

# Higher Education Coordinating Board Focus Groups

**Prioritizing Features for Development of a Web-based  
Academic Advising System**



## Executive Summary

During January and February of 2007, the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) contracted The Connections Group to conduct a series of focus groups across the state to help determine the top priorities for a Web-based academic advising system. Given that many end-users would likely have several preferences for what that system might include; the Connections Group conducted focus groups among students and staff from two- and four-year, public and private institutions.

The proposed system, as outlined by the HECB, would serve the interests of public and private baccalaureate institutions as well as community and technical colleges. The system would be used by a diverse group of stakeholders: enrolled students, prospective students, transfer students, academic advisors, admissions staff, records and registration staff, family members, and the general public. With this varied group of end-users and an already ambitious list of requirements for the system, The Connections Group was asked to conduct focus groups to determine stakeholders' highest priorities and expectations about how the system should work.

During the focus groups participants were asked to rank each potential feature, identifying which they consider "must have," "nice to have," and those that "aren't currently a priority." Three features were rated as "must have" by focus group participants:

- Web-accessible course equivalency tables that "translate" one course to another at different institutions;
- Degree audits that would require the system to accept both individual courses and a "package" of courses; for example, transfer associate degrees like the Direct Transfer Agreement or one of the new major related programs; and
- The capacity to link to existing degree audit systems as well as to the system being developed by the community and technical colleges.

Student participants recognize that they face a series of complicated choices, and they are excited about the possibility that they could access a 'one stop shop' for some of this information. Students overwhelmingly support the development of a Web-based advising system, and they have high expectations for its function. Faculty and staff also expressed much excitement about the possibility of a new Web-based advising system. Coupled with that excitement is a healthy measure of anxiety about whether the system can be successfully implemented, and whether the information will be accurate. There is a shared realization that for this to succeed, it cannot be based on a one-time infusion of resources.

The HECB will use the data gathered during the focus group process, in combination with information gathered through other efforts, to create a Request for Proposals (RFP) that will be used to select the vendor for the statewide system. Bidders in the RFP process must be able to demonstrate that they can provide the requirements specified by students, faculty, and staff from around the state.

## Overview

The proposed online advising system, as outlined by the Higher Education Coordinating Board, would serve the interests of all postsecondary public and private institutions. In addition to these varied educational institutions, the system would be used by a diverse group of stakeholders – including enrolled students, transfer students, prospective students, international students, parents, academic advisors, admissions staff, and records and registration staff.

With an already ambitious list of requirements for the system developed by the HECB, The Connections Group asked to conduct focus groups to determine stakeholders' highest priorities and expectations for how the system should work. Participants discussed possible features for development and ranked their preferences of features on a paper ballot.

*"If students are going to live more [of] their life on the Web, we better do more of our work on the Web."*

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## Focus Group Method

### Participation and Recruitment

In January of 2007, seven focus groups were conducted across the state. Each of the six public baccalaureate institutions hosted one focus group (with the exception of Washington State University Vancouver, which hosted two), guaranteeing that the focus groups were geographically diverse. The focus groups were held at the following locations:

- January 8 Eastern Washington University (EWU)
- January 9 Central Washington University (CWU)
- January 10 The Evergreen State College (TESC)
- January 18 The University of Washington (UW)
- January 24 Western Washington University (WWU)
- January 26 Washington State University Vancouver - Students (WSUV)
- January 26 Washington State University Vancouver - Administrators

Increasing the number of students attaining a bachelor's degree is a key objective of the Web-based advising system, and improving the ease of transfer from two- to four-year schools is essential to reaching this goal. Thus, it was strategically important to hold the focus groups in these locations, not only to gather feedback about how the system must function, but also to share information about the development process with students and staff at the various two- and four-year institutions.

Focus groups, as opposed to quantitative research such as polls, were chosen so that we could explore what students and advisors use now for online advice as well as what their top priorities would be for a new Web-based advising system. Since no centralized system currently exists and our participants were from varying backgrounds and levels of familiarity with existing

systems, we needed to first engage participants in a discussion to bring everyone to a common information level and then draw out their ideas. In this exploratory stage, focus groups allowed us to gain valuable insight into the varied and nuanced ways these participants would relate to and use a Web-based advising system.

In addition, focus groups look for the common language, the depth of feeling about subjects, what persuades people to respond or change their minds, and what values underscore the comments made. Given that the current online advising system would need to be adopted by the vast majority of institutions in the state to be most effective, we were charged with determining the depth of interest in an online system, how much it might be used and for what, and the priority of possible features for inclusion in an online system.

Each group involved a mix of people who are expected to use the system: students, admissions officers, records/registrar staff, and academic advisors from two- and four-year schools. The exception to this was one student-only focus group and one administrator-only focus group, both held at WSUV.

To recruit participants, The Connections Group contacted staff at each of the public baccalaureate and surrounding community and technical colleges. Outreach efforts focused on those who are most familiar with the current transfer and articulation process and who would be most affected by a new system. This included advisors, admissions officials, and registrars or records specialists. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and nearly every school contacted sent at least one representative.

More staff participated than students -- 46 to 29 respectively. The administrators were split evenly among the two- and four-year institutions and they represented a range of specific work responsibilities including advising and registration.

<b>Total Staff: 46</b>	
Public Baccalaureate:	20
Community College:	18
Private Institutions:	3
Baccalaureate Branch Campus:	3
Technical College:	2
Advising:	22
Records/Registration/Registrar:	12
Admissions:	5
Evaluations:	2
Other (IT, General Admin, etc):	5

Students were recruited through online advertisements, e-mails to student leaders, and referrals from other students or administrators. Students who had transferred or were considering transferring were targeted during the process. We worked from the premise that transfer students often faced the most complicated path to graduation. If a system could accurately guide transfer students through their pathways, then the system could effectively address the needs of all students.

Many participating students did not follow a traditional two- or four-year timeline for completing a degree, and a number of students had taken classes at multiple schools. While still in the minority, these swirling students – those taking a “cafeteria” approach to education – were clearly a growing demographic who needed assistance navigating their more complex paths through higher education. Central Washington University students at the Ellensburg Campus were an exception to this trend, most likely due to a lack of “feeder schools” in the region.

<b>Total Students: 29</b>	
Traditional 4-year students at Baccalaureate Institutions:	11
(7 from Central Washington University)	
Community College students:	9
Transferred into a Baccalaureate Institution:	9
(2 from other Baccalaureate Institutions, 7 from Community Colleges)	

**Focus Group Process**

The focus began with a general discussion about the state of higher education, knowledge of the HECB, and academic advising. These preliminary questions were designed to gather qualitative information about what broad issues students and administrators face today, make participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions, and give the moderator a sense for the temperament and attitude of those in the group.

After these more general subjects were discussed, the moderator described the possible features for development in a Web-based advising system. Participants were then asked which features stood out as most important for development. Each feature was then discussed in depth.

To conclude, participants ranked the features on a paper ballot that was collected and tabulated after the focus group. The final questions asked if there were any ideas for features that had not been included on the ballot and if anybody had last minute advice for the HECB as they moved forward with development.

## Focus Group Findings

### A Snapshot of Today's Student

The students in the Web-advising focus groups are approaching education as just one aspect of their busy lives. There are an unprecedented number of influences on their decisions: costs, degree program(s), interest and career goals, time, location, and life and family concerns. Instead of institutions dictating students' timeline, course load, and educational path; students are choosing how and when they want their education.

One administrator explained, "A lot of the students I work with are trying to work at least half-time, if not full-time, while going to school half-time or full-time. And it doesn't make a lot of sense to do both and do both well. School suffers first. Not all [students] are 18 to 22-year-olds but *even some of them* have commitments with families and work and other commitments beyond school, so it's more difficult for them to find the classes they need and perhaps stay on track."

*"When they design the system, try to remember what it was like to be a broke, confused student with a bunch of people telling you what you should do."*

Students from the focus groups are seeking advice from a variety of sources – including family, friends, their school advisors, and the Internet. Many students acknowledged seeking advice online from a variety of Web sites. One student explained, "One I just found out about is called Ecademy, which is more business-oriented, and it's just [ecademy.com](http://ecademy.com). It's really cool; it's set up for job information and all kinds of online resources available."

Participants also seemed to be quite willing to change direction, including schools and majors. As a result, they want tools that help them plan for and understand the implications of the change. One advisor explained, "When students change their mind, and typically they're going to do that three to five times before they get a degree, many of [the choices available] will also change. So, being able to help students understand where they are at any given point is what I would love to be able to do, rather than getting out the paper and pencil."

Students are increasingly tech-savvy and comfortable using the Internet to round out their degree programs. Five of the six participants in the student-only focus group had taken online classes. One commented that, "I feel like I can focus more on classes that are like super-important that I have to go to lecture for. I feel like I have more time for those because I can plan accordingly with an online class."

However, they also have higher standards for the online resources that they use. Participants in four of seven focus groups stated that existing degree audit systems fall short in this area with one student explaining, "Not only is it useless, it is frustrating to look at it and you just waste time even bothering to understand it." This underscores the point that, when developing a state advising system, the "gold standard" is Google, which is not always in place at the institutions.

Others commented that the system needed to be user-friendly for a diverse group of people. One administrator explained, “Because if it's a student, it's me or it's a parent using it, you're looking at three different populations. I might use it on a daily basis and I may be comfortable with it, but someone [new] who is just opening the Web page and can easily navigate through it, that would be important.” Several participants also noted other end-users who might require special consideration. These included students with disabilities, international students, and older students who do not have the tech-savvy of some of the younger participants.

*“I didn't know what kind of classes I would need... I even met with an advisor and I didn't understand... because it was a language problem, of course.”*

Students also expressed strongly that they were not interested in logging onto a Web-based survey to provide feedback. One student explained, “I see...a long term benefit of this [filling out a survey]. On a day-to day basis when I have fifty million things for school to do, it is not going to be a top priority.” Most students echoed this sentiment but also noted that the ability to contact a site administrator might be used if they encountered problems during their use.

In addition to an easy-to-use Web site, students are looking for something that will give them better information suited to their individual needs. They don't want more information; they want the *right* information at the *right* time that will help them make better decisions. Specific features of interest included the following:

- **Pathways to career planning:** information on how their interests fit into majors, how majors lead to a degree, and how the degree leads in entry-level jobs and builds into a career. One student described her ideal as “one site with all these different resources, as far as like internships and as far as what to do to pursue your particular career or what to do to get this degree or what college may accept your credits. Just all that in one Web site would be nice...I find that I have always four Internet explorers open and I have to bounce back and forth, and it gets frustrating.”
- **Guidance on how and when to make educational decisions:** how to plan for and time future course work to fulfill both general education and major requirements. One student explained, “One of the difficulties I have found...is getting into general ed classes, sometimes they will be full and you will have wait until another quarter, and that really pushes you back...and that will cost you more money in the long run.”
- **Blogs or message boards for students to talk with other students who are facing, or have faced, the same choices:** One student described her experiences looking at graduate schools and particularly liked one site featuring “a board of forum coordinators that answer all these questions, direct people with certain questions to certain places in the Web site or certain people to talk to. And if someone has a question that's probably already asked or answered, they can search for it.”
- **Advice that helps them save money, as well as time:** This could include communicating, at or prior to registration, that a course is transferable. One student lamented, “Still to this day, I still don't know why...some of those courses do not transfer

over when those are actually helping me reach my degree...The courses are business courses, and yet they just don't transfer over. So I am sort of like back-tracking, taking more classes, which means more money.”

### **A Snapshot of Institutional Staff**

The key words staff participants used to describe the proposed system were: excitement, anticipation, and fear. “Let’s not get excited until we know it’s going to happen,” one staff member commented. Others viewed it as a necessity in the current academic environment, with one participant explaining, “If students are going to live more [of] their life on the Web, we better do more of our work on the Web.”

Most staff stated that the goal of the system should be to help students make better decisions so the time they spend with advisors is enriched. Many staff participants noted that existing advising and degree audit systems are often hard to find and hard to navigate, and the results are hard to understand. One staff member explained, “Our advisors, in our initial advising appointment, have to make a choice between trying to help a student really be able to read the document, or use that advising time to help them with other stuff.”

There are hopes that the system can elevate the level of conversation advisors have with students. One participant commented, “I appreciate the combination of on-line and face-to-face. Because the face-to-face is useful in terms of students...who are undecided. So we can sit down with people and say, here's what's possible, where do you fall into this? What would you like to do or not like to do?”

*“I came and got the book and it says here’s the list of 800 majors at [my baccalaureate institution] – and there are seven economics degrees. I chose the one with fewer credits required for the major.”*

Other advisors were wary, however, of students getting all of their advising from an online source. One concerned participant commented, “I guess my biggest fear is [losing] face-to-face interaction that the students may be using [the online system] rather than working with an advisor.” Many participants noted that one benefit students might lose without in-person advising was the ability to find out what flexibility and gray areas existed in course equivalencies and degree requirements.

Participants are hopeful that the system will encourage students to plan for transfer earlier. One staff member explained, “[Students] need to be asking questions, and they need to know right from the beginning that they need to be asking those questions, not a year after they have begun. Because I don't want to say, ‘it's too late’, but often *it is* too late to be in a situation where everything is going to be really neat for them.”

Staff participants in the focus groups are not worried that the system will take their jobs away; they are more worried that it will increase their workload. One participant stated, “I think a lot of the problems with bringing up some type of an advising/degree audit system... is tracking

those changes. Because no one has time to research... we've got 32 community colleges in Washington! I mean, read those catalogs every year? Changes? No one can do it.” Staff participants would like to play a part in developing a plan that would be implemented before the system launches, detailing who would be responsible for updating information and clarifying funding issues to support the ongoing work.

Given the ambitious goals for the system, staff are skeptical about project feasibility. Many have also had underwhelming experiences with their own systems (DARS, COCO, Degree Works, etc.) and worry that this new system will be too cumbersome, too complicated, or just too hard to use. One administrator explained, “Because of our experience with [our degree audit system], it's got to be...so easy to use...We spent all this money and time to make it, and nobody uses it. It's really unfortunate.”

As a result, they insist it would be preferable to do something simpler -- on a smaller scale and more quickly -- rather than pursue a larger, more complicated system over a longer period of time. One participant cautioned, “There has to be a great deal of thought in there that the information that the students get is accurate. And that means that the level of that information is limited.” She continued, “...trying to make it all encompassing...I think it's going to be so large and cumbersome, that the potential for error and giving students the wrong information is out there.”

Participants also want information about what is happening in every step of the development process. The more system information, feedback, and knowledge they gain now, the more likely they will be to adopt it when it goes live. Several staff also noted that if students used it, they would be more likely to get excited about the system. One participant summed his feelings up saying, “[If] it informs people enough to have some better questions. That's a good thing.”

### **Priorities for Development**

During the focus groups, participants were asked which features were a “must have”, a “nice to have” or “not a priority right now.” During these discussions and through tabulation of the ballots, several features became apparent as top priorities:

*“In some cases you don't always know where to go. And they don't state at [a four-year institution] site if my community college business course transfers.”*

- Web-accessible course equivalency tables that “translate” one course to another at different institutions;
- Degree audits that would require the system to accept both individual courses and a “package” of courses; for example, transfer associate degrees like the Direct Transfer Agreement or one of the new major related programs; and
- The capacity to link to existing degree audit systems and student information systems as well as to the system being developed by the community and technical colleges.

It also became apparent during the focus groups that certain features were necessary to provide accurate, timely information that could be easily updated and controlled by each campus. Each was not considered a stand-alone feature; they were considered absolutely necessary to support

other features rated as “must have.” For example, to publish accurate course equivalency tables, the system must be able to store and communicate “start” and “end” dates for those courses and programs.

Without the following functions, the system would not likely be embraced by students and staff:

- User-friendliness;
- Accommodation of start and end dates for courses and programs since courses change, which in turns affects whether they remain equivalent;
- Inclusion of a comprehensive list of degree programs offered in the state by both public and private colleges and universities;
- Reasonable interaction among existing systems; and
- A plan for keeping the system updated.

### **Ballot Results**

The paper ballots filled out by participants were collected at the end of each focus group and average scores were calculated for each feature. The findings were aligned with the qualitative conclusions of the focus groups.

Based on the paper ballots, the prioritized list of features is listed below along with a representative quote from one of the focus groups:

- 1. Course equivalency tables:** “The issue that we have in going to various schools’ Web sites is that [the equivalencies] are ... hard to find, and they look different from each other. And if advisors are scratching their heads and leaning on their shovels, then students are certainly doing more of it,” explained an advisor at the WSUV focus group.
- 2. Degree audit:** An admissions officer from the UW focus group commented, “I think that is probably what’s most missing now. You can get individual course information, not that that is not important. But someone at a community college right now can’t get an audit, whether it’s ours or anybody else’s, because everybody has a different system. And so I think since major-readiness is so important, that is the biggest need.”
- 3. User-friendliness:** “Everyone wants something easy to read, simple to follow; an overview for the whole program with easy navigation...maybe her mom could hop on, or maybe someone wants to do research, ‘cause my brother, he does stuff like that whether I want it or not. I want it easy,” described a student at the Evergreen focus group.
- 4. Interaction with existing systems:** “From the IT world, our priority would be the interaction among existing systems...the interoperability between all of these different disparate systems we are trying to bring together is number one...to bring those things to life, to make them useful,” explained a Webmaster at the EWU focus group.
- 5. Comprehensive list of degree programs offered in the state:** “I was thinking students would want [a centralized list of degree programs], and you know about WOIS [a private, nonprofit organization that researches and distributes information about Washington careers, schools and training programs], you can go in there and do a little bit of research.

And sometimes that takes 15 minutes to get to the point you want to get,” noted an advisor at the WSUV focus group. When asked further about WOIS, she acknowledged that most students probably weren’t aware of it as a resource.

- 6. Students upload record for evaluation\*:** “I think having a feature where a student could easily download their classes into it. Either they download it from an unofficial transcript, or if they have to type it in, it's typed in and it saves it so they can go back every quarter and put in the new courses,” commented an advisor at the CWU focus group.
- 7. Ability to send and receive electronic student records and unofficial and official transcripts:** A student at CWU explained, “It would be cool if we had a statewide system, so if you transferred anywhere in Washington, community college, two-year to four-year, Master's, whatever, you don't have to pay to have an official transcript. They all have an internal system. That would encourage you to stay in Washington because you would save money on the transfers.”
- 8. Accept individual courses and a package of courses:** “If they are going from school to school, it's important to have that information feed into [the system] and say, ‘Okay what's the package degree I can get -- and how will that come across? Or if I just take individual classes, how will they come across?’” noted an admissions officer at the WSUV focus group.
- 9. Tips for transfer students:** Some staff indicated that tips for transfer needed to be communicated right away with one advisor at the EWU focus group explaining, “[students need] tips on how to transfer and what if's and how to's...I think they need that information up front to go forward.” Another staff participant at EWU had a different take, “We've got tips. But we don't have up-to-date, accurate information. To me, that's different.”
- 10. Accommodation of start and end dates for courses:** “I think it's important for the reflection of constantly changing degree requirements; that's what's important to me,” noted one advisor at the UW focus group.
- 11. Faculty and staff communications:** An evaluations officer at the UW focus group explained that communication between institutions is important; however, it must be controlled by admissions/advising staff at each institution. “...between institutions, if there is a faculty member who is teaching a psychology class, our faculty person is not going to contact that faculty person to ask about that course. My [evaluation’s office] staff is going to call Central and say, ‘Hey, tell us about this course, can you send me the course description?’”
- 12. Survey for soliciting and collecting feedback:** “I don't have time to fill out surveys. It is the last thing you want to do. If it is working, use it,” explained a student at the Evergreen focus group.

**13. Unified statewide look/feel\*:** “It should be uniform, because isn't this about centralizing and not having it be so fragmented? So if it just shows cohesiveness, that's all we need,” commented an advisor at the UW focus group. However, an advisor at the Western focus group argued, “...it feels almost like everything is going to get so diluted...and institutions have potential to lose what it advertises about in their specialties and their mission, if everything looks the same from school to school...I just feel that having it statewide wouldn't serve our institutions.”

\*There were initially only 10 proposed features for development. Features #6 and #7, #5 and #8, and #3 and #13 were combined in the first focus groups.

Though there was some variation in ranking the different features across focus groups, the top four (listed below) were highly ranked by participants at each group.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Percent ranking it in top four</b>
Course equivalency tables	81%
Degree audit	60%
Interaction with existing systems	56%
User-friendliness*	48%

\* Some participants did not rank “user friendliness”, stating that it was “a given.” Thus, 48% understates its importance as a key feature.

Participants maintained that two proposed features should be left for future development efforts and “de-prioritized” for initial implementation: automated faculty and staff communication, and students’ ability to send their electronic records or unofficial transcripts. In both cases, advising and admissions staff indicated that processes for both functions already exist and are working relatively well. Allocating limited resources to duplicate these functions via a Web-based advising system might compromise the quality of other “must have” features.

Participants also had the option of writing in a feature for development on their ballot. Of the 75 participants, 21 people opted to add a feature to the list. The results are summarized below:

- Seven related to providing information or advising on how students’ interests might match with career paths, degree programs, and course decisions.
- Three emphasized that course equivalency tables also needed to show where a course counted and whether it would count for general education requirements or major requirements, not just if it would transfer and be counted as a general elective.
- Two people believed the ability to create ‘what if’ situations would help students plan better.
- Also listed, were increasing staff to maintain the system, a training program so that students would know to use the system, and ensuring that system remained free to all users.

Each of the focus groups also included discussion about a comprehensive marketing plan. Though this feature was not listed on the written ballots and therefore not ranked, it was a source of significant conversation. Participants generally agreed that an aggressive marketing campaign was critical to ensuring student buy-in. Case in point: many student participants indicated that they were not aware of resources *currently available* at their home institution.

## Conclusions

In the past, colleges and universities determined the timeline, process, and rules for a student to earn a degree. A lot has changed: factors like cost, competition, interests/career goals, time, location, and life and family concerns are all changing the ways in which students (in this sample) access higher education. Students have more choice about how and when they conduct their studies, and their paths through the higher education system are consequently becoming more complex.

Student participants recognize that they face a series of complicated choices, and they are excited about the possibility that they could access a ‘one stop shop’ for some of this information. They overwhelmingly support the development of a Web-based advising system, and they have high expectations for its function. Students are demanding fast, accurate, user-friendly service in helping them plan their education. If that level of service is not delivered, they will seek potentially inaccurate advice elsewhere.

Faculty and staff expressed much excitement about the possibility of a new Web-based advising system, especially those from the smaller, more geographically remote and technologically strapped schools. Coupled with that excitement is a healthy measure of anxiety about whether the system can be successfully implemented and whether the information will be accurate. There is a shared realization that for this to succeed it cannot be based on a one-time infusion of resources. There must be a plan for ongoing training, updating, improvements, and student-suggested changes.

The data gathered through the focus group process will be combined with other information gathering efforts, including a Web-based advising pilot project, to create the “backbone” of an RFP. The RFP will be used to select the vendor for the statewide system. In short, bidders responding to the RFP must be able to demonstrate that they can provide the functions that students and staff indicated were their priorities through this process.