Focus Group on Experiences of Upperclass Oxford Students

Framework:

During the month of October, 5 focus groups were conducted with juniors and seniors to explore their experiences at Miami – specifically on the experiences that influenced their decision to remain at Miami and what they see as opportunities for Miami to improve retention. Questions centered on five areas:

- Why Miami? And was it what you expected when you started.
- Campus Climate
- Retention
- Academic and Career Support
- Improvement of student experiences

Sessions were conducted by Andrea Bakker, Assistant Director Institutional Research; Gwen Fears, Associate Dean of Students; and Denise Krallman, Director Institutional Research.

From these interviews, several common themes were identified.

Themes:

1. Decision to attend Miami influenced by campus tours. Although there were a variety of different reasons students decided to attend Miami or initiate the first visit (such as family influence, major, athletics), the majority of the students interviewed indicated that their visit to Miami was the piece that influenced their final decision. Specific comments included:
   a. Campus guide was great – fell in love with campus
   b. Fell in love with MU as soon as she saw the campus
   c. During visit loved school
   d. Came to open house and fell in love with campus

2. Peer support is invaluable to student success. Peer support & mentoring, both in the academic and social settings, was clearly tied to student success. Students indicated that their friends and social connections were important in decision to remain at Miami when thinking about leaving. Multiple students made connections with upperclassmen early in their college experience, with the upperclassman serving as an unofficial mentor. Students saw great value in this relationship and some specifically indicated that this type of mentoring could be beneficial to others. Specific comments included:
a. The student to student collaboration is sometimes more important than what you get out of the lecture class  
b. Met upperclassmen in Marching Band who gave advice and ‘brought into the fold’ the week before classes started  
c. Met an upperclassman a couple of months before classes started and that helped (met through common friend at home)  
d. Having a senior peer mentor as a freshman would have been helpful – when you know an upperclassman can be ‘cool’ as a freshman  
e. Senior peer mentor match based on residency, major would be a good idea  
f. Leveraging the help of others, study groups, finding people in classes you can ask for help, sharing notes, bouncing ideas off each other  
g. Friends have been the best support  
h. If didn’t have a release (ability to vent) from the academic side would have been difficult so student organizations helped particularly the ones related to the major

3. Peer connections were made by finding multiple ways to get involved on campus. Many students found the first few weeks or months difficult to make the connections to other students but most said that they eventually made strong connections with other students primarily through involvement in various clubs and organizations on campus. Some mentioned that they wished there were activities similar to orientation during the first week or two of the semester - by the time they arrive on campus, the connections they made during the ‘blitz orientation’ were long forgotten. Specific comments included:

   a. You have to get involved... That’s how you find people  
   b. LLC helped in making friends  
   c. Getting involved in activities makes the campus feel smaller  
   d. Living in a dorm, it was really easy to make friends and get connected to people. Even met people doing intramurals (free agent)  
   e. Joining clubs helped – need to encourage freshmen to be more involved in clubs/organizations  
   f. Found his “community” after the first three or four weeks, felt like he fit in early enough that he felt comfortable

4. Students were adept at self-advocacy – actively sought out the resources that would help them to be successful at Miami. Many students mentioned contacted offices such as Rinella, Career Services and Student Counseling when they needed assistance. Some students also actively sought out faculty members (not their advisors) who could mentor them, although some of these mentoring relationships developed over time. Specific comments included:

   a. If you don’t make it happen, it’s just never going to happen  
   b. Recognizing when you need some assistance and really leveraging these options  
   c. Flyer in dorm about a workshop on time management – which was very beneficial  
   d. Actively getting advising helped after the first semester. Realized that if she doesn’t go to her advisor with a problem, she won’t get help
e. Found academic support, but not official advisors, rather mentors that she sought out. She goes to them time and time again for the mentoring, rather than just looking up a course for her

5. **Struggle with Miami bureaucracy even for successful students.** Students sometimes had difficulty getting the assistance they needed or finding the right person to answer a question. They were surprised at the difficulty involved in maneuvering through some of the educational obstacles. Specific comments included:
   a. Thematic sequence – disconnect between online course groups/requirements and what is actually being offered to fill the sequence
   b. Difficulty in transferring study abroad credits back to Miami
   c. Overlap/duplication of MP and CAS requirements is confusing and causes problems
   d. Study Abroad as an Ugrad Summer Scholar - went to multiple offices – no one had a complete view - everyone only had knowledge in their specific area and faculty advisor(s) weren’t aware of any of the details involved
   e. Bureaucracy at MU is terrible – trying to find help/critical resources is very hard -
   f. FSB minor - studying abroad in summer doesn’t allow for taking course required in summer and not allowed to take during academic year - feel there is no flexibility
   g. FSB requirement of career search/internships that has entire base in Ohio when you are out of state and want to move back after graduation – this can be problematic
   h. First semester didn’t know anything about dropping vs withdrawing a course, what that meant for financial aid, how to reach out to advisor (vs. them reaching out to her)
   i. People turn in change of major forms all the time. But don’t always have to discuss decision before making change

6. **International students feel very isolated from the university community.** International students feel isolated from others at the university and don’t necessarily know what to expect at an American school. Several knew very little about Miami prior to arriving on campus. Specific comments included:
   a. It feels isolating the first year because of cultural differences
   b. Was concerned about speaking skills
   c. Didn’t know much about MU – when turned down from the first set of applications at “big name” schools, applied at next group
   d. Parents decided she would go here
   e. Had high expectations of Americans (stereotype from movies, television)
   f. More in-depth orientation experience for international students

7. **Students concerned with the advising system.** Students repeatedly mentioned problems with advising, despite advising not being an explicit part of the focus groups (not even mentioned in the question protocols). Common complaints included not knowing who to go to for advising, having only a superficial relationship with their advisor, not feeling that their advisor could give them appropriate academic or career advice, wishing that they were able to meet with an advisor in their major during their first semester rather than a general first-year advisor, and wanting to have one consistent advisor rather than switching advisors
after their first year. A number of students avoided going to their official advisor and found the support that they needed from either their peers or a professor in their major. Specific comments included:

a. Likes the Miami culture, but the advising was so discouraging, even after seeking out advisors and going to office hours, that she wasn’t sure why she should be here
b. Advisors are over extended (too many advisees)
c. Problem in advising – in 4 years have had 5 different advisors and then have to go over DARS every time you change advisor
d. No choice in advisor when in major – some faculty don’t help – just hand a list of courses from bulletin on what to take - hall advisors are hit and miss
e. Advisors within major are not good – they should reach out and build the relationship so the student doesn’t have to make the first steps
f. Difficult being in Honors and having two advisors
g. First year advising is basically just a check in for major issues. There’s no relationship built.
h. First year academic advising needs to be reevaluated.
i. Doesn’t think there should be a first-year advisor. It should be linked to your major when you come into school. They’re [first year advisors] are focused on getting you through Miami Plan rather than your major
j. Went to advisor for help with DARS and advisor just told her to look at DARS, which is scary when you’re a freshman and don’t know how to do it

8. **Diversity, or rather the lack of diversity.** Particularly the multi-cultural students were concerned about the lack of diversity on campus. “Miami Image” was mentioned several times. Specific comments included:

a. Expected more diversity on campus – only one other African-American female on her floor freshman year
b. Very surprised at the make up of the student body
c. Miami is not as diverse as other campuses visited