
Appendix

Financial Aid Director and Staff Focus Group Protocol

Institution:
Cluster:
Interviewed:
Interviewed by:
Date:

FSA MSURSD MSI Support
Performance Enhancement Program – Phase II
Financial Aid Director and Staff Focus Group

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING TO RESPONDENTS

Introductory Script for Financial Aid Director and Staff Focus Group: Good morning/afternoon. First of all, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me and for being willing to participate in this study for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA). Before we start, I would like to introduce myself, provide a little background on the study, and answer any questions you might have.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

My name is name and I am a researcher with Windwalker Corporation, an organization that conducts research in education. I am here today to facilitate this focus group on behalf of FSA’s Minority Serving and Under Resourced Schools Division (MSURSD). As independent, federally contracted evaluators of MSURSD, Windwalker is looking to discover ways that MSURSD can best serve minority serving institutions (MSIs). This is not an evaluation or review of your institution; it is a time for us to hear from you about the resources and services that MSURSD can provide for you. The information we discuss will be essential to ensuring MSIs continue their participation in Title IV programs.

MSURSD is currently working to improve its interactions with MSIs by enhancing the services and resources MSURSD provides, with dual goals of increasing MSI compliance rates with Title IV regulations and assisting MSIs in improving student performance outcomes.

The purpose of this discussion is to provide an in-depth exploration of specific research topics and questions, to provide MSURSD with feedback on how to further improve its interactions with MSIs. We will be exploring the following topics:

1. The Impacts of Financial Aid Staff Turnover;
2. The Use of Technology to Track Student Financial Aid Activity;
3. Student Financial Aid Awareness & Engagement; and
4. MSURSD Services for Recently Designated MSIs.

Your institution has been selected to participate in this focus group because of its cluster affiliation (name of cluster (e.g. HBCU, HSI) and regional location. Along with the other selected institutions, you represent the full MSI population. This focus group should take approximately 90 minutes.

I'll talk about how this session will go next, but for now, are there any questions about the study or why we are here?

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW PROCEDURE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Next, I'd like to say a few things about the process for this discussion. During our session today, I'll be asking you some questions and I'll be taking notes on what you are saying. I will not record your names. If you don't mind, I would also like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team would hear the recording; it would just be for my own reference. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

I want to assure you that all of the information you provide today will only be used for the purposes of this study. The recorded focus group will be transcribed by me, and portions of this discussion may be incorporated into the final report to the Department of Education but will not associate responses with a specific individual and I will not provide information that identifies a subject to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law. Therefore, anyone who reads the study will not know that the statements came from a specific individual. The results of this study will be used by FSA only to further improve upon its interactions with minority serving institutions. Whatever you express in this room stays in this room. We're asking you to make the same commitment - to keep what is said in this room private and not repeat it to others in your school. That way people can feel safe to be honest, and in turn, we will gain more helpful information to improve the financial aid process at your school. Agreed?

This session will give you a chance to express your opinions. I want you to feel comfortable in saying what you really think and feel, as your ideas and opinions are important to me. It's OK to disagree with one another. I'd like to hear everyone's perspective. If you don't feel like responding to a question, you don't have to.

Are there any questions before we get started?

If you agree to the terms mentioned I will accept your verbal consent to participate and proceed with this focus group.

Note to interviewer:

*Throughout the focus group, possible probes are set aside following each general question. Asking these questions may help to move the focus group pace or may prompt a less talkative respondent. However, **do not feel you need to ask each of these probes**; it is likely that the respondent will cover many of these issues when responding to your initial inquiry. Keep the tone conversational and comfortable.*

I would like to start by learning about each of you and your roles.

1. What is your role and how long have you been working at this school?
 - 1a. Have you always worked in the financial aid office? If not, where else have you worked and for how long?
2. Have you had a role in financial aid at another school? If so, what role did you have and for how long?

Thank you for providing me with some information about your backgrounds. Now I would like to begin discussing financial aid staff turnover.

3. First, how many financial aid staff members, including but not limited to full-time staff, work-study students, do you currently have?

If the institution interviewed has more than one campus, please ask if each has their own financial aid office; if they do have other offices, inquire about the number of staff serve at each.

4. How many vacancies do you have?
5. How many staff members have left in the past three years? Please differentiate between those that were terminated, those that no longer work in the office, and those that left on their own.

If one or more staff members have left in the past three years:

- 5a. What are the reasons for staff turnover?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- Do professional development opportunities affect staff turnover? If so, how?
- Compensation (i.e., pay/salary)
- Managerial leadership style
- Work environment

- 5b. How do you learn about the reasons for staff leaving?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- Are exit interviews conducted?
- Are staff surveys conducted?

5c. How long has the position remained unfilled? How is staff affected by staff turnover?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- With regard to productivity?

6. What do you think contributes to your staff retention?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- Do professional development opportunities contribute to staff retention? If so, how?
- Compensation (i.e., pay/salary)
- Managerial leadership style
- Work environment

Now I'd like to start talking about your use of technology to track student financial aid activity.

7. Which technological systems do you use to track student financial aid activity, such as FAFSA, SAP, verification and awards?

7a. How do you track student financial aid activity via those packages and systems?

7b. How does the use of this technology affect your services to students?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- Has it impacted the role or function of the financial aid office? If so, how?
- Has it facilitated student access to financial aid? If so, how?

If no:

7c. Why not?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- Would you use technology if you could?

○ What resources would you need (for example, financial resources, training)?

8. How have FSA regulations necessitated changes to your technological systems or software packages since you've been at the institution? How did you find out about the changes (e.g., FSA, MSURSD, NASFAA, and Regional Office)?

9. What was done to ensure the changes were implemented effectively and timely?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

○ Was the new system/software tested? If so, how and what offices were involved?

○ Was training provided for the users? If so, how and by whom?

○ Who, if anyone, has been designated to update your systems to address regulation shifts? The goal is to get the title of the individual responsible for this role.

9a. Were there any challenges with instituting the changes?

If yes:

9b. What were they?

9c. How were they addressed?

10. Does your office have its own system specialist?

11. Do your students use technology (e.g., email, dedicated secure website, phone apps) to stay informed of their financial aid status?

If yes:

11a. What technological methods do they use?

11b. How do they use this technology?

12. What resources could assist you in making more effective use of technology?

Now I'd like to start talking about student financial aid awareness and engagement.

Some institutions use methods such as student orientations, workshops, online tools and video tutorials to engage their students in financial aid awareness.

13. How and when do you engage your students in financial aid awareness?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- How do students learn about financial aid options (Pell grant, loans, scholarships, etc.) on your campus?
- What do you know about student attendance at/use of the activities/tools you use?

14. Do you assess your students' financial aid knowledge?

If yes:

14a. How and when do you assess this?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- Do you assess student knowledge about the costs associated with college (e.g., financial aid eligibility, repayment requirements, types of aid etc.)? If so, how?
- Do you assess student knowledge about how to access financial aid? If so, how?

15. Are there any barriers to student engagement in financial aid awareness?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

- What are those barriers?
- How do you address the barriers?

Ask Questions 16-18 only of recently designated MSIs (refer to list). Otherwise, skip to Question 19.

Now I'd like to start talking about MSURSD Services for recently designated MSIs.

16. Were you aware of MSURSD prior to being asked to participate in this focus group?

If yes:

16a. Which MSURSD resources are you aware of?

16b. Which MSURSD resources do you believe are particularly useful?

17. Which financial aid resources do you use to help you in performing your job?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

Where/what organizations do these resources come from?

18. As a newly designated MSI, what are your specific financial aid resource needs?

What to listen for and probe, if necessary:

What are your needs regarding Title IV compliance?

What are your needs regarding student engagement in financial aid awareness?

What resources could help you in raising graduation and retention rates?

19. Do you have anything else that you would like to add before we conclude this focus group?

Those are all the questions I have. Thank you for your time and for participating in this study.