PHSA Evaluation Committee Focus Group Discussion Findings

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Becca Woofter (Chair),
Geneva Vogelheim, Jasmine Lee, Lillian Chen,
Mounica Lakshmi Dugginapeddi

Outline

1. Background & Methodology
2. Themes from 2021 Evaluation
    a. Transparency in the Use of Student Feedback
    b. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
    c. Funding Accessibility
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    e. PH 200
    f. Priority Areas for Next Year
3. Recommendations

Aims for 2021 Evaluation

- To better understand select themes from the 2020 PHSA Survey
  - Students feel their feedback is not valued
  - Faculty lack diversity and awareness of EDI issues
  - Students worry about funding availability and distribution
  - Students struggle to access necessary resources and information
- To provide qualitative data on relevant student issues to inform decision-makers
  - PH 200 (Masters students only)
  - Faculty and admin response to current events (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality)
  - Integration of Trello as a means of advertising events and resources
- To determine priority areas for improvement in the coming year

Focus Group Discussion Protocols

- We conducted 4 focus group discussions with FSPH students (Spring 2021)
  - Two groups with Masters students & two groups with Doctoral students
  - Conducted during Week 7
  - Advertised through student listserv, What's Bruin, and student organizations
  - Each participant received a $25 gift card
- Recordings of all focus group discussions were transcribed and coded for themes

Sample of Focus Group Discussion Participants

- Final Sample: 24 students
    - 13 Masters (MPH and MS) students - 6 first years, 7 second years
    - 10 PhD students
    - 21 women, 3 men

Departments of FGD Participants

4%
12%
17%
46%
21%
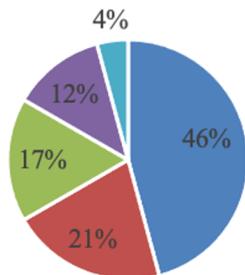
- Community Health Sciences
- Health Policy and Management
- Epidemiology
- Environmental Health Sciences
- Biostatistics

Race/Ethnicity of FGD Participants

24%
4%
48%
24%
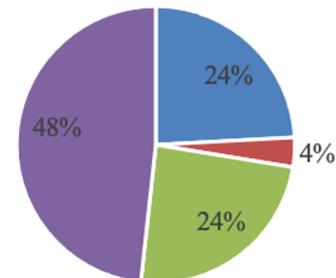
- White or Caucasian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Asian/Asian American

*Note: Students could select >1 race

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: Transparency in the Use of Student Feedback

1. Students have seen some improvements at FSPH as a result of feedback

2. Students overall feel that their feedback is not valued at FSPH

3. Students desire more transparency in how feedback is considered by faculty, staff, and administrators, and how it is used to implement change

4. Students suggest more investment in regular evaluation, such as a permanent task force and full-time staff member(s) dedicated to evaluation

Transparency in the Use of Student Feedback:
In the Classroom

"I can't really think of a time where my first year there was ever a professor who had really pushed us to complete the evaluations or had a mid-quarter survey. But this year, I've really noticed that a lot more professors are asking for feedback in the middle of the quarter."

"I think what would be really helpful is to set aside time for a class period or even for a short amount of time to say that-- for a professor to say, **"These are the points that I found really helpful and, going forward, just to let you all know that this is what I'm going to make changes on for the course for future students." So that way we feel like we're not just wasting our time filling out these forms.***"*

Transparency in the Use of Student Feedback: Overall

"Rarely do I see spaces in which it's clear how there will be follow-through, like, **"Thanks for joining this meeting. You told us you wanted this. Now we've done this." I have not been in a space where I have had that happen and so it almost feels as though, "Well, thanks for asking me to spend another hour of my day filling out your survey or telling you what my thoughts are."** *And then it goes out into the ether and nothing happens."*

"There needs to be more of a conversation around coming up with solutions and just talking about like, "Okay, what's feasible to tackle first versus what might not be feasible. **I think at times we understand they can't do everything all at once but it would be nice for there to be transparency there around what do** <u>**they**</u> **feel is the most pressing issue versus what do** <u>**students**</u> **feel is the most pressing issu***e, how do we come together to make sure that everyone's needs are being met."'*

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: EDI

1. Students report improvement in faculty awareness of EDI in the classroom, primarily tied to pandemic-related accommodations, although approaches are inconsistent across faculty

2. Students appreciate FSPH's recent investments in EDI such as funding for anti-racist research and department EDI committees

3. Students desire more consideration of structural issues in classes beyond surface-level discussions about social determinants of health

4. Students desire a more consistent demonstration of commitment to EDI by faculty

5. Students appreciate faculty acknowledging current events in a timely manner, as well as showing flexibility with deadlines in response

EDI

*"I think all our courses need to have some form of acknowledgement of what is racism...where it **doesn't matter what type of coursework it is or what type of department classes they are**."*

*"I've been disappointed in some of my classes where race and ethnicity are kind of just token issues, where we just kind of talk about them in the **theoretical** without understanding that they're the **actual lived experiences** of many of the students in my classes."*

*"It's always really weird to put it frankly, to see like, 'Hey, we're talking about how do we move in a more equitable manner.' **And then the next sentence is a microaggression from a faculty member. So it's really hard to see that at times because we act like we get in the academic sense, but in terms of how do we model it in the everyday lives**, in the classrooms, in interactions with students, and things like that, it's hard."*

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: Funding Accessibility

1. Students overwhelmingly express that finding funding is stressful and time-consuming

2. Students desire more support for navigating funding, such as dedicated time with SAOs or Ambassadors to help find funding opportunities

3. Students acknowledge that funding policies are often beyond the control of FSPH, but are frustrated with low GSR pay scale and positions just under 25% time

4. Masters students express difficulty finding and securing employment positions

5. Doctoral students often take time away from their dissertation, thereby lengthening their program duration, in order to work in unrelated positions as a TA or GSR to cover living expenses

Funding Accessibility

"I think, too, as a student, that I always have a lot going on and they'll send out emails like you can apply for this scholarship and I'm like, "Okay, now I need to cut time out of my day if I want to apply to something to see if I meet all the requirements, write an essay, get my transcript or get a letter of recommendation or whatever". And I'm just, "Right now?" **The mental-emotional capacity with everything else going on, then you want me to do this additional thing but just like-- I am so tired.** *And then I feel like they're not being understanding of that either."*

*"There is no support system to help us through it...***I think sharing opportunities is great, but again, it comes down to a public health principle of just throwing out opportunities is not enough if you don't actually have the resources and people to help you.***"*

"And if we don't have a degree in biology or chemistry, or we didn't study in the States for our undergrad education, it's very difficult for us to find a TAship."

"I will say the most frustrating thing about this process for me is the fact that we're basically responsible to find our own funding*....I think that in my opinion, this should be the responsibility of the department, it should be the responsibility of the advisers, of the faculty to ensure that their students are funded."*

Funding Accessibility (Doctoral Students)

*"This is just making me think about how much we've normalized having full-time classes...fellowship...also, TAing or GSRing to make money on top of that. And then pretty much everyone I know also has another job for cost of living. So **I know myself I've had at least five positions at one time and juggling that, that's just the norm it feels like. And that is not normal.**"*

"But from the argument of, "There's boundless opportunity. You'll find something," that doesn't seem like a good answer, even more so now. It was never a good answer. Even more now, it seems like it's completely inappropriate and mismatched to the reality of our context."

"Do I try to do research that's maybe tangentially relevant to me, not get my tuition paid and get paid less? Or TA for something that's maybe not going to help me in my career and just spend a lot of time doing it to get paid as much as you can and get your tuition paid?"

*"I had to do **more than what any in-state student would have to** or domestic student just so I could be covered completely. And at times I felt like essentially, I was just working to stay in school and not get as much out of my program or research as I'd like to. Because all of my time is just being used up by working and staying afloat."*

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: Trello & Accessing Information

1. Students appreciate weekly digest emails, such as What's Bruin
2. While some students appreciate the use of Trello or Slack, they struggle to keep up with a separate platform and worry about missing important information
3. Students report rarely, if ever, using Trello as a regular source of information
4. Students mostly report difficulty navigating Trello, although some students appreciate that it is organized by topic and contains a lot of information

Trello & Accessing Information

"*I really appreciate our SAO sends out a weekly newsletter, and that is what I go to to know about events or resources, fellowships, whatever. **I feel like everything is there. I know about it. I know that the most important things will be in that.**"*

"*A positive of Trello...if I'm only interested in, let's say, career opportunities or workshops available, I can just not look at that, look at scholarships or fellowships since it's not applicable to me anymore. So I can just follow through rather than if it's an email, then everything is one email.*"

"**I don't mind emails. *I can definitely filter out emails if I don't see it fit compared to Trello it's another click. It's another board that I have to remember that it even exists.* I definitely forget that it exists sometimes.**"

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: PH 200 (Masters Students)

1. Students appreciate the idea of an integrated core, but felt they did not learn how to integrate the disciplines together

2. Students struggled with the order of subjects and switching between them frequently

3. Students did not believe the instruction in each topic was sufficient, particularly in Biostatistics

4. Students did not receive comprehensive feedback on assignments

PH 200 (Masters Students)

*"It's just getting like a quick look at what this department does and then you're moving on to the next thing. **And it doesn't really show you how these different departments work together in the real world or on a real policy issue or real public health issue."***

*"**While I appreciate that we're learning about the different departments, I feel like I would have to shift my mind in thinking about the different departments. So a way for it to be more cohesive I think would be for it to be say a whole Biostats day or a whole EHS day because I have...felt that it was kind of hard to grapple onto material more** because after having two hours of a specific department, and it was like, oh okay, now we need to shift our mindset to a different department."*

*"I was putting a lot of effort in the beginning, and then it kind of went down. And I was seeing the same grade. So I was not sure what I was doing. **So just getting some type of feedback, or some form of answers or discussion of the answers would be super helpful.**"*

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: Priority Areas for Next Year

1. Students desire more information about the transition back to in-person learning and how COVID-19 safety will be upheld

2. Students desire more connection and community with each other

3. Students desire more emphasis on lasting change among EDI efforts, and a standardized approach across all departments

4. Students desire more structured mentorship and professional development opportunities

Themes from 2021 Evaluation: Priority Areas for Next Year

"I would really like to see just a lot of transparency going into the fall in terms of what is happening and what the expectations are. I mean, I know so many students that are back home. They've left the country. They've left the state or the city or whatever. What do they expect? Are they going to still be flexible with grading? What is happening? **I just feel like I don't know what is going on next year in terms of where our school is or where our specific department is. And I'd like to see conversations happening around that sooner than later.**"

"...possibly hiring more staff because it seems like Janae's name just constantly pops up and she is the only Black woman doing this work. And if the school wants students to be involved because they are part of the solution, pay the students for their time in doing this work."

"I feel like I've missed out on an entire year of professional development, not only with professors and with colleagues, as classmates. But just, networking with the outside world."

Recommendations

- Transparency in the Use of Student Feedback
  - Continue streamlining surveys to decrease student effort in providing feedback
  - Provide clear and timely reports on any findings from surveys, plans for action, and updates as those plans are implemented through multiple communication channels
  - Departments & Central Offices should share notes with students from key committee meetings

- EDI
  - Create expectations for faculty participation in EDI efforts
  - Ensure further incorporation of structural issues in courses across FSPH based on student feedback and examine syllabi for possible areas of improvement
  - Continue and expand funding opportunities for students engaging in EDI work

Recommendations

- Funding
  - Offer more personalized support for students in finding and securing funding opportunities
  - Work to create more TA opportunities for both masters and doctoral students
  - Work to provide more guaranteed funding for doctoral students, particularly international students, and ensure that department faculty and staff are actively engaged in funding process

- Trello & Accessing Information
  - Consider use of Google Calendar or CCLE/Canvas page to advertise events and announcements
  - Prioritize email as the primary medium of communication

Recommendations

- PH 200
  - Consider modifying course structure to ensure comprehension of learning in each discipline and integration between disciplines
  - Reduce changes between topics and faculty to create more continuity of learning
  - Provide more support for Biostatistics teaching and more feedback on assignments

- Priority Areas for Next Year
  - Provide timely and comprehensive information about policies and protocol for in-person or hybrid instruction
  - Partner with student leaders to create opportunities for social connection among students across programs and departments
  - Prioritize mentorship and professional development opportunities for second-year students

Thank you!

Becca Woofter: rwoofter@ucla.edu

Geneva Vogelheim: gvogelheim22@ucla.edu

Jasmine Lee: jsmn321@ucla.edu

Lillian Chen: lchen121@ucla.edu

Mounica Lakshmi Dugginapeddi: mounica@g.ucla.edu