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A qualitative assessment of non-traditional graduate student cohort experiences at a WMU regional location

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WMU Academic Leadership Academy, 2010-2011



Background

Objective

Evaluate the non-traditional graduate student cohort program experience (marketing, competition, decision-making process, and student services) at a WMU regional location and provide recommendations for the program that will result in increased satisfaction and program enrollment.

Method

Approximately 36 respondents, students in either the fall 2008 or fall 2009 program cohort at a WMU regional location, participated in one of four focus groups.

Respondents

All respondents were enrolled in one of two courses from an academic program offered at a WMU regional location during the fall 2010 semester. The majority of respondents were members of either the fall 2008 regional location academic program cohort or the fall 2009 cohort. There were a select few respondents that were not part of the cohort and that traveled from surrounding cities to attend the course at the regional location that semester.

A little less than half of respondents work in some capacity for a major corporation located in the city. Other respondents were a mix of individuals employed at various organizations in and around the city. Almost all students were currently employed full-time.

The majority of respondents live and work in the city of the regional location.

Summary

- Students reported that increased career opportunities and workplace advancement were the main reasons for pursuing a graduate degree program.
- Most students knew they wanted this degree (as opposed to another degree type) and surprisingly, most students did not do a significant amount of competitive shopping of institutions.
- The few students that did look into other institutions looked at Michigan State University, Grand Valley State University, Spring Arbor University, and University of Phoenix.
- Most students indicated that they chose the academic program at the WMU regional location because it was the only program offered face-to-face in the vicinity, meaning it is convenient and in the format they prefer.
- WMU tuition is more in-line than other institutions with tuition reimbursement offered by many local companies where respondents are employed.
- Most respondents indicated they had heard about the academic program at the WMU regional location through marketing pieces (billboards, radio, direct mail) or through word-of-mouth (co-workers, friends).

Reasons for Pursuing Graduate Degree

Reasons for considering a graduate degree ranged from top-down pressure from management, including having a graduate degree as part of a professional development plan, as well as for career advancement, and to gain a competitive advantage in job searching.

Respondents indicated that a graduate degree would help them be more marketable in a competitive job market, aid in upward career mobility, and result in more opportunities.

"[This] degree will make my resume more distinctive."

Marketing and Competitive Research

Marketing

Almost half of the respondents had attended an information session about the academic program at the regional location. Respondents indicated hearing about the regional location academic program through marketing initiatives including:

- Billboards
- Website
- Newspaper
- Flyer/postcard

Researching Competitive Programs

- Approximately one third of respondents researched the academic program at MSU, however this option was dismissed by some because their employer's tuition reimbursement program does not fully cover the cost of the program.
- Others dismissed the MSU program because it required a longer commitment and it was viewed as harder to get into.
- The University of Phoenix was questioned in regards to accreditation and reputation of their online program.
- Grand Valley State University, Spring Arbor University, and the University of Phoenix were also mentioned as competitors.



WMU Regional Locations

Decision-Making Process

Most respondents indicated that they decided rather quickly that the WMU academic program fit their needs, because of location and cost (employer tuition reimbursement was a significant factor for many individuals).

"Why shouldn't I do it? It's right here and it's paid 100%!"

The majority of students cited convenience as the main factor in choosing the WMU academic program at the regional location.

"If WMU wasn't offering this program [here], I would not be enrolled."

Summary of reasons:

- Convenience
 - Location – close to work and to home
 - Evening classes
 - Guaranteed registration (for cohort)
 - Predictable, classes at same times
 - Free parking, close to building
- Name recognition
 - Recognizable school name
 - Accredited university, close to home
 - Quality education
 - Credible program (feedback from peers)
- Face-to-face classes (not online)
- Cohort model
- Tuition reimbursement (from employer)
- Facility
 - Wireless network
 - High-quality facility with good technology
- Have multiple coworkers in program

Student Services Satisfaction

Respondents from the fall 2008 cohort reported, in general, a higher satisfaction with the cohort model than did respondents from the fall 2009 cohort. Much of the lower satisfaction from the 2009 group was focused around two issues: not knowing which academic program concentration would be offered, and lack of student services and advising availability.

Concentrations Offered

- Students from the fall 2008 cohort did not report issues with the concentration offered for their cohort.
- Students from the fall 2009 cohort expressed frustration and confusion over which concentration would be offered and how it would be communicated to students.
- Many of the students in the fall 2009 cohort had begun to take concentration courses on WMU's main campus because they weren't sure which concentration would be offered at the regional location and wanted to be sure that they would be able to finish their degree in a timely manner.

Student Services Satisfaction, Cont.

Cohort Expectations

- The majority of respondents from both cohorts reported having high expectations of a cohort model, including individualized attention, services, and advising that would all be readily available.
- Respondents indicated that they were very satisfied with the registration process completed by the advisor for courses each semester.
- Respondents indicated that the cohort had been successful in developing a group of students that were able to get to know one another and network.

Some areas where respondents had high expectations that were not met included:

- Lack of attention from a coordinator; individuals who had prior experiences with cohorts in particular felt that the WMU regional location academic program cohort lacked a "point person" who they could turn to for information, updates, and who would act as a counselor for questions, concerns, support, academic department connection, etc.
- Lack of clear direction for which courses students were able to take or should take.
- The ability for students to complete courses wherever they were offered; moving away from the cohort model so students could choose to attend courses in any WMU location.
- Many students indicated wanting to take summer courses.
- Students part of the regional location cohort that live in near WMU's main campus were not eligible for book delivery to their home.
- Students not living near WMU's main campus wanted books to be available at the regional location.

Recommendations

Areas for opportunities to increase satisfaction, and as a result, program enrollment include:

- Assigning a program coordinator who can be the connection between the WMU regional location and the academic department, recruit prospective students, and serve as a conduit for communication and services for current students.
- Explore meal options for students at regional locations.
- Explore opportunities for students to study in the evenings and on weekends when regional locations are typically open for non-academic programs and events.
- Offer summer courses at regional locations.
- Offer courses in a regular rotation so students are aware of what courses will be offered during which semesters, enabling them to plan their program of study and anticipate completion.
- Offer increased students services, like books and access to advising, more frequently at regional locations.
- Discontinue cohort model for course registration; allow students in the program to select courses at the location that works the best for their schedule.