Methods

- Students enrolled in the Neuroscience 490 “Senior Project” Capstone class in 2012, 2013, or 2014 at WSU were invited to participate in a 60-90 minute focus group during the regularly scheduled final exam period for the course. The course has no final exam. Students were told that their feedback is an important part of the program and that this was their chance to discuss their impressions of the program as a whole and talk about things that “weren’t on the course evaluation.”

- A standard questionnaire was developed jointly between the Neuroscience program and the Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning (OATL) that included both individual response items and group discussion items. Each session began with a light breakfast and the course instructor reminded students of the purpose of the focus group (see above) and introduced the focus group team. The instructor then moderated the group discussion items. Another OATL staff member participated in each session as a note-taker, recording general discussion themes and relevant quotes from students.

- A summary of the discussion notes as well as the anonymous individual response sheets from participating students was returned to the program after each session.

- Qualitative analysis of both summaries and individual responses for each session was carried out purpose of the focus group (see above) and introduced the focus group team. The instructor then moderated the group discussion items. Another OATL staff member participated in each session as a note-taker, recording general discussion themes and relevant quotes from students.

- A summary of the discussion notes as well as the anonymous individual response sheets from participating students was returned to the program after each session.

- Qualitative analysis of both summaries and individual responses for each session was carried out by the department to identify the students’ most strongly held perceptions and identify any areas for improvement.

Results

In each of the three years that we have held a focus group with our graduating seniors we have seen the following results:

• Multiple students questioned by students as compared to the Exit Survey used previously (see Table 1)

• Recurring themes of student concern (see Table 2)

• Possible suggestions for addressing concerns and improving the program overall

Table 2: Student Questions. Student responses to the focus group questions have identified a number of concerns that were not obvious to program faculty. Examples of these issues have been grouped by the theme that arose from the concern and year. “Closing the loop” indicates program facilitators actions (done in progress) to respond to student identified concerns.

Conclusions

Although faculty often believe that years of experience and a depth of disciplinary knowledge give them an advantage in developing a curriculum that will be successful and effective for their students, the perspective of the students participating in the curriculum is equally valuable.

References:


