Senior Exit Interviews

LTC Assessment Session
May 19, 2010

What are they?
Senior exit interviews are face-to-face conversations between graduating seniors and department/program faculty and staff, held during students’ final weeks with the purpose of establishing how students have thrived in a particular program. They are best suited for gaining information that is holistic, complex, in-depth and offered from the student perspective (Young and Hagerty, 2007). If you want more specific information, consider giving a written survey.

Who’s doing them?
Exit interviews seem to be most commonly done in engineering, computer science, psychology (or at least these are the disciplines writing about exit interviews and results).

IMPORTANT NOTE:
Exit Interviews are unlikely to require IRB approval. However, students should be assured of (e.g. Wilson and Hochel, 1995):
- Voluntary nature of interviews (it’s OK not to answer questions)
- Confidentiality and anonymity (results will be in aggregate for program evaluation purposes)
- Information provided will not be discussed before graduation

How are they doing them (Mechanics)?
Practices vary and you can choose among several options.
- Do them every year or every few years?
- Do them every year for the same purpose?
- Vary the information sought (different questions) every year?
- Interview all the seniors in a given graduating class or a subset? (e.g., the Macalester computer science department interviews, roughly 25% of graduating class (8-12 students) each year; Schneider, 2002).

- Most departments interview students individually, but at least one department interviews students as a group (Dreisbach, et al., 1998).
- In some departments, the chair or director interviews all of the students; in other cases, students choose among three faculty members or a “director of assessment” (Wilson and Hochel, 1995).
- Most departments schedule exit interviews late in the final semester/term; some wait until after exams. Most allow at least 20 minutes per interview.
- Many departments use a standard set of questions (see next page for some suggestions) and also allow for some spontaneity. Interviewers may ask for students’ permission to take notes – which then get cleaned up and go to a department assistant who strips any identifying information and compiles the results. Taking notes indicates to students that their responses are taken seriously (Doll and Jacobs, 1988).
- Do not tape record —unless you are prepared to spend hours transcribing.
- The interviewer should accept the comments students make with appreciation and try not to get defensive or over-react. Try hard not to use leading questions. It’s a good idea to have a few “sure-fire” questions in reserve, in case a student is reticent.
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What might you ask?
We compiled the following questions from a number of sources. You might select two or three that help you get at the complex stories you want – and vary the questions from year to year. It’s helpful to remember that the exit interview can also be a powerfully positive experience for the student.

Questions about Carleton:
• What was your single most significant experience, in or out of the classroom, during your time at Carleton?
• In terms of the courses that you took your first year at Carleton, what courses or things that you learned in that first year influenced your future course selections and aspirations? [Prompt for courses they avoided or were very motivated to take and any changes in aspirations]
• So now if you were going to think about your overall Carleton experience, what aspects have helped you in the knowledge and skills you consider most valuable? And that could be a course, it could be a particular faculty person’s approach, it could be maybe a peer group that you’ve been involved in.
• How would you sum up and articulate the liberal arts experience you have had at Carleton?

Questions about the major program:
• Why did you choose your major?
• What are the most important special skills and knowledge you gained as a result of completing your major?
• What single experience in the department was your most positive?
• What single experience in the department was your most negative?
• What advice would you give to first year students thinking of majoring in xx?
• What skills did you develop in your 100 and 200 courses that prepared you for 300-level courses and comps?
• What themes in your work as a xxx major do you consider significant?
• How has your work as a xxx major affected your beliefs and practices?
• What are the primary strengths of the program?
• What are the primary weaknesses of the program?
• Were you satisfied with the guidance you received from your department regarding post-graduate opportunities? How can the department continue to support you in the next few years?
• If you had it to do over, would you still major in xxx?

Questions about the student:
• What skills and abilities that you developed outside of the department are the most valuable to you?
• What are your future plans?
• Where do you see yourself in five years?
• Now I want you to think about the next steps in your life. And how important do you think the skills and understanding you developed as a major in xxx will be?
• Can you describe something to me that you are really proud of?

References:
http://www.brynmawr.edu/institutionalresearch/documents/2010_04_SeniorExitInterviewForm.pdf

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Dreisbach, Joseph H., Thomas P. Hogan, Ann Marie Stamford and John W. Greggo, 1998, Focus Groups and Exit Interviews are Components of Chemistry Department Program Assessment: Journal of Chemical Education, v. 75, p. 1330-1332.

