Objectives

The purpose of focus group interviews was to engage a variety of Montana State University Billings students, faculty, and staff in a dynamic conversation about their opinions, observations, and recommendations regarding possible improvements to the University’s auxiliary services and athletic program. Focus groups are intended to yield qualitative data, reveal hidden sensitivities, and structure the survey questions.

Methodology

A total of seventeen focus group sessions were organized by the University, which were held during the week of December 1st, 2009, as well as January 19th, 2010. Focus groups were developed to engage students and faculty/staff in a dialogue about various auxiliary facilities and the University’s athletic program. Additionally, these groups were retained to comment on any possible improvements that would help retain current and future MSU Billings students. In total, one hundred ninety-eight participants provided feedback and data on the Auxiliaries and Athletic Master Plan. Participants in all sessions were generally fairly vocal on the subject matter and the interaction proved informative.

A moderator from Brailsford & Dunlavey led each focus group, whose purpose was to guide the conversation and to address concerns pertaining to students’ life on and off campus. The moderator introduced a series of questions, intentionally open-ended in nature, and permitted individuals to discuss tangential issues while maintaining an engaged and focused conversation. The following report is a overview of the findings during focus groups and contains a summary of the discussions, including specific points raised and direct quotations. The responses shown are meant to illustrate the range of answers, comments, and concerns voiced during the focus groups.

Participants

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### Summary of Findings

Participants from the seventeen focus groups were collectively interested in the Auxiliaries and Athletics Master Plan. Their knowledge about the current issues and demands of other students other than themselves provided good preliminary insight. They presented well-reasoned concerns and recommendations for future improvements to University housing whether they lived on or off campus. Focus group participants also indicated a deep interest in making recommendations for enhancing the campus life on all of the MSUB campuses in order to create a legacy for themselves and future students. Likewise, members showed a great interest in improving the conditions of the dining hall, campus bookstore, student union, health center, child care center, recreation facility, and athletic facility. The issues of outdated buildings, overcrowded facilities, limited dining options and administration inconsistencies were the major themes in each of the focus groups. Some of the recommendations that have arisen out of these groups can be implemented in the short-term, while others will need sufficient time to plan, organize, and carry out.

### Perception of MSU Billings

Consistently, many students, faculty, and staff cited the “small community atmosphere” as the major reason for attending MSU Billings. Most traditional and non-traditional students indicated that coming from a small community or farm town naturally led them to search for the same environment when choosing where to attend college. Small classroom sizes, integral faculty / staff - student relationships, and the ability to form close friendships with those in the residence halls, were the other reasons illustrated by students for picking MSUB.

Additionally, the students mentioned another major reason for choosing to be a part of Montana State University Billings was for its affordability. The University’s current tuition rate is set at the
lowest rate among the Montana State University school system. In addition, their current room and board, fees, and general expenses also total to be a much more affordable option than their in-state peers.

Location of the campus with respect to their homes was an additional and ideal component when it came to student’s decision to attend the University. A majority of participants expressed the proximity of campus to be a convenient means for returning home to take care of common errands / chores and tend to family obligations. Overall, most students were pleased with their choice and felt that the University met their expectations.

Faculty / staff equally felt that MSUB made a lasting impression on their decision to work there. Faculty enjoyed the relationships developed with students and mentioned their colleagues as the main reason they have chosen to stay at MSUB. Many staff members are alumni of the University and stated that the decision to work there was based on their experiences as a student. Faculty / staff also felt very pleased with their choice to work at MSUB.

Current Auxiliaries and Athletics

The distinction between non-traditional and traditional students was the clearest when comparing commuters who live off campus to those living in the residence halls. When interviewed, traditional students indicated that there was a noticeable divide amongst both groups of students in the residence halls and in various social spaces. Students chose to live on campus for a number of reasons, including convenience, experience, and cost. Whereas, some non-traditional students stated they had unique family obligations that did not allow them to live on campus even if they were interested. Generally, focus group participants felt that the living conditions in the residence halls were standard and could use basic renovations or modifications of amenities. The meal plan options were regarded as repetitive and expensive, but enjoyed the late-night service hours provided by dining staff.

When participants were asked how they felt about the Student Union, all on-campus students enjoyed using the facility for club meetings and events. Additionally, the game room was a highlight for most students who said it was a great utilization of that space. Some drawbacks participants expressed: antiquated furniture, older game tables, and minimal usage from non-traditional students. On-campus students indicated a deep interest to share this facility with more non-traditional students at MSUB.

The Bookstore proved to be underutilized by students and participants acknowledged that prices for books and other common supplies for classes were costly. Most focus group participants also stated that they did not purchase textbooks there and instead bought them through an online bookstore due to greater affordability.
FOCUS GROUP REPORT 2.0

Students in the focus group regularly stressed the need for a larger workout space in the Recreation and Athletic facilities. Participants showed a desire to use the facilities and thought it was an essential aspect to their day as a student. Focus groups also collectively illustrated that athletes typically use the facilities more often, which causes a sense of intimidation and reluctance on non-athletes to exercise in the workout areas.

Future Auxiliaries and Athletics

Most student participants articulated an interest in the renovations of various auxiliary facilities. Participants sensed that constructing new buildings was not entirely necessary because it would greatly affect the affordability of the education they were receiving. For instance, students highlighted that renovations to residence halls, various recreation amenities, the fitness room, and bookstore would enhance student life at MSUB, but that these alterations were all that were needed initially.

Other facilities in this master plan, such as the Student Union (SUB) and athletic facility, proved to be a more complicated issue for focus group participants. Some felt that the SUB was in a great location and others thought it would be more utilized if it were more central to campus. Students understood the need for athletic facilities and recommended the creation of a larger room / field space dedicated to both athletes and non-athletes. Lastly, the construction of newer indoor and outdoor facilities for particular sports teams was another common idea proposed by students in the focus groups. The general sentiment was that many winter sports teams struggle to schedule-in appropriate training / practice times due to the extreme weather in Billings, MT.
Detailed Findings

1. Why did you choose to attend MSU Billings?

Students chose to attend MSU Billings for many reasons, such as the “small environment” it created in the residence halls and classrooms, as well as the following:

- Students perceived their education at MSUB as a very affordable one that retains a “greater value” than at larger peer institutions.
- Many on-campus participants indicated that first-year student orientation events also made a large impact on their decision to attend due to the way it developed a sense of interest for campus life and residence hall life.
- Participants who were student-athletes mentioned that scholarships and competitive potential of the Athletic Department attracted them to attend MSUB.
- Other students indicated that Billings was “much bigger than their hometown” and they wanted to experience “life in a bigger city.”
- Participants also felt that MSU Billings was close enough from home to visit, but still far enough to seek their independence as an adult and college student.
- Likewise, Native American participants chose to attend primarily because of the proximity to their families back on the reservation, which was important for them when they had to return to participate in various ceremonies.
- Graduate students collectively felt that MSUB provided a solid program for their specialty and chose to come because it was consistently ranked among the highest in the region.
- Other graduate students stressed the autonomy given in their Master’s program for research and part-time teaching opportunities.

2. How has MSU Billings met your expectations?

Students genuinely felt that their expectations were met, but expressed a few positive and negative comments regarding their overall experiences during their time at MSUB.

- Participants do believe the affordability has lived up to their expectation and is still one of the least costly institutions in the region.
- The cost of education and the level of satisfaction from a degree at MSUB far outweigh the community college path, which many students experienced prior to attending the University.
- Residence hall living was also another common positive attribute that students felt strengthened their decision to attend MSU Billings.
• Residence hall students stated that they knew the sports teams were not as competitive as other Montana schools, but still felt a camaraderie and general excitement of games and team spirit on campus.
• Although the overall expectations for focus group participants were positive, they expressed that the quality of the facilities on campus were below average and needed some basic improvements.
• Native American students also stressed that they felt disconnected with the advising and financial aid offices, which their success depended upon as first generation college students.
• From an academic advising standpoint, a wide array of students did not feel that they received the support necessary to finish their program in four years.
• Graduate students also expressed the lack of efficient and effective resources on campus from campus administration.
• Additionally, students felt that the campus not having performed any recent remodels of their facilities for over 50 years does deter applicants from choosing MSUB.
• Many COT students expected more night classes to be offered given the non-traditional nature of a large amount of students at that campus.
• Lastly, better child care services were also another common expectation by non-traditional participants; stressing that the University failed to provide these adequate and basic resources for parents.

3. What is student life / campus culture like at MSUB? Are there areas that need improvement?

In general, student life and campus culture at MSUB was seen as somewhat active; however, participants illustrated a significant cultural divide from traditional and non-traditional students creating a lackluster social environment.

• Students believe that MSUB provides a lot of activities on the main campus to students, but lack this type of culture on the COT campus.
• Some COT students that participated in the focus group mentioned that there is a sense of isolation - both figuratively and literally - to the main campus and its students.
• Having a shuttle system that services all three campuses was a common idea proposed by some students in order to alleviate some of the commute by students and to create a more unified university.
• Participants also felt that the majority of campus activities were tailored to residents and would like to see more programming offered for non-traditional and commuter students.
• Others argued that due to differing priorities of commuter and non-traditional students, many of them would take more advantage of the auxiliaries if they were given a sense of value.
• Additionally, most non-traditional students do not care to use the auxiliaries now and will continue not to if they remain in the same condition.
• Graduate students said that there was no connection for them to the campus and only came to MSUB to learn, study, and leave.
• Native American students did feel that more cultural activities should be offered that brought together minority students into one central location on campus.
• Overall, the environment on campus was described as a positive and “collegiate” one, but that more programming should include the full spectrum of students at MSUB.

4. What is your overall perception of Child Care Services at MSUB? Are there areas that need improvement?

A strong interest in improving and enlarging child care services was considered to be one of the highest priorities for students who commuted and had children.

• Many participants in various focus groups mentioned that either they or fellow students they knew would greatly benefit from a larger service of child care.
• Of those participants who were interested in child care, the majority expressed a discontent with the waitlist procedures and would like to see a more efficient process in the future.
• COT and Nursing students were some of the most interested focus group participants for including a child care facility on their campus.
• Main campus students who are parents said it would be a nice amenity to offer for families because both spouses could enroll in classes at the same time rather than one at a time.
• Having a small facility at the COT campus and an expanded one at the main campus was the most widely agreed upon solution from participants.
• An even greater support was received by the Native American students who mentioned that many of their children had to be left at their reservation during the week while parents attended courses at the campus.

5. What is your overall perception of the Health Services at MSUB? Are there areas that need improvement?

Overall, students were surprised to hear that a health center was located on the main campus. However, participants who did utilize the facility really enjoyed the wide variety of general services available to students.
• The majority of students were unaware that despite not participating in health care insurance provided by the University during the application process, students could still use the health center free of charge.

• Participants who did use it felt that the service was adequate and a benefit because of its convenient location near the residence halls.

• Some complaints came from those at the COT regarding the time frames allotted at their health center, stating that if they “pay for it but don’t have access to it, then something should change.”

• A lack in appointment availabilities due to the limited doctors’ visits also prevents some students from taking full advantage of this service.

• Additionally, health center users all agreed that the facility should be updated and include more services that are typically found in clinics off campus.

• Lastly, many students felt that the newfound knowledge of unlimited access to the health center without insurance lends them a greater opportunity to take full advantage of this service when needed.

6. **What is your overall perception of the Housing and Dining facilities at MSUB? Are there areas that need improvement?**

Many participants in the focus groups felt that their experiences with Housing and Dining have been pleasant overall; however, comments and recommendations on these facilities by students demonstrated a deep interest to enhance the quality of the food and renovate the residence halls.

• Participants in large majority agreed that all students should experience traditional-style housing as a new college student, but added that suite-style housing may be more appropriate for retaining older students.

• Housing was considered to be outdated and in need of new / updated amenities.

• Programming was the highlight for many students and acknowledged that their perceptions of housing were improved through the years because of the activities available to residents.

• Currently, family-style housing is in high demand with a large waiting list that students feel should be accommodated as an Auxiliaries Master Plan is further augmented.

• Dining meal plans for residents and commuters were often referred to as “expensive,” of “little variety,” and with “repetitive weekly options.”

• Dining was commonly referred to as the “cafeteria,” which typically connotes an older or more traditional dining experience.

• Dining facilities were enjoyable by most students’ standards on the main campus, although, COT students felt there was a lack of high-quality affordable options where they were, which caused them to eat off campus during breaks.
• Female participants generally did not approve of the all-you-can-eat option and felt that a more suitable alternative would be the grab-and-go option.
• In general, most students felt Housing and Dining was adequate, but would like to see basic improvements to housing amenities and infrastructure, as well as an array of affordable dining options.

7. **What is your overall perception of the Student Union? Are there areas that need improvement?**

The Student Union Building (SUB) was a uniquely debated topic among various focus group participants. Some enjoyed the space while others felt that it was not centrally located enough to provide an appropriate social gathering place for a wide spectrum of students.

• Residents were among the first to initiate a strong support for the SUB because of the setting it provided to meet new people and partake in programmed events by housing staff.
• Some participants were very cognizant of the value of Petro Theater and felt it should be utilized more often for classes and revenue-producing events.
• In contrast, the Liberal Arts building was viewed as the main hub on campus by other participants because of its central location, accessibility to most classes, and dining availability.
• The majority of participants did not view the Union as a hub on campus.
• The SUB’s position between the dining and residence halls did not create a distinct enough space, which students felt made it “camouflaged” from other buildings on campus.
• Both graduate and Native American students felt little to no direct connection with this particular space because it did not entertain any of their desired interests as a student at MSUB.
• Native American students, however, stressed that their idea of a gathering space would be in a lodge dedicated to their heritage; these students stated that they would also encourage other minorities on campus to use this space.
• COT students believed the Commons was a great gathering place for them, but encourage this master plan to include more computers, printers, lounge furniture, and quiet group-study rooms.
• Overall, focus groups established that the addition of a more central location, wireless internet, commercial food vendors, more lounge space, and a larger game room at the main campus would make the SUB a more desirable space to be in.
8. **What is your overall perception of the Bookstore? Are there areas that need improvement?**

Overall, focus groups determined that the Bookstore was an essential part of the campus, but was lacking the basic necessities and affordability students truly desired.

- Students believed the prices of the books were much higher than stores off campus or online; however, they felt that the convenience was occasionally worth their purchase.
- The availability of course-specific supplies also was a benefit for students because they did not have to leave campus to purchase them.
- Some students bought and sold their books online due to the high prices and low return associated with the Bookstore’s buyback system.
- Other members of the focus groups appreciated that smaller items such as cough medicine and candy were included in the Bookstore, but would like to see a larger variety as a more traditional convenience store might offer.
- Participants also observed that the access to the Bookstore was uninviting and had very limited space inside for items on shelves and space for foot traffic.
- Nursing students often saw the Bookstore as a place too far from where they commonly go to class or study.
- COT students on the other hand saw the convenience of this space, but did not feel its size reflected the growing amount of COT students.
- The majority of focus group members did not feel the Bookstore was living up to the expectation they had coming to a University, however, they did enjoy some of the smaller improvements that have been recently made to accommodate students.

9. **What is your overall perception of the Recreation and Athletic facilities at MSUB? Are there areas that need improvement?**

Recreation and Athletics were viewed as another pivotal aspect to the collegiate experience at MSU Billings. Some improvements were felt necessary in order to accommodate non-athletes, while still enhancing critical amenities in order to allow student-athletes to perform at a competitive level.

- Facilities were seen as relatively outdated, in average condition, and not centrally located on campus.
- Participants described the fitness center space as “too small” and “overpopulated with student-athletes.”
- Student-athletes did not feel they had enough space or specific equipment to schedule-in appropriate practice times for all teams.
Non-athletes expressed that there was an immediate intimidation factor present upon entering the fitness room and described their experiences at the gym as sometimes “uncomfortable.”

All participants agreed that parking around the recreation center was very difficult to locate and did not accommodate well to other users in the community.

Focus groups illustrated that there is a “lack of outdoor and indoor space” for intramural sports.

Some of the current athletic facilities are miles away from campus making it both difficult for students to use and watch games at.

Many focus group members were paying monthly fees at off-campus fitness centers because of the over-crowding and inconveniences found at the campus recreation center.

Additionally, the necessity to tailor to both types of students - athletes and non-athletes - at the same time would prove more beneficial than providing dedicated spaces for each user.

Overall, participants agreed that their current recreation fee was lower than most off-campus gyms and would pay extra per semester to enhance the facilities, but only would welcome a conservative renovation and/or construction process to curtail a large fee increase.