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## 2020 FALL STUDENT FOCUS GROUP REPORT

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**CONTEXT** In order to better understand the student experience in the distanced environment, what opportunities students want or cannot find, and how DOSA can support students in this distanced environment, the Director of Strategic Planning and Assessment conducted four focus groups online.

Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 11 students participating, 10 of which were undergraduates and one was a masters student. They were predominately first year students.

**Q1:** *Students introduced themselves and something they enjoy about being a student at Ohio University.*

Students shared that they enjoy campus, friendly people, the community, meeting people quickly, the Bobcat family feeling. One described OHIO as “nice and embracing.” Another said that they made connections and furthered their career before starting coursework. Another said that all instructors are very involved and trying to make connections.

**Q2:** *Think about your semester this fall thus far. Please share a description of what it has been like. How would you describe your experience to a friend?*

Student responses were positive, negative, and mixed. Positively, students said that they can tell “OHIO has put effort into making sure students are getting what they need.” Negatively, students shared their struggles. One said, “It is really hard for a first year” and another, “I do not know anyone or have connections with people.” And, mixed comments blended these kinds of responses.

➤ *Follow up: Have you found any informal ways to connect with classmates?*

Two students responded. One said they appreciate when instructors use breakout rooms to better connect with a small group of students. Another shared that they are talking to the same people from before COVID and not getting to know many new students.

➤ *Follow up: What has been helpful or good thus far in helping you connect?* Two different focus groups were asked this question.

- The Learning Community (LC) having the student fill out calendars to stay organized with deadlines across courses
- Some students orgs are still able to meet outside for personal contact
- Being involved and being an LC leader
- Professors have been very supportive with the virtual change
- Another student shared that they are really impressed by the professor’s commitment and recording all the lectures, making sure every student knows what is going on. “If you are struggling, they make sure you know office hours where you can go for extra help.”

**Q3:** *Are you already or are you planning to be involved in any organizations this term?*

Some first year students shared that they are having a hard time finding organizations. One shared that he would like to join more but is “kind of lost as to how to look for orgs.” Another shared that she had looked through Bobcat Connect and could not find the groups that are active or meeting right now. She said very few were meeting online and was open to suggestions on how to find them (this student is off campus this term and is living at home).

Some first year students had plugged in. One male student had joined two organizations. He found out about one via a card on his car on campus, and sought out joining the latter. A sophomore student shared, “Orgs were helpful when on campus, but I don’t see myself engaged as much. It is hard to make time.”

- *Follow up: How did you find your student organization?*
  - Bobcat Connect but noted that very few have meeting information in the portal
  - Heard about it from a friend in DLA. As OMSAR student and was looking to get more involved.
  - A TA mentioned during a lab that they were president of a club and offered that students could join.
  - A professor shared about the organization since it is related to the class and suggested students join.
- *Follow up: Normally involvement fair introduces organizations. It is interesting that faculty and instructors told you about groups. What can we do to ensure students hear about the groups available?*
  - One student suggested, “Orgs should make a short video introducing themselves and sharing what they do. The shorts could be put together in small groupings like a commercial/mini involvement fair. They could be emailed to students.” Another affirmed and the other participant was also a fan of this idea and together they spent several minutes discussing how this could be helpful.

Q4

*What does involvement look like right now?*

Some organizations are meeting weekly and in-person with limitations. Some are using GroupMe to find times to meet and to share details on how to follow organization guidelines. No official programs to introduce group but open to get to know each other at events. Interactions with members mainly outside of meeting times, formal meetings focus on topic at hand, but personal relationships formed to have fun.

Another named organization is preparing materials for practicum and looking into community service opportunities; communicate primarily via email. Another organization uses Discord to communicate. Interactions in meetings are helpful but communication outside of meeting times more beneficial.

One student shared that as president of an organization the following on recruiting, “Tough to get to know people from a distance. No student org fair made recruiting more difficult.” When talking to students, they didn’t have much of an idea about organizations or getting involved because of no Org Fair or clubs going into classes.

Q5

*This is a unique semester given the different way we will need to interact with one another. How do you want involvement to look this term, given what is happening in the world and physical distancing guidelines?*

- Would love for it to be normal again and more outreach.
- Need more consistency with guidelines set by OU administration. Different levels of concern from students. Hard to engage large groups virtually.
- The weather changing makes it difficult to meet outside. Need outdoor heaters.
- Since not all classes are synchronous, maybe set up live streams for students to come and talk and ask questions outside of office hours.
- “It is hard to get involved after being on computer all day, you want a break from electronics.”
- In an ideal world communication would be better. If you send something out people would respond. Simulate more authentic conversations. Icebreakers while online and breakout rooms for 1:1 conversation has helped. It’s helpful to meet still as they’re getting work done but the level of community has lessened

➤ *Follow up: What would help you feel more connected to campus/peers?*

- Virtual Involvement Fair
- Having a mentor to help match up people and check in
- First years need to build relationships
- Suggestion: More professors have students turn on cameras, without face to face it feels very distant
- A lot of my classes don’t even meet, no way to connect with people

➤ *Follow up: What would you like for students to help find the active orgs?*

- Virtual Involvement Fair

➤ *Follow up: Have you relied on social media for outreach? Has that helped?*

- Not very effective- maybe because it is not the usual outreach tool
- Have seen no student orgs pop up on monitored media
- Covering all platforms would be helpful

➤ *Follow up: What would you suggest to students to get connected and encourage staff to do to get students plugged in?*

- Instructors can advertise organizations based on academic topic and interest. Students shouldn’t feel afraid to reach out to people so they can get connected and make friends they may not have met otherwise.
- Have heard others say they wish there was some kind of org fair this year to be able to just meet people, could make it work online like the career fairs currently are.

Q6

*How are you creating or finding a sense of belonging?*

A student shared that one organization leveraged Zoom for an event to find a mentor within the organization. Breakout rooms are helpful for these kind of events with Zoom functionality compared to Teams. Another shared that silly icebreakers during org meetings and group TV/movie watching has provided a sense of

belonging. Another organization has been focusing on certain games that can be played remotely. Even if not in person, the consistent talking to people can create friends that bring that sense of belonging. In one focus group, 3 out of 4 participants shared that their campus job provided a sense of belonging (tutoring, unnamed, being an LC leader).

**Q7**

*If there were someone or something else available to support your organization and its mission this semester, what would you want?*

- Teams group could be beneficial but having everything confined to one page may not be helpful.
- One-on-One conversations from staff or upperclassmen to students to guide them to organizations or ways to connect to groups of people could be beneficial.
- While online, better to have IT support for students/orgs to get connected in different ways. Who to contact if a student leader wants to know how teams could function in the org, some guidance.
- Clear standards and event expectations for spring 2021
- Space heaters for outdoor events
- Multiple people in orgs connecting and promoting
- Virtual environment where orgs can come together and communicate about events, etc.
- Bobcat connect used more widely and better advertised
- Perhaps a digital CIC bulletin board
- It would be nice to outreach from upperclassmen to freshman-like a mentor (affirmed by three students in one focus group session)

## **METHODS**

All focus groups were held on Teams so that they could be recorded. Each session was led by a moderator and co-moderator, with a guided list of questions. The recordings were transcribed by an outside observer. The key findings were presented above.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Focus group methodology has its limitations. Focus groups rely heavily on the moderator and a bad moderator can nullify the data quality. To overcome this, I moderated every focus group. I have facilitated more than forty focus groups and am experienced as a researcher and practitioner on the subject matter. All focus groups were recorded and an outside observer transcribed them as well as provided their own reflections, questions, and observations. The use of an outside observer reinforced the quality of the recommendations derived from the data.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

- Students seemed to be connected in some way through orgs still but overall when describing their experiences a lot of feedback was that there's uncertainty, disconnectedness, and disorganization
- The learning communities seem to be doing a great job, it was encouraging to hear a student not involved in any organizations say that her LC was where she found community- attributing in part to that they have their cameras on but that doesn't happen in other classes
- The majority of the participants wanted to hear more about more organizations to get involved with but didn't know how to do so.

- I was surprised to hear that students aren't going outside as much.

## **REFLECTIONS**

Student mentioned that the role of the leaders within these organizations allows them to adapt to the needs of the group and use their creativity to solve problems. A co-moderator noted that they were surprised at how content the students who were meeting regularly with their groups seemed. It sounded like they have figured out how to manage during this time, whether meeting in person or online. They reflected, "I started to wonder if the current generation of college students is so used to using technology in every aspect of life, that this wasn't too difficult of an adjustment. I am definitely interested in how this generation has adjusted during this time compared to other generations and how that influences their success."

In multiple focus groups, multiple first-year students were lost as to how to look for organizations to join. With one student's comments about mentorship and first year students feeling lack of direction, it is curious to start to find the gaps in these student experiences. Students feel that live instruction is better and adds to connection. Mentoring could improve the connection. Having students be on camera also fosters connection. It is a very hard time to be a freshman, there has not been an opportunity to feel excited about the transition to university. Involvement in orgs and mentoring could increase commitment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Tell student organizations about outdoor heaters and how to go about reserving them for fall/winter outdoor events
- Share notes related to coursework with academic counterparts
- Ask the CIC to:
  - o Set up a process for student organizations to create short 'commercials' to introduce student organizations and push these out on socials
  - o Push these commercials out via various existing communication platforms
  - o Run a January student involvement fair that is live, incorporates the 'commercials' and either breakout rooms or short meetings with student organization leaders
  - o Explore having 'involvement mentors' built up quickly and push it out on socials as a way to help those who want to be involved get involved