular revision as opposed to future needs, and considered the entire curriculum, including the professional preparation aspects.

The literature provided support for the use of focus groups in student-centered investigations. Focus groups involving students have been found useful for collecting qualitative evaluation data about university programs and courses (Hendershott & Wright, 1993; McCormick, 1994; Powell, Hunt, & Irving, 1997). A focus group provides a vehicle that extends beyond the gathering of information to gaining an understanding of the issues in question. It promotes interaction between respondents, which often leads to a greater depth of information and better insight into respondent attitudes and behaviors (Morgan, 1988a). Student focus groups have been used successfully to investigate qualitative indicators such as satisfaction (Franklin & Knight, 1995), and to provide in-depth feedback as a follow-up to quantitative data collection (Singer & Miwa, 1997). Based on these premises, a focus group was used in addition to the more traditional use of a questionnaire to solicit student input for curriculum revision.

Setting

During recent years, TR program faculty at a small southeastern public university noticed an unusual amount of stress in students enrolled in their final semester prior to internship. This stress was demonstrated by a noticeable increase in inappropriate behaviors in class, verbal complaints, poor attendance, and poor performance in course activities. Although previous senior cohorts had not demonstrated this high of a level of stress, it appeared to have been building over several years.

Senior students had expressed several concerns, many of which related to curricular design. First, many students were complaining that the senior-level courses were too demanding. They indicated that they were expected to do work which was both complex and voluminous. They stated that they had not been exposed to such demands in previous TR courses, and felt surprised. Since this was their last semester prior to internship, there was a perceived additional stress in having to pass all courses and establish internships or delay the internship and graduation for a semester.

In response to this, two TR program faculty members designed and implemented a study to investigate the students' complaints with a focus on feedback regarding an imbalance in course loads and assignments at the senior level. The purpose of this research was twofold. First, the validity of students' complaints needed to be confirmed. Was the curriculum, indeed, too "top heavy", i.e., excessive course loads at the senior level? The second purpose was to get student input into possible solutions. The concept of a student-centered learning environment suggests that students should have a voice in making needed changes in the program curriculum. The investigators would solicit student feedback for shifting and balancing loads between courses and course levels and within the overall curriculum, so that demand and challenge were more evenly distributed across sophomore, junior and senior level courses.

Methods

Overview

Data were collected in two phases during November and December of the Fall semester of a recent year. First, students responded to a questionnaire about course loads in the TR curriculum and other factors that might contribute to stress. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the questionnaire. Following the analysis of those data, a focus group was conducted to probe salient issues in depth.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section requested student feedback on course workloads for each course required for a major in the TR program. First, for each course, the student chose one of the following responses: should be lighter,

for that course. The second question in this section asked "Which assignments conflicted when courses were taken concurrently?"

The second section of the questionnaire examined conditions that might affect the student's ability to fulfill course responsibilities. One question asked for a self-rating on a five-point Likert scale of the student's tendency to procrastinate. The other question asked for the number of hours per week that the student worked on a job during the current and previous semesters. These conditions might be likely to increase perceived stress. However, they were not related to course workload, and did not justify decreasing it. The final section of the questionnaire consisted of an open-ended request for any other related feedback that the student might have.

Questionnaires were administered by one of the investigating faculty members to nineteen senior-level students (16 females and 3 males, with an age range of 20 to 25) during a session of a course in which they were all enrolled. In order to minimize the potential for intimidation, the instructor who taught the course did not administer the instrument. Students were informed that the faculty had noticed their concerns about course loads and had developed the questionnaire to assist in addressing this issue. They were requested to answer all questions honestly and thoroughly. They were also assured that confidentiality would be maintained through the complete anonymity of their responses and were instructed not to write their names on the questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Focus Group

After reviewing the results of the questionnaire, the investigators conducted a focus group session. Questions asked of the focus group were derived from responses to the first and last section of the questionnaire. Data from the second section were not considered relevant to curriculum revision, for reasons described in the findings. Students in the focus group were asked about how course loads might be better balanced through the curriculum, what specific aspects of senior-level courses were causing stress, and how the faculty could better respond to their concerns. An outline of questions guided the process, allowing for digressions or more detailed questions and probing. Several comments made previously in the questionnaire were explored in greater depth. For example, which specific assignments should be shifted and to which courses should they be moved, and what were some specific ways to improve overall professional preparation of students.

The focus group was conducted by both investigators during a session of another senior-level course. This setting was chosen in order to minimize no-shows and other problems as described by Franklin and Knight (1995) associated with recruiting students for focus groups. Members of this 'captive audience' were encouraged to participate by being told that all of their responses would be considered for the curriculum revision process. Sixteen of the original nineteen students who responded to the questionnaire were present for the focus group. This number of respondents was large for a focus

group, but justifiable, since data were being collected from a preexisting group (Morgan, 1998a). Such a group provides homogeneity and compatibility, both of which are keys to a good group dynamic (Morgan, 1988b). Participants do not need to spend time getting to know each other and can spend more time generating data. Additionally, the investigators felt that all members of the cohort should be given opportunities to express themselves. This improved the comprehensiveness of data by allowing the full range of opinions to be better represented (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996).

One investigator asked the questions from the outline while the other recorded data in the form of notes and quoted comments. Students were told that the purpose of the focus group was to discuss in greater detail some of the issues and concerns from the questionnaires so that they could be better addressed. The investigators emphasized that this event was another opportunity for students to assist in the improvement of the TR program. Both investigators took active roles in probing and clarifying issues. In order to encourage participation from all group members, facilitators repeatedly asked for additional comments and suggestions, a recommendation made by Morgan (1998b) for working with large groups. The facilitators demonstrated a friendly, supportive and appreciative manner to encourage participation and to maintain the focus on positive, constructive involvement. Students were forthcoming with their responses and comments, and did not appear to be inhibited by either the investigators or the setting. The session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Findings

Workload by Course

Overall results from the first section of the questionnaire indicated which courses at the sophomore, junior, and senior levels could carry lighter or heavier contents. Specific course names have not been given, since these may not be consistent across different TR programs. Four courses were identified by 50% or more of the students (3 senior-level and 1 junior-level courses) for a lighter content load. Two additional courses (both senior-level) were named by 45% of the students as candidates for a lighter content load as well. The top three courses targeted for a heavier content load were one sophomore-level course and two junior-level courses. It thus became evident that course content could be shifted for a more balanced curriculum. Although it was not feasible to reduce loads in six courses while increasing loads in only three, it was possible to redistribute some content for a more balanced overall course load. This redistribution and other curricular changes that were made are discussed later in this study.

The responses to the question "Which assignments conflicted when courses were taken concurrently?" clearly indicated a conflict between two senior level projects (a comprehensive case study and a research project). A change was made in advising policy to have students not take these two courses (Advanced Therapeutic Recreation and Research Methods and Evaluation) concurrently. The research methods course was shifted to the second semester of the junior year.

Student conditions

The second section of the questionnaire solicited information about student conditions that could be factors in students' stress. The self-report on tendency to procrastinate had a fairly even distribution of responses, and did not provide any data useful for curricular revision.

More than 80% of the group worked at least 10 hours per week, with the mean of 17.1 hours per week. Three students worked more than 30 hours per week, while three others did not work at all. The mean of hours worked for the previous semester was 20.8 hours per week. The mean for other previous semesters was 20.3 hours per week. While these data are useful for examining other factors impacting student learning, the findings were not relevant to curricular revision.

Open Ended Comments on the Questionnaire

Direct comments were evaluated to be useful or not useful for curriculum revision by the investigators. There were two criteria for this decision-making process: (a) relevance to curricular revision as opposed to teaching or advising issues, and (b) likelihood of suggested changes in the curriculum to be effective.

Some comments addressed teaching styles and advising issues, instead of curriculum issues. This information was reported to the program faculty and to the department chair. Only those comments that were relevant to curriculum issues were included in the discussion of this study and for making decisions about curriculum revisions. Comments relevant for curriculum revision formed two categories: (a) comments concerning the general, overall curriculum, and (b) comments about workloads in specific courses.

Comments related to the overall curriculum include:

- "...shift workload to earlier courses."
- "...increase load in beginning classes."
- "Along with heavy classes we [as seniors] have to look for an internship and do professional development also."

Comments concerning specific courses include:

- "...change sequence and take Leisure Education (a junior-level course) earlier."
- "...[adequately] divide the information in Principles [in Therapeutic Recreation] and Procedures [in Therapeutic Recreation]."
- "...Majors' Seminar (a senior-level course) is too hard"

Focus Group Findings

Overall, the responses from the focus group were positive and constructive. They ranged from very specific, "Resume writing needs to be started much earlier, in the Sophomore year." to general, "Major projects need to be broken down into smaller pieces." One respondent expressed the need for faculty to show more concern for students' well being, especially during stressful times of the semester, "I'd appreciate it if you asked me 'How are you doing?' or 'What's the problem?' when stress levels are going up." One series of responses provided unexpected information about having faculty members exchange teaching of courses they had traditionally taught, "Dr. X doesn't teach any senior level courses. She should switch teaching classes every once in a while." As illustrated, respondents brought up a variety of topics including teaching methodology, student-instructor interactions, and suggestions for improving the curriculum.

Responses were organized into three general categories through the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which has been found useful for interpreting focus group data (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). The categories were: (a) increase or reduce content of courses, (b) change pedagogy in specific courses, and (c) provide more ongoing feedback to students about their performance.

The majority of the responses related to course content. Respondents felt that senior level courses needed to have some of their content presented earlier, but could only make limited suggestions as to exactly which courses it should be shifted to. Remarks about changing pedagogy most frequently referred to senior level courses, especially with regard to the amount of content covered by exams and how major projects were structured. Exams needed to cover less content and be given more frequently, and projects needed to be presented in smaller chunks. These remarks were connected to the need for more ongoing feedback, which helped to reduce students' uncertainty about their progress in courses.

Examples of suggestions from the above categories include:

(a) changes in course content

> "...shift assessments, progress notes, and behavioral objectives from Advanced [Therapeutic Recreation, a senior level course] to Procedures [in Therapeutic Recreation, a junior level course]."
>
> "Resume writing should be started much earlier in the curriculum."
>
> "...begin professional development earlier, for example, require students to attend a conference in their sophomore year."
>
> "...start the history portion of the senior case-study in an earlier course."

(b) changing pedagogy in specific courses

"...the case-study [a senior level project] needs to be broken down more."

"...change how we do volunteer work—we need to do more writing about it."

(c) providing more ongoing feedback

"When you have major projects due and don't have a clear idea of how you stand, it's difficult. We need to know how we're doing."

"*Students need to be kept better informed of their progress.*"

The student suggestions on pedagogy, specific assignments, feedback to students, and recognition of other sources of seniors' stress were discussed between the TR faculty members, and reported to the department chair for further action. The comments specific to curricular change were utilized for subsequent decisions in curricular revision. The resulting changes made to the curriculum are described in the following section.

Discussion

As a result of this study, it was discovered that from the students' viewpoint, the curriculum was indeed top heavy. All of the TR faculty agreed with this viewpoint. In response to this, several curricular changes have been initiated. For example, three new one credit hour professional development courses were developed to redistribute the content and focus of one senior-level course (Majors' Seminar). The three courses must be taken in order over three or more semesters to allow for sequential learning experiences. These courses introduce resume writing and professional development activities earlier in the curriculum as suggested. Also, as mentioned earlier, the research methods course previously taken during the final semester prior to internship is now being taken one semester earlier. This allows the two largest class assignments (an in-depth case study and a research project) to be conducted during different semesters. It is important to note that the overall workload of the students was not reduced but has been redistributed and better balanced throughout the required courses.

Insights gained from this study are also guiding long-term program development. These include:

- Educating students about the difference between curriculum requirements and teaching methods between particular courses.
- Investigating existing teaching methods and changing them as needed to improve student learning.
- Considering balancing course loads whenever making curriculum revisions.

- Educating students to identify sources of stress and effective responses to stress when it impacts learning.

After the focus group was conducted, students' attitudes and ability to focus on class tasks seemed to improve for the remainder of the semester. Perhaps this was a case of the Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1940; Jones, 1992), where merely giving attention to students had a beneficial effect on their motivation and productivity. This was in spite of the participants' knowledge that any curricular changes resulting from the study would not benefit them directly, since they had already completed most of the curriculum. Participation in the focus group may have had an additional benefit for the students. It provided a forum for them to express their concerns and listen to each other, corroborating some issues and debating others, often a characteristic of the focus group experience (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Their voices were heard by their peers as well as by their instructors. This can be a source of motivation for improved participation (Morgan, 1988b), and may also provide a value-added benefit to the participant (Hendershott & Wright, 1993). The meanings of these kinds of interactions warrant further investigation.

One of the purposes of this study was to get student feedback to guide curricular revision. Seeking student input had a two-fold benefit. First, students appreciated voicing their concerns and perceived problems. Second, faculty members were able to look at curricular balance and other related factors from the students' perspective. Since no single faculty member teaches all of the courses in the curriculum, her/his perspective of the overall curriculum tends to be fragmented. On the other hand, students take all of the courses and can provide a more comprehensive and cohesive view of the curriculum. Their input can and should be an important part of curricular revision.

Recommendations

Three issues need to be taken into consideration prior to conducting similar studies in the future. First, students need to be able to differentiate between curriculum changes, teaching methods, and advising issues unless those topics are being specifically addressed. Reflecting on the data, it became apparent to the investigators that students confounded those issues when answering questions that were specific to curriculum revision. Students may need clarification through examples and discussion prior to collection of data.

Second, faculty who are not instructors of the focus group members should be considered for facilitation of the focus group. Students might be less concerned about repercussions of their responses and thus more honest. Although the investigators did not sense any such concern on the part of the respondents in this study, some intimidation due to status was possible. The advantage of having instructors administer the focus group was that they were more aware of the issues in question, and could probe respondents more accurately. This tradeoff might be minimized by thoroughly briefing the non-instructors prior to their conducting the focus group.

Third, the sample should consist of an existing cohort of students, if possible. In such a group, members are familiar with each other as well as with the issues. They represent a wide range of ideas and opinions that yield rich data. If the focus group is conducted during a class period of this cohort, attendance is maximized.

It should be noted that the curriculum under discussion has been intentionally developed to be highly cohesive. Each course is designed to be an important part of the whole curriculum and has distinct relationships to the other courses. The three faculty members of the TR program design and teach their courses within this rubric of collaboration. This level of collaboration combined with the program having the single concentration area of therapeutic recreation has greatly facilitated the changes indicated by this study. Larger programs with more diversified curricula may find it more difficult to implement changes in course loads across the curriculum. Further research is needed to investigate how student input might be obtained to guide curricular change in these programs. Given the rising importance of participatory learning environments, this is a timely topic for investigation.

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