

Honolulu Community College Focus Group Study

Overview

1. The purpose of this study was to gather as much information as possible about HCC students in regard to their recruitment and retention.
2. After consideration of numerous research methods – and a test of one of them – focus groups were the chosen method because of the type of information that was sought and because of the efficiency of the focus group process. These four focus groups were conducted on three dates: October 2, 7 and 8.
3. A system was established with three teachers ahead of time whereby the researchers would be allowed time for recruiting students for the focus groups right from their classes with the focus group to follow. This system worked very well.
4. Not all students could stay for the entire focus group, but the majority did with the result that approximately 40 students participated over the four focus group sessions.
5. Responses were recorded and transcripts produced for each of the four sessions. These transcripts are at the end of this report.
6. No faculty or staff were allowed in the focus group rooms and students were identified by letters instead of their names thus assuring anonymity and therefore – hopefully – candor.
7. As an incentive to participate – as is the case in most focus groups – students were remunerated for their participation.
8. Four standardized questions started each session and from there the moderator guided the free-flowing discussion mostly centered around the topics of recruitment and retention. Some groups were more voluble than others as might be expected.

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Findings

The four questions mentioned in #8 in the Overview on the previous page were:

- Where did you go to high school?
- How far do you live from campus?
- How do you get news and information on a daily basis?
- Are you working?

1. Respondent's High Schools

Among this group of 40 students there were 21 high schools mentioned including two from the mainland and two different schools on Maui. The only Oahu high schools mentioned more than once were Pearl City High School with six, McKinley and Aiea with three each and Kaiser, Farrington and Waianae with two each. These may simply be a function of size. Four private schools were mentioned: St. Andrews, Academy of the Pacific, Kamehameha and Lanakila Baptist.

Take Away:

Targeting certain groups usually makes marketing much more effective in terms of where resources are spent.

A preponderance of one or two schools might have indicated targets for recruitment. The reasoning is that HCC is known and it is a marketing maxim that it is always easier to sell where the product is known. There could be a counter argument about mounting recruitment efforts among those schools where HCC has no students, at least among this 40, like Kalani High School, Kailua and the like.

These kinds of decisions are where marketing experimentation can play a key role. For instance, from the information we have here, over a two or three year period HCC could mount an intensive recruitment effort at Pearl City High School where it seems the college does pretty well alongside a similar recruitment drive at Kalani High School (where there were no students in this study). The success could then be measured taking into consideration factors such as distance, counselor orientation and the like.

If it hasn't been done already, a data scan of the full student body and the high schools they attended could indicate areas of strength and weakness in recruiting terms. To make this effort more meaningful, trends could be detected if the data was scanned for a five year period.

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2. Respondent's Distance from campus

The purpose for asking this question was to determine if students are clustered close to the campus since the public perception of "community" colleges is that one of the reasons they were created was to serve those in the immediate vicinity.

In addition, an assumption was made that the closer to the campus a student resides the easier the transportation question becomes. That assumption went out the door when parking was brought up. The matter of parking elicited more heated discussion than anything else discussed in these focus groups. A literal handful of students in these discussions walked or rode the bus.

Roughly half the students live less than five miles from HCC and the other half more than five miles. In fact, four said they live ten miles from campus. These distances were estimated by the students and the actual result might be slightly different.

Some students, because of their chosen course of studies, have no choice but to attend HCC (as is the case with some other community colleges as well) and so the distance from where they live to campus is moot.

Take Away:

From the responses we got, proximity doesn't seem to be much of a driver for recruitment among the students in this study. When you read the verbatim comments at the end of this report, it is clear that many other factors are a work when students make decisions about where to attend college.

Again, a Zip code data scan over a period of time – say five years – might reveal trends of where students are coming from. The value in such a study could help in establishing marketing targets when put along side the highest producing high schools for HCC.

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3. Respondent's Information Sources

It is evident in the media world today that information is delivered much differently than it was ten years ago.

With two major media, the news is not so good. Newspapers, particularly large urban dailies, are hurting mainly because the internet – with dozens of varied outlets – has stepped in with more current stories delivered to ubiquitous computers and cell phones. One wonders even in Honolulu whether the dailies will survive for long as we know them today.

Even the networks are struggling with the proliferation of cable channels.

A lot of the turmoil is age-related: young people today are simply not picking up newspapers and/or staying glued to network TV as we used to. And that means looking at how HCC delivers its messages must change too.

Where this group of HCC students gets its information on a regular basis is all over the lot with a couple of interesting notes as can be seen by the following tally:

Newspapers:	
Honolulu Advertiser (mostly online and sporadically)	12
Star Bulletin	1
Television	
KHON	3
KHNL	2
KGMB	1
KITV	1
KHNL	1
K-5	1
John Stewart (fake news)	3
Radio	
104	2
102	1

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3. Respondent's Information Sources (continued)

Internet	
My Space	14
Google	7
Yahoo	7
Facebook	1
CNN	1
AOL	1
Friends and Family	6

Take Away:

Some caution is needed since these results came from those who participated in this study which is less than one percent of the HCC students. Students do go to multiple outlets for their information; and we know from other studies that many respondents don't remember all the media they use regularly.

Nonetheless, at first glance it might look like the Honolulu Advertiser was a big winner. But the verbatims reveal that only one student actually looks at the paper version of the Advertiser and that is in the library at the college and only periodically. The rest look online and usually now and then. But the Advertiser might be encouraged by this information.

Taken together, TV as a media category doesn't look too bad with ten students responding they get information from that source. But again, reading the verbatims shows they seldom go to TV regularly for straight news.

As expected the college must find ways to deliver its messages on the internet. These results might assist in determining which outlets would work better for HCC. The college's website does not seem to be the answer.

4. Do Respondents Work?

While there are not clear-cut answers to this question from the results, it seems that about half are employed. If students are employed or not might be the subject of a entire study that examines whether they work to pay for college, whether those working also need scholarships; and how working affects how they decide to go to college and where.

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5. How Respondent's Learned About HCC

These responses are consolidated from across the four Focus Groups. Probably not surprisingly, none of them said they learned about HCC from the media except one who learned of a specific class he was interested in. Most of the responses could be anticipated, but one among these responses was, for the study team, a surprise.

- School Counselors
- Course of study only offered at HCC
- Parents are alums
- Family and friends
- Friends only
- Saw an ad in the Advertiser

Take Away:

The surprise was that several students said they came to HCC because their parents had attended the college. This may be well known to the college's administrators, but didn't seem to fit the public perception of community colleges. The numbers of alums who kids attend HCC is not large according to the Focus Groups, but given records at HCC, it would seem that somehow mining the alums might produce inexpensive results.

It may not be that easy to reach alums because they would probably have to be out of school for at least 20 years and addresses change and the like. But if the college doesn't have an alum program, perhaps this could be the opportunity to start one. More about this factor in the Recommendations.

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6. Positives about HCC

The respondents were not asked to directly speak about the positives of the college, so again, the following represent a consolidation of information from the four Focus Groups.

- Teachers – better than expected; approachable; helpful; creative; relaxed; interesting.
- Atmosphere – more relaxed; casual.
- Hands on
- Less intimidating
- Smaller classes
- Energy on campus is good due mostly to the teachers
- Cheaper
- Specific Classes
- Diamond-in-the-rough
- Good location – near stores and food outlets
- Learning Community

Take Away:

Aside from a few gripes about some teachers, it seemed that over and over the students in these groups found their teachers to be very good as outlined above. This suggests a wonderful core for marketing to future students.

The first five Positives from the above list speak loudly to a big segment of young people. And these points, made by the students in the Focus Groups, could be the basis for a strong marketing program for HCC.

To review:

Interesting teachers
Relaxed, casual
Smaller classes

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7. **Negatives About HCC**

With some exceptions the following list probably represents what one would find that students say about just about any urban community college. But it can be instructive to learn the gripes (and thus weaknesses) of the college.

- Don't like the looks
- Some teachers aren't interesting
- Parking
- Elevators – scary
- Can be creepy, ghetto-like
- Food – overpriced and not that good
- Not much to do on campus
- "Just come to class and then go."

Take Away:

Short of vast capital expenditures to improve the looks of the place and build the desired parking garages (neither of which will probably happen in the foreseeable future), several of the negatives can be dealt with if these are deemed important by the faculty and administration.

This brings us to the Recommendations for this report.

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Recommendations

8. Messages

- Interesting teachers
- Relaxed, casual
- Smaller classes

What makes these HCC features credible is they came from students on campus. That makes for powerful marketing. Another optional feature that could be added is: In Town. In other words, "You get good teachers in smaller classes in a relaxed, casual atmosphere and that's all right here in town."

The big reason for adding the "in town" feature is that it suggests that access to campus could be better because of public transportation – without saying it. The parking bugaboo will always be there, but finding ways to ameliorate it without building the garage is probably desirable. There will be more about that in another section of the Recommendations.

Another benefit of the "in town" feature is from what a couple of students said: Chinatown is close by; downtown is close by; and there's Costco and Home Depot close by. These will also be dealt with in another section of these Recommendations.

Another strength of the *interesting teachers, smaller classes, relaxed atmosphere* message is that it can instill pride in students. In spite of all the messages and media that might be used to tell the world about HCC, there are no better salespeople for the college than students. And when they are provided a message they can identify with, they are much more likely to spread the word.

Likewise, the all important school counselors now have a succinct message to relate to as well. And in today's message maze, the simpler the better.

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Recommendations

9. Medium

A critical factor in getting out HCC's message is to turn to as many natural sales people as possible. Three have been identified: the students themselves; school counselors; and alumni

Think about a MySpace or YouTube segments or even blogs with actual students sitting on campus telling the camera what they like about HCC. Message control might not be as easy as we want with these media, but the college must try to stick to the *interesting teachers, smaller classes, relaxed atmosphere* as much as possible.

Another powerful medium for telling HCC's message are "Fam Trips," which the college is already doing with high school counselors. These trips are where the ultimate salespeople are brought to the source and shown what goes on here. How better to arm a very important sales force – with the message we want them to have about HCC – than the counselors who the focus groups identified numerous times as how the students first heard about HCC?

It is assured that many of the school counselors will turn down an invitation, but if the Fam Trips are handled well, the word will get around and it can then be assured that the counselors will be standing in line to attend.

What does it mean to "handle" these Fam Trips well? First, give them options. They can come for lunch (well prepared by the students) and attend one class of their choosing; they can do the preceding but also take a tour of campus; all of the above but spend the afternoon attending a variety of classes. In other words, make it easy. That means offering to pick them up on their campus and bring them to HCC.

If the sons and daughters of alums attend HCC in any numbers beyond what was learned in the focus groups, why not stage an alumni luau on campus? Make it a fundraiser by charging, say \$40 for the luau, and adding another \$60 for scholarships or whatever.

Finally, the website has to clearly reflect the *interesting teachers, smaller classes, relaxed atmosphere*.

Focus Group Study

Recommendations

10. **Turning the Negatives to Positives**

Not much to do.

Several students said there wasn't much to keep them on campus beyond their classes. That situation, of course, could probably be said of any college campus in Hawaii. Lack of energy on campus was another complaint. Following are recommendations to energize the campus and keep students around.

Demo Days. Every other month, booths would be set up along the main walking artery on campus. Each of the major schools – and even courses – could demonstrate their wares.

- Cosmetology could provide hair care and styling.
- Aeronautics could set up a simulator.
- Psychology could do stress tests.
- Graphic arts could do artwork.
- Welding could make gifts for sale.
- Marine science could do safety demos.

These Demo Days would be a perfect time to hold Fam Trips for the high school counselors. The media should be invited. The alumni luau might be coordinated with one of the special days.

Drab Campus.

HCC is an urban campus and that has built-in restrictions. Plus any major upgrade to the facilities is probably not going to happen with budget restrictions and the like. But there are things that can be done to turn around the perception of the campus looking like, as one student said, "a prison."

Establish a Nursery and Landscape Program.

With the huge resorts and multiple golf courses in Hawaii, this kind of course might garner a lot of students. If it did, one of the best ways to study nurseries and landscaping would be to have the students landscape the campus. A good example is the University of Georgia which has a prize-winning, stupendously beautiful campus designed and maintained by the landscape students.

Put Graphics to work.

The HCC campus has dozens of huge outdoor canvasses that could be made stunningly beautiful by having the Graphics Department paint, sculpt or whatever to build interest in the campus. Whatever and wherever their work appears, it should disappear each semester to keep up interest.

Focus Group Study

Recommendations

10. **Turning the Negatives to Positives** (continued)

Parking

As the administration is surely aware, parking remains a thorn. There is almost no sure-fire solution short of free valet parking. But a more sure-handed approach by the college might help cut down on the grumbling.

Establish a Transportation Office and Web site.

Commuting by car will get expensive again. Parking is expensive. Any gripes can be handled by referring those students to the Transportation Office that will work with them to find the best bus route, the best bike route, the best combination route whether they work or not. Students may pay no attention and they may not use such a service, but it's there and available as an alternative to driving and parking.

Car pools have never been overly successful. Have the students establish their own secure website where car pools can be put together on a daily basis.

Connecting to the Community.

This was not brought up directly by the respondents in the focus groups. But HCC sits in somewhat of a retail mecca: Home Depot; City Mill; Costco; Dole Cannery etc. This could be an opportunity to connect to HCC's community by establishing a series of Retail Courses where the students would observe and study via partnerships the college sets up with Home Depot; City Mill; Costco; Dole Cannery.

**Recruitment & Retention
Focus Group Study**

Conducted for: Honolulu Community College

**Conducted by: David Cheever Marketing, Inc.
November 2-8, 2008**