

Gathering Focus Group Data Regarding Student Motivation
Project Summary
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Background Information: The goal of this project was to collect qualitative data through the use of focus groups to determine why academically at-risk students utilize academic support at rates lower than the general WSU student population.

Original plans were to hold four focus groups to reach 25 total participants, providing incentives of food, a \$10 Purple Pass Credit, and a thumb drive as incentives to participate. Unfortunately, this plan was naïve. Ultimately, over 626 students were invited to participate in ten scheduled focus groups or alternative interview times. The response rate was dismally low and the no-show rate among those who indicated they would attend was approximately 60% despite reminders being sent. The incentives were also tweaked to replace the thumb drive with a chance to win an additional \$25 in Purple Pass credit. Ultimately, 19 students attended the focus groups. To supplement this data, surveys were given to 28 students who attended the Inclusion and Diversity Leadership Retreat. We were able to use some incentive already purchased with department funds, therefore we spent \$241.77 of SLD funds instead of the \$400 originally requested.

Findings:

- 1) Students are aware of Tutoring Services. Even students who never used tutoring did know that WSU offers this service.
- 2) Embarrassment/Stigma is a factor. 68% of the Inclusion and Diversity students believed that embarrassment was a barrier to students using tutoring. Students in the focus groups also mentioned embarrassment, one went so far as to say they would only use

tutoring if they could meet somewhere else because they did not want to be seen coming to the center.

- 3) Personal connections are effective. While the students suggested we continue our multi-faceted publicity efforts, three techniques were noted as being the most effective: having a tutor come to class; a professor pulling them aside to suggest tutoring; or an email from their advisor suggesting tutoring . Interestingly, when we tracked the students who participated in the focus groups, 59% of them had subsequently used tutoring after attending the focus groups. While the purpose of the groups was to listen to the students ,not to persuade them to use tutoring, it appears that seeing the center and talking to a staff member may have made using tutoring more appealing.
- 4) Many academically at-risk students did well in high school without studying but struggle with the transition to the more academically rigorous college. Several of the students interviewed did not do even the basic success strategies such as class attendance and time on task. These students are not going to make the extra effort to come to tutoring until they start taking their education seriously.
- 5) Some of our students do not do well because they are facing very challenging personal issues such as family financial hardship, unplanned pregnancies or substance abuse. Understandably, these students are often not in a position to take the extra time and effort to come in to tutoring.
- 6) When seeking participation of students, especially those that are at-risk or less engaged students, normal incentive do not appear to be enough. A chance at a “big ticket” item

such as an iPad may be a better incentive than giving each student a smaller, but guaranteed enticement.

Actions:

- We partnered with a mass communication student to develop a short video with testimonials from students who used tutoring and featuring a few of our friendly tutors to hopefully lessen the stigma students may feel about using tutoring. It will be added to our website soon.
- We have a sign on our door that says “Need help in a class? You’re in good company _____ students have already used tutoring this semester.” We update the number weekly.
- We increased the number of classroom presentations that each tutor is required to do from two to three each semester.
- We continue to do multi-faceted publicity efforts including posters and bookmarks, presentation, emails to students and teaching faculty, sidewalk chalk, residential hall council presentations, and digital signage.
- We are increasing outreach to faculty and staff to encourage them to refer struggling students to Tutoring Services.
- We continue to emphasize the importance of outstanding customer service during our staff training.