Report on the Human Resources Focus Groups

February 22 – March 5, 2002

Nancy Jokovich
Manager, Quality Initiatives

Martha L. Oburn
Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness

Office of Institutional Effectiveness
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Introduction

As part of the Human Resources (HR) office’s follow-up to the 2001 Internal Customer Survey (ICS), the Associate Vice President of HR requested the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) conduct a series of focus groups to assist HR in taking a close look at what they do, how they serve ACC employees, and how ACC employees perceive them. It was expected that data from the focus groups would facilitate understanding of the experiences and needs of employees and provide specific information on how HR might better support ACC employees in their work.

This report provides a description of the methodology used for the focus groups, an overview of the participants involved, an analysis of participants’ comments and their specific recommendations for assisting customers of the office of Human Resources.

Methodology

In January, OIE met with HR to plan the focus groups. One focus group would be held at each campus. Each focus group would be targeted to have no more than 12 individuals participating, with the four employee associations providing names of 3 employees per group. This size of group was chosen to promote maximum participation from the participants. The time for each focus group would be about 2.5 hours. They were to start in mid-February and conclude before the start of spring break on March 8.

The facilitator met with the HR supervisors and managers. They asked to attend the focus groups to respond to specific questions of the participants. No more than two HR supervisors/managers participated as silent observers in each focus group.

The facilitator worked with each of the campus managers to reserve rooms and dates. An email was sent to the employee association presidents to announce the focus groups and ask for their support. Employee association presidents were also emailed the information on the schedule of dates and times for each campus and asked to provide three employees from each association to participate at each campus. Several days before each focus group, participants were sent a reminder via email.

At each focus group, the facilitator asked the participants to consider the characteristics measured by the ICS – overall quality, promptness, and service attitude – in regard to the HR area as a whole and then by each specific area, as listed on the ICS form.

Participant responses were captured on a flipchart and then transcribed into a Microsoft Word file. This file was emailed to participants for review and edit, as needed. The responses from all sites were then collated into one file to better identify similar comments across different areas.

A thematic analysis was used to present the information in a meaningful way. In this approach, participant responses were reviewed for common themes across participant
groups and locations. Responses that were repeatedly voiced, both positive and negative, were highlighted. Single responses that were deemed noteworthy were also marked as relevant. From this pool of responses emerged broad themes or categories of meaning that identify assistance that the participants need.

**Participants**

There were a total of 38 employees who participated in the focus groups. The OIE facilitator and the HR representatives are not included in that number. In designing the focus groups, it was decided that the employees selected to participate should be representative of the campuses and of the employee groups in the College. The table below displays the distribution of participants by campuses and by employee group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus/Site</th>
<th># Participants</th>
<th>Employee Group</th>
<th># Participants</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Prof/Tech</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
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**Analysis of Comments**

The range of comments from HR focus group participants can be divided into two major categories: comments addressed to specific offices within HR and comments addressed generically to the whole of HR. Overall, Human Resources is the office that provides support for employee recruiting, hiring, placing, orienting, paying, training, retiring, etc.; HR provides services to every person employed at the College. Perhaps no other College office has as great an opportunity as does HR to impact how employees feel about working at ACC; certainly no other office has as many customers as HR. The
overall message from those customers who participated in the HR focus groups is that they need assistance with accessing and trusting the support provided by HR. To examine this, the analysis will start with the feedback from focus group participants on the individual HR offices.

**Analysis of Feedback by Office**

The following analysis by individual offices of HR is derived from the specific comments for those offices. While many of the comments fit the generic themes given below, there were also specific process and office-based comments that are included here.

**Office of the AVP**

Participant comments indicated customers see the Office of the AVP as responsive, handling issues promptly and efficiently, and they appreciated the timely information that the office provides via email or phone. Focus group participant comments also indicated that customers expect this office to provide an organizational framework for all the areas within Human Resources, thus increasing consistency of information across areas and decreasing embarrassing errors that damage credibility of HR as a whole.

**Benefits**

Focus group participant comments indicated customers have quite varied experiences in their interactions with this office. Several participant comments characterize service from the Benefits area as “genuine”, knowledgeable, and prompt, particularly noting the quality of workshops and presentations. Other participant comments indicated that this area is often not empathetic with their needs, citing in particular the lack of physical privacy in the area, tight deadlines for completing paperwork or attending presentations, and confusion regarding procedures and processes.

**Compensation**

Several focus group participant comments indicate customers were pleased with the improvement seen in turn-around time in the development of offers (24 hours from paperwork to offer). Others indicated mixed experiences with having calls returned. Participant comments also indicated that customers do not know overall policies, processes, and procedures, i.e., how levels, steps, or titles are determined; how jobs are selected to undergo market classification; who has authority on re-classifications; or what
the criteria are for promotions. Several focus group participant comments indicated customers feel that job descriptions were not up to date or accurate, or that they were re-written by a supervisor to change compensation for the position.

**Employment/Hiring Services**

Although several focus group participant comments revealed customers value recent workshops held for hiring committee members, nearly all participant comments indicated customers are confused regarding the policies, procedures, and processes of employment; they indicated a need for more information on the process and policies for applications, job requirements, and transfers. Focus group participant comments also voiced concerns regarding the accuracy of information disseminated during the orientation process.

**Payroll Office**

The predominant messages from focus group participant comments regarding the payroll area of HR are that customers want to speak with a person, rather than voicemail, when they have a pay issue. They want Payroll staff to respond to customers professionally and courteously. They also want clear, accessible procedures and policies regarding pay as well as timely solutions to problems, especially those that recur.

**Records**

Focus group participant comments indicated customers feel pleased with the overall services of this area. They cited improvements in tracking documents and updating information and noted that the area had good, broad knowledge. Participant comments also revealed customers’ frustrations when transcripts are lost and copies are not accepted. Participant comments suggested emails to supervisors on matters like I9s and timesheets should be copied to administrative assistants and administrators to provide them with current information to use when faculty turn to them for help.

**Staff Development**

Focus group participant comments regarding this office indicated that customers have difficulty with the schedules for workshops and training sessions, especially with the travel time required and with the constraints of single person offices. Focus group participant comments also revealed that the offerings are not responsive to their needs; notices are not published in a timely manner; and the variety has not been sufficient to
help customers meet development goals. They would like more communication on offerings and on cancellations as well as information on policies and procedures.

**Analysis of Feedback across Human Resources**

The range of comments from HR focus group participants indicates they perceive this office as having responsibility for many of the functions that are integral to the successful operation of the whole College. As such, analysis of the participant comments revealed several themes or categories of meaning that identify specific assistance these customers need. The themes are:

1. **Who, What, When, Why, and How**
2. **Person to Person**
3. **Confidentiality, Equity, Accountability**
4. **Credit Where It's Due**
5. **Miscellaneous Comments Across ACC**

Each theme is named (*in boldface italics*) and summarized below. Several verbatim comments that illustrate the theme (*printed in italics*) and participants’ recommendations (*also in italics*) to address the issues are also provided. It is important to keep in mind that the recommendations presented here are from the participants in the focus groups; they are not the results of analyses by OIE.

1. **Who, What, When, Why, and How**

   To take advantage of HR support services, HR customers need to know the procedures and timelines they should follow for accomplishing specific employee-related tasks. This theme is predominant in many comments. Prevalent in focus group participant comments was the feeling of confusion and frustration that customers experience because they don’t know whom to call/contact, the process involved in initiating or completing an employment transaction (hiring/terminating/resolving a problem), deadlines, or which form needs to be used and how to access that form.

   **Comments:**
   - “Need a receptionist to help direct calls. Who do I talk with?”
   - “Called HR and asked for form to be mailed to the campus. HR representative said, ‘We do not do it that way—you have to come in.’”
   - “What is the protocol?”
   - “When hiring or terminating employees, the process is not clear. What is needed depends on who you ask.”
• “The employee didn’t understand the rules; they were mysterious.”
• “Change happens frequently and there is not enough communication.”

**Recommendations:** Focus group participant comments revealed the following recommendations to demystify HR procedures and processes and relieve customers’ confusion and frustration.

- Need to provide general information on HR processes. If roles and responsibilities were understood, employees would know whom to call or seek help from.
- Post referral matrix, problem-solving flowcharts, or process maps on the Intranet that help employees find a person to contact, a needed form, a web address, etc.
- Set up a “help desk” or receptionist in HR to help funnel requests to the right person or to the right website.
- Have a special “hotline” set up in Payroll on paydays. Use it to resolve issues quickly.
- For each office, have a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) on the website. Make it dynamic -- as questions come up the second time, post them with their answers.
- Send out “heads-up” emails. Share information on how to resolve or avoid problems.
- Post the annual calendar of HR events, such as benefit enrollment, PEP evaluation, etc.
- Include the administrative assistants on faculty and adjunct faculty distribution lists.

2. **Person to Person**

Another prominent theme among focus group participant comments is a request that interactions with HR be more person-friendly. This theme underscores the potential the HR office and its staff have to influence the culture of the College and the morale of College employees. Customers experience HR via telephone and in-person interactions and need to feel that their questions and requests are valid and respected. A significant number of comments revealed customers feel frustrated by the way their requests for assistance are addressed.

**Comments:**

- “Feel as ‘nuisance’ to staff in Human Resources.”
- “We are not the enemy. Dealing with HR makes me feel as if that is how I am considered.”
- Working with Human Resources is painful.”
- “No one in HR answers phone calls”
• “Staff is annoyed at questions.”
• “Get inaccurate information from staff members who don’t know how to say, ‘I don’t know. Let me find out and get back to you.’”
• “Don’t see any initiative to help out—outside of specialization”
• “Need more personal contact.”
• “…aren’t compassionate to their customers.”

Recommendations: Several participants’ recommendations were offered regarding ways the HR offices could help customers feel more like team members working with HR staff to accomplish the goals of the College relative to employee/employment issues.

• Need to adopt “Let me help you” or “I don’t know, but I’ll get back to you” attitude.
• Reset phone messages on a daily basis and indicate who to call next.
• Send HR staff out to campuses on a monthly or quarterly basis. It is more difficult to become frustrated or angry with a person than with an office.
• Use professional development in house—HR should avail themselves of what is available to others.
• Acknowledge receipt of documents [request for review, applications, etc.].
• Need more staff in HR to cover areas adequately.
• Cross train HR staff.

3. Confidentiality, Equity, Accountability

Focus group participants expect high standards of integrity from HR. This theme is revealed in numerous focus group participant comments—comments about integrity, about fair treatment, about accountability. Because HR staff have access to sensitive information regarding employees, customers need to be able to trust those staff to maintain confidentiality. Customers also need to be able to trust that employment practices are applied equitably, that HR is “above reproach” in fulfilling its function. And customers need to be able to trust that HR will be accountable for the performance of its function.

Comments:

• “There is no integrity.”
• “HR should be a safe cushion for employees.”
• “How loose is information regarding salaries, raises? Information gets out.”
• “Confidences have left [the] area. Lack of trustworthiness.”
• “Favoritism—relatives of employees get preferential treatment—cover-up.”
• “Sweetheart positions are created.”
• “Job descriptions are inconsistent.”
• “Supervisor responsibilities/requirements not consistent/clear.”
• “Is there a mission statement? I haven’t seen it.”
• “No confidence in answers—passed from one office to another.”
• “Forms[on the web] do not always work. They are not always the latest revision.”
• “HR web site is not accurate and [it is] missing information.”
• “No accountability—they can do whatever they want to you.”
• “Wagons are circled—they are in denial of problems.”
• “Increasing cynicism by avoiding responsibility.”

Recommendations: Focus group participant provided fewer specific recommendations for this theme than for the others. How does an office improve customers’ trust? Perhaps no other issue identified in this study offers so great a challenge as does this one. However, the underlying request voiced through most comments indicates consistency, communication and caring would go a long way toward creating a trusting environment in which HR and its customers could work together.

- Hire a consultant to help improve Human Resources.
- Have standardized, documented procedures to avoid inconsistencies.
- Improve [the] grievance process.

4. Credit Where It’s Due

Though focus group participants were very frank and vocal regarding customers’ needs, it was also evident that they appreciate the efforts HR makes to support employees in their work. Several focus group participant comments revealed appreciation for improvements to the functioning of the office.

Comments:

- “Overall pleased.”
- “Website has improved communication/info.”
- “[I] get timely information via email or phone”
- “Had good experience, received explanation.”
- “…assured employee that things would be handled and they were.”
- “Genuine response.”
- “Appreciate improvement in turnaround—24 hours from paperwork to offer.”
- “Workshop was pretty good.”
- “We appreciate the fact that HR will do this—take the time out to hold these focus groups.”
Recommendations: Again, there were not many recommendations for this theme, but those offered were directed toward encouraging HR to continue its efforts to provide quality support to its customers and “advertise” those improvements.
- Give visibility to attempts to improve.
- Announce changes in processes or procedures that have resulted from feedback on the Internal Customer Survey.

5. Miscellaneous Comments about ACC

There were a group of comments made by focus group participants that did not deal with Human Resources processes or procedures. The comments are summarized below. In some cases, the participants wanted to voice a concern or a question about the College; in other cases, the participants did not know where the boundaries were between HR and instructional deans.

1. Business Services Move to the Service Center
   Participants were not clear how they would interact with Business Services in this new location. They suggested posting processes and flowcharts on the web site that would give customers information on where to go and the procedures to follow.

2. Marketing Communications
   Participants want to know about press releases when they are being announced, not after they are published in the newspaper. They suggest sending them via email to the employee list-serv.

3. The Budget, Raises, and Rumor Control
   Participants are confused and anxious about the issue of raises in a tight budget year. Questions arose like, “If there aren’t the standard raises this year, will step increases still happen? If not, do I still need 24 hours of professional development?” While answers may not be available, sharing information helps customers understand the processes.

4. Adjunct Faculty
   Adjunct faculty members have the perception that they are not full citizens of the College. They feel that the College tries to pacify adjuncts; not work with them. While institutional memory is long, there is now an effort now to include AFA in processes – instructional affairs are making efforts to respect adjuncts.
5. Faculty Scheduling
   Participants discussed problems with multiple faculty scheduled for the same
class and adjuncts bumped by a full-time faculty member. They did not know
whom to refer these problems to or how to resolve them.

6. Forms Available
   To avoid having to search for items, it was suggested that it would be good to
have all forms, not just Human Resources, in one place or to have them available
and updated online.

Summary

Because of their impact on every employee in the College, Human Resources has
a tremendous potential to establish a sense of community and cooperation within the
College. Comments and recommendations offered in HR Focus Groups reveal the
encouragement and the frustration that customers feel when working with HR.
Participants made comments tied to their needs to understand HR processes and
procedures; to be treated as valued and respected team members with HR; and to trust
that these interactions are conducted in an environment of integrity and professionalism.
Positive changes that HR has made were recognized, indicating customers’ willingness to
see and appreciate improvements in service. Human Resources should be encouraged to
publicize the actions they take to improve their processes and procedures, as well as to
see and treat employees as their customers.