Transforming the Classroom: Including Undergraduate Students in Program Evaluation

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Abstract

In an effort to improve the evaluation process and gain greater insight into student's perspective of the Georgia Southern University Recreation and Tourism Management (RTM) program, a unique semester-long evaluation project was integrated into the Evaluation and Research course curriculum. While University-supported course evaluations were in existence, an evaluation of the RTM program exploring issues related to curriculum, advisors, professional experiences, and internships did not exist. The most unique factor of the project was the collaboration between faculty and students as they worked side-by-side to create a student exit-survey examining various aspects of the RTM program. As a result of being a part of a real-world, collaborative effort with faculty, students experienced several benefits including (a) improved problem solving skills, (b) critical thinking ability, (c) research and evaluation skills, (d) improved professional presentation skills, and (e) participation in professional development activities beyond the classroom.

KEYWORDS: Student centered learning, student evaluation, program evaluation, experiential education

Introduction

Student evaluations are used across university campuses as a measure of a teacher's ability to teach. Student standardized evaluations provide instructors with important feedback from the student's point-of-view and allow administrators to gauge the effectiveness of every teacher's instruction. The premise that student evaluations are reproducible and useful for evaluation has been accepted since the 1980s (Theall, Abrami, & Mets, 2001); however, there is a growing body of literature that examines the usefulness and validity of student evaluations. Critics of student evaluations often cite incorrect use of global questions, rating scales, and timeframe of administration as central problems for their usefulness. In an effort to improve the process, Davis (1995) suggests the creation of faculty-developed evaluation instruments suited to individual departmental curriculum and purpose (Divoky, 1995). Industry has adopted similar feedback methods which include "upward feedback" and the more popular 360-feedback assessment, where the fundamental premise is to gather information about organizations from multiple perspectives, specifically employees. The advantages of assessments like 360-feedback are widely recognized and offer several advantages over single-source assessment such as new perspectives with which to judge employees, reinforcement of organizational values and visions, and more comprehensive and objective data than one source (Fleener & Prince, 1997).

In summer 2008, faculty in the Recreation and Tourism Management (RTM) program at Georgia Southern University recognized a particular need in relation to evaluating overall student perceptions of the RTM program. While University supported course evaluations were in existence, an evaluation of the RTM program exploring issues related to curriculum, advisors, professional experiences, and internships did not exist. In an effort to improve the evaluation process and gain greater insight into student's perspective of the RTM program, a unique semester-long evaluation project was integrated into the Evaluation and Research course curriculum. The most unique factor of the project was the collaboration between faculty and students as they worked side-by-side to create a student exit-survey examining various aspects of the RTM program.

Description of the Activity

Students enrolled in RECR 4536 - Evaluation and Research - learned survey techniques in a traditional classroom setting combined with a five phase group evaluation project. Students were placed in groups (6-8 students) to work on a semester long evaluation project that comprised 40% of their final grade. Each phase allowed the instructor to judge student progress, provide feedback, and assign points that accrued towards the final grade.

In this course, students were asked to assist the faculty and administration in improving the RTM program through their input and feedback. They were informed how important of a role their perspective would play in evaluating the program and improving it for future students. The introduction of this project as more of a charge for the students, rather than group work, excited the class and

made them feel part of something that would make a difference in the future. Phase one included forming groups and developing a two page project proposal that included a title, abstract, names and contact information of group members, an introduction to the project, research questions, and potential impact of the project. This phase allowed students to become familiar with group members and ask important questions to clarify the purpose of the project.

The second phase required students to conduct a literature review and compile an annotated bibliography with ten sources (no more than three web-sites) in American Psychological Association (5th ed.) format. This phase of the project occurred in a computer lab and required students to search for literature as a class. Key words and library resources were shared among the students during this phase. After completion of this phase groups were asked to share their findings with the class and discuss ways in which previous research could aid in developing the RTM exit-survey.

The survey instrument was designed in phase three. Class discussions revolved around the identification of programmatic areas that are not typically evaluated in standardized student evaluations. This provided structure for the survey as well as the students. Structured sections included respondent's demographics, RTM course assessment, student self-assessment, faculty assessment, professional experience, future plans, and internship experience once completed. Next, each group used the literature review and personal perspectives to compile a list of potential survey questions for each section. Each group was instructed to create an aesthetically pleasing survey instrument that was easy to read and comprehend. The RTM program faculty met at the conclusion of phase three to discuss the survey and compile all six of the group's survey instruments into a single draft. Overall, students comments were mindful and on target; however, discussion of appropriate wording, question section placement, and ensuring questions did not overlap with standardized department evaluations was required. After several meetings to discuss both question inclusion and survey layout, the first version of the instrument was finalized. Faculty then presented the newly drafted instrument to the class and invited student input. For this component, all faculty involved in the development of the survey attended the class to field questions and receive additional student input. Student's excitement and feelings of inclusion in the project yielded strong opinions during the input session. They were supportive and offered insightful suggestions for survey improvement. A second faculty meeting included discussion of student feedback and development of the final survey instrument. The final survey instrument was presented to the students and received their approval.

The developed survey instrument consisted of six sections and a total of sixty-three questions. Each section contained a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed ended questions used a 5 point-likert scale where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The first section collected respondent demographics including such items as age, gender, time when declaring RTM as major, emphasis area in major, minor, and how did you hear about the RTM pro-

gram. The next section asked students to assess their courses overall about class size, the curriculum, and group work. Open-ended questions asked about courses not offered that students feel would benefit them in the future and what students like most/least about the program. The third section allowed students to assess themselves and included items about their time management skills, discipline in completing course work, enjoyment of learning, peer interaction, and if they feel responsible for their academic success. Information about their professional experience like membership in professional organizations, attendance at conferences, and experience hour requirements were also posed. The fifth section probed students about their future plans like their career goals, furthering their education, and where they saw themselves five years from now. The last section asked information about the internships experience like deadlines, paperwork, initiative in locating an internship, and if the internship led to a full-time job.

The survey was administered in phase four using electronic methods. Each group compiled a list of names to contact and solicit for participation. The participant list was a convenient sample consisting of 35 recent graduates and 25 current seniors. Participants were solicited via email, direct contact (e.g., phone, face-to-face, etc.) and Facebook. There were a total of 60 students contacted and 39 usable surveys were completed for a 65% response rate.

The final phase required students to analyze the data and create a final report. The data analysis portion of this phase required students to meet in the computer lab and run analysis on the data in SPSS v 15. Students then took the analysis and prepared a final presentation and report. The presentation could be no more than 20 minutes in length and included 5 minutes for a question and answer segment. Faculty and administrators in the college were invited to attend. The presentation required students to dress professionally, present findings, and give recommendations. A practice session was offered to students the weekend before the presentations. The final report was due one week after the presentation and included a cover, executive summary, table of contents, introduction, methods, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. All group members were expected to contribute equally to the project over the course of the semester. Students confidentially evaluated their group members' participation at the end of the project, which accounted for a portion of the grade. In addition, students had the opportunity to resubmit any of the first three phases for full credit. This opportunity for resubmissions reflected a realistic research process in which we share and learn from our mistakes to produce a better product.

Learning Outcomes

This project addressed NRPA Accreditation Standard (8.17): students will learn to apply basic principles of research methodology and analysis for assessment, planning, and evaluation processes. At the completion of the project students and faculty identified a number of outcomes that were consistent with this standard. While many of these benefits were acknowledged verbally by the students, some were internalized through participation in an experiential project

of this magnitude. As a result of being a part of a real-world, collaborative effort with faculty, students (a) improved problem solving skills, (b) develop critical thinking ability, (c) developed research and evaluation skills, (d) improved professional presentation skills, and (e) participated in professional development activities beyond the classroom.

Problem Solving. The student's involvement in the evaluation process allowed them to understand various points of view that can be used to improve existing programs and services. RTM majors will be expected to meet the demands of diverse users in an era of budget cuts and limited resources. The ability to rely on problem-based inquiry to create interdisciplinary solution-directed answers will be critical. This project allowed students to apply evaluation techniques in a collaborative team-based setting designed to generate ideas for improving the quality of an existing program. Contrary to many of the projects that are conducted in research and evaluation courses, the topic of investigation was personally relevant to all of the students. This allowed them to become more engaged in the evaluation process.

Critical Thinking. Student comments centered on the amount of effort and time it takes to conduct an evaluation project. They were surprised that terminology and survey formatting could make such an impact on interpretation and results. This became apparent after the RTM faculty invited student feedback on the draft survey instrument. Students joked after the feedback session about how exhausting the class discussion was. These comments indicated that students were challenged to look beyond the traditional classroom setting of a lecture and think critically to provide feedback.

Research Skills. Students were required to define the research problem, conduct a literature review using the library and online resources, enter and analyze data using SPSS statistical software, and issue recommendations based on their findings. This allowed students to experience the entire research process firsthand, and reflect on what they learned.

Presentation Skills. Although today's students are technologically-oriented and multitasking, they often lack the ability to use technology in a professional manner. Allowing students to experience the pressure of presenting the finding of an evaluation project in the presence of faculty and administrators enabled students to gain valuable presentation skills that are transferable to the workplace.

Opportunities beyond the Classroom. Engaged students have the opportunity to present findings and share their classroom experiences at various professional conferences. For example two students from the course, along with three RTM faculty members, presented a panel presentation at the conference for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Students reflected on the experience and discussed the outcomes of the learning experience. Most importantly, students will have the opportunity to apply their research and evaluation skills in real world settings during their internships and subsequent professional careers.

Final Observations and Recommendations

Overall, student comments regarding the project were positive. They enjoyed being part of a "real world" project that will be used by the university to improve the quality of the RTM program. Additionally, they were pleased to be involved in developing the very tool that they themselves will use to evaluate their academic experience. Most criticisms related to time constraints; students wanted more time to analyze the data and prepare their presentations. We would recommend commencing the evaluation project within the first few weeks of the semester, after lectures that provide an overview of the research process. Frustrations also arose around the use of SPSS. In hindsight, we would recommend the use of Excel. Most students will not have access to SPSS in their future workplaces and Excel seems to be a more realistic and user-friendly data analysis package.

When preparing an evaluation project, it is imperative that project planners (in this case the RTM faculty) dedicate the appropriate resources and work collaboratively. Faculty meetings and discussions required extensive time and coordination, and without dedicated, available collaborators, projects such as this may experience difficulties. RTM faculty scheduled weekly meetings during the month in which the instrument was being developed, along with multiple classroom visits.

We would also recommend the inclusion of student and faculty collaborators for projects of this nature. Students felt empowered because of their inclusion and their ability to "set the standards." Finally, it was a positive experience for the students to see the faculty working together in an attempt to engage students in the learning process.

Conclusions

The evaluation project proved meaningful for both the students and faculty. Professionals in the field of parks, recreation, and tourism are required to evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of programs and services. This project proved to be a useful tool that assisted students in acquiring the skills necessary to conduct systematic evaluations that inform important agency decisions. In conclusion, students were able to contribute to a real world evaluation project that will ultimately leave them better prepared for professional life.

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