

## Exit Interviews: A Decade of Data to Improve Student Learning Experiences

Carole Kacius, Cynthia Stone and Silvia Bigatti

### Background

Systematic and ongoing evaluation is necessary to improve the quality of academic programs and help plan for the future. Faculty members have a responsibility to integrate evaluation techniques to continuously improve graduate students' experiences in which they are taught, socialized, and prepared for careers (Anderson and Swazey, 1998). Understanding the strengths and challenges of a program enables administrators to prioritize goals, allocate resources, increase student satisfaction, influence change and improve retention. Academic program faculty must respond to the needs of students as they move through their graduate experience (Polson, 2003).

A number of evaluation techniques serve as exemplars for addressing programmatic incremental needs by providing both timely and longitudinal data collection (Hardré and Hackett, 2014). The authors of this study conducted a program evaluation using a mixed-method approach that involved gathering descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative data from current students, alumni, and employers of alumni. The approach included exit interviews with graduating students to assess and improve student learning experiences, institutional processes, curriculum, and student services. Prospective quality assurance, through methods such as exit interviews, can assure that the educational experiences meet the mission of an academic unit currently and in the future (Biggs, 2001). This paper describes the process of collecting and using qualitative data gleaned from exit interviews to improve a master's degree program in public health. The Indiana University Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health faculty use exit interviews for all levels of programming. This includes three undergraduate majors, the Master of Public Health (MPH), the Master of Health Administration, the Master of Science in Biostatistics, and three PhD programs. The use of an exit survey started with the MPH program and expanded to other programs as well. Additional program evaluation methods include a final paper and poster presentation, a capstone presentation to community partners, alumni surveys and employer surveys.

## **Rationale**

The exit interview process is a key element of the overall continuous quality improvement efforts of the School and have been conducted since the inception of the MPH. The students appreciate being asked for their opinions and are more than willing to provide thoughtful, candid responses to the questions. The high response rates and qualitative methodology provide rich data with in-depth information. By collecting this information from students as they graduate, faculty gain useful, timely, detailed information that enables them to pinpoint areas that need action and change.

Feedback from the exit interview process is used to continually improve educational experiences and outcomes. Examples of improvements that have resulted from the exit interviews include:

- Created new courses of interest to students and their employers
- Changed statistical software used in biostatistics course
- Now offer courses online, day and evening, and in the summer
- Allocated additional resources to the management of internships
- Revised forms and documents in the student handbook
- Allocated additional resources to career services

Additional assessment methods to improve the program's quality include:

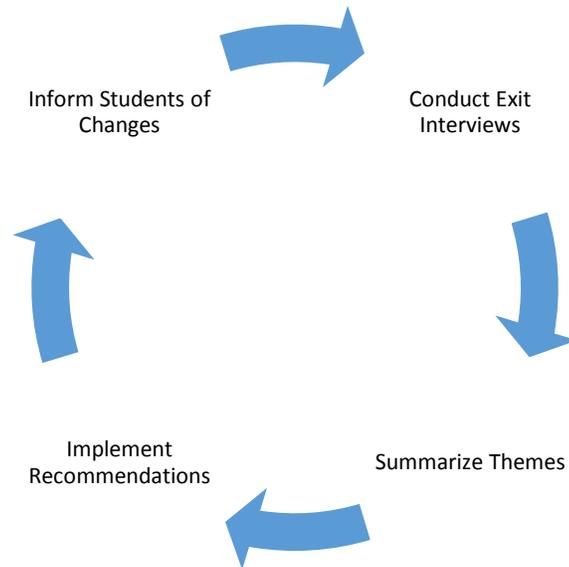
- course evaluations completed by students each term
- internship evaluations completed by students to assess the practicum site and preceptor qualifications
- periodic e-surveys to inquire about the strengths and weaknesses of the program from our students, alumni, employers of alumni, and community partners
- feedback from the national advisory committee at annual planning retreats.

## **The 10-Step Process**

The setting for this process is the campus of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, a large urban public research university that offers more than 250 degrees in 18 schools. The campus has a health and life sciences focus for over 22,000 undergraduate

students and more than 8,000 graduate and professional students. The MPH program has over 175 current students and over 500 alumni. The exit interviews take place in the office of the Associate Dean for Education. When students arrive for the interview, they are given background information about the process and informed how the feedback will be aggregated and used. Every effort is made to offer a comfortable setting in which students can feel free to offer their opinions, ideas, suggestions, and recommendations. The process includes the following 10 steps.

1. Students are contacted via email to schedule their exit interview one month before graduation.
2. The face-to-face, semi-structured interview begins with an explanation that responses are confidential and that student names are not linked to responses.
3. The interview consists of 12 questions and lasts 30-45 minutes.
4. Notes are typed by the Associate Dean for Education on the evaluation form as the student answers each question.
5. Responses are summarized. Themes are identified each semester and trends are identified over years.
6. Responses of cohort groups, such as international and African-American students, can be compared.
7. Aggregate information is shared with administrators and faculty.
8. Programmatic improvements are made as a result of the feedback.
9. Students are notified via email of the programmatic improvements that have occurred as a direct result of the exit interviews.
10. The next cohort of students is contacted via email to schedule exit interviews one month before graduation.



### Exit Interview Assessment Cycle

#### Questions Asked During the Exit Interview

1. Have you had any changes in employment since starting the MPH program?  
 Yes      If yes, did the MPH Program facilitate that change in any way?  
 No
2. What are your long term employment goals?
3. How would you evaluate the quantitative preparation you received in the MPH program?
4. Please comment on the following aspects of the program:
  - a. Internship:
  - b. Final Project/ Capstone:
  - c. Advising you received when you were coming into the program and while you were in the program:
  - d. Fairbanks School of Public Health (FSPH):
5. What are the MPH Program's strengths?

6. What are the MPH Program's weaknesses?
7. If you were in charge of this program, what is one thing you would keep, change, or eliminate?

**Keep –**

**Change –**

**Eliminate –**

8. How would you describe this program with regard to
- a. **Academics –**
  - b. **Social aspects –**
  - c. **Community** (i.e. the community's involvement in the program and the program's involvement in the community) –

9. Do you have any other suggestions for improving the MPH program?

10. Would you be interested in participating in our MPH Alumni Association?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

If yes, please provide an email address other than your IU email address:

11. Would you be willing to stay in touch with the FSPH via LinkedIn or other social media outlets?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

12. How often do you use our website? Do you have any suggestions for improving the website?

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The authors conclude that exit interviews are a useful tool and an integral part of continuous quality improvement efforts for academic programs. To obtain the highest response rate possible, link the exit interview to graduation requirements. To obtain the in-depth responses, assure students that responses will remain anonymous and will be reported in aggregate form. For larger programs, exit interviews can be conducted for a random sample if it is not possible to interview all graduating students. To close the feedback loop, inform students of the changes that are made so that they understand that their input is valued and can see how their feedback has been used to make programmatic improvements.

### **References**

Anderson, M. S. & Swazey, J. P. (1998). Reflections on the graduate student experience: An overview. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 1998, 3-13.

Biggs, J. (2001). The reflective institution: Assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching. *Higher Education*, 41, 221-238.

Hardré, P. L. & Hackett, S. (2014). Beyond instrumentation: redesigning measures and methods for evaluating the graduate college experience. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, DOI 10.1007/s11092-014-9201-6, 1-2.

Polson, C. J. (2003). Adult graduate students challenge institutions to change. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2003, 59-68.

Carole Kacius is associate dean for education and training, Cynthia Stone is a clinical associate professor, and Silvia Bigatti is an associate professor of social and behavioral science in the Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.