



# Creating a Space for Student Voice in Advancing Program Review

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## Introduction

In 2018 the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) conducted an evaluation of the Illinois Community College Board's (ICCB) program review process, focusing on the career and technical education (CTE) programs. The purpose of program review is to support community colleges in decision-making and planning as related to institutional programming. OCCRL therefore framed the study to explore the use of the program review process as a tool for supporting student-centered, equity-minded, evidence-driven change within the Illinois community college system.

In conducting the evaluation, members of the research team focused on seven environmental and institutional factors derived from various literature sources to include leadership, strategic investments, equity-guided processes, engagement, statewide guidance and governance, data literacy, and infrastructure and information technologies (Arenth, Bennett, Bernadotte, Carnahan, Dube, Thompson, & Walton, 2017; Bragg, Bennett, & McCambly; Copland, Knapp, & Swinnerton, 2009; Spurlock & Johnston, 2012). This brief focuses specifically on the engagement factor and introduces student voice as an area of advancement within the program review process.

## Problem in Context

Within the study, engagement was defined as “diverse viewpoints and roles as encouraged and sought after, and contributes to ongoing improvement processes” (Fox, Thrill, & Keist, 2018). In exploring engagement within the program review process, we sought to understand how Illinois community colleges engaged external and internal stakeholders, as well as the roles and viewpoints, present within the program review process. Participants were asked to reflect on who facilitates and participates in the program review process. Within those findings there was representation of several stakeholders including faculty, research staff, and various levels of administration (deans, department chairs, vice presidents, for example) across both student and academic services. Noticeably absent from the program review process were several stakeholders that included one important group—the students.

Students take on several roles in higher education such as stakeholder, consumer, teacher, facilitator, and many more (Seale, 2010). However, in most instances, students are not included in the decision-making processes within their institutions. In many higher education institutions, in fact, students lack any sort of control and have little to no input with the exception of class participation. Instead, findings from processes such as program review inform the policies and practices that determine what students should do, with the expectation of positive outcomes. This has the potential to minimize students' opportunities to become possible leaders and experts in their own educational experiences, resulting in missed information that could be used to aid administrators in improving educational outcomes. There is an opportunity, therefore, to advance program review by incorporating students' voices.





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## Student Voice

In the field of education, student voice is defined based on the context in which it is used, offering various understandings and interpretations. For example, McAuley (2003), as cited by Seale (2010), defined student voice as “small excerpts of quotes from students in reports of evaluation work and labeling these quotes ‘the learner perspective’” (p. 997). Also cited by Seale (2010) is O’Neil and Wyness (2005), who refer to voice as “the perspectives of a stakeholder group that have not been sufficiently included in a discourse” (p. 998). The Great Schools Partnership (2013) provides a more robust, and perhaps acceptable, definition of student voice: “student voice refers to the values, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students in a school.” Seale (2010) believes student voice can be seen as several metacognitive activities that include seeking the student perspective, inquiring about student experiences, and hearing ignored voices.

Student voice can be represented as one of four types that encompass traditional, nontraditional, convenient, and inconvenient ways of communicating (Fletcher, 2015). “Traditional” refers to voice that comes from students who are generally expected to share their thoughts, while “nontraditional” voices are less likely to share their voices (Fletcher, 2015). “Convenient” voices are those that are expected in terms of who is going to speak and what is going to be said, whereas “inconvenient” voices are the thoughts of students who express themselves in unexpected or unpredictable ways (Fletcher, 2015). As program review is focused on equitable outcomes, it is important that institutions are inclusive of all student voice and move beyond the traditional voice to include the voices of all students.

## Importance of Student Voice

One might question why it is important to include student voice within program review. Seale (2016) offers several ideas behind the process of engaging student voice:

1. student feedback as having a transformative impact on institutional and teaching practices,
2. increased student engagement through participating in key decisions pertaining to their education, and
3. students being empowered and gaining agency by sharing their experiences and influencing change.

Perhaps the most important reason, as it pertains to program review, is that student voice can provide pertinent information as to the ways in which policies and practices influence the way students experience learning, which may complement or clarify existing outcomes data (Bourke & Macdonald, 2018). It can also be a valid way of understanding the way students experience and engage with the institution as a whole. Fielding (2001) suggests that student perceptions, which can be identified through student voice, also have the potential to inform institutions about their shortcomings.

## Incorporating Student Voice

When incorporating student voice into program review, it is important to consider whose voice will be heard. Educators must be sure to capture the diversity of voice across a variety of dimensions such as ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, academic intent, and gender. Lundy (2007) provides a framework of student voice that, while focused on K-12 schools, could be applied to higher education. The framework is based on the notion that there is no one voice, and that creating a space that welcomes and incorporates diverse voices is important (Bourke & MacDonald, 2018; Lundy, 2007). There are four areas of the framework:

**Space:** Students must be provided a space in which they are encouraged to express their views. The space must be inclusive and a location in which the voices of diverse student populations are solicited and participation is open to all. Students must also be protected from penalty when speaking their mind.

**Voice:** Students with a wide range of views must be encouraged and enabled to express their thoughts and should be reminded of the opportunity to express them freely.

**Audience:** Students must be provided with the opportunity to share their views to those who have a responsibility to listen and take action if it is warranted.

**Influence:** Action must be considered and possibly taken in response to student views after analyzing all viewpoints. Students should be informed of what actions were taken as a result of their views and be notified about how their thoughts were regarded.

Incorporating student voice into program review is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Institutions must consider the demographics of the student populations they serve and identify various ways in which student voice can be represented in program review. One way in which students can actively participate in program review is through student representation on the program review committee. Institutional leadership should leave spaces for students on the committee and invite them to participate as full team members and not just observers. However, be warned that doing so may result in a single voice that may not represent the entire student population. As an alternative, leadership can create a student board, similar to that of a student government association, that would better represent the student population and be more inclusive of diverse voices.

Mockler and Groundwater (2015) advocate for the need for qualitative and quantitative data, both of which can represent student voice. Qualitative data can be collected via focus groups, anonymous feedback, and interviewing, while quantitative data can be collected through student surveys. The use of both forms of data help to provide a more complete and thorough picture of what students experience and how they are affected, and can help focus institutional efforts and resources. Mockler and Groundwater (2015) warn that tightly controlled surveys may limit the topics students might speak about and restrict the ways in which they can share their views. As such, it is important to consider ways in which surveys can be less restrictive and more open-ended forms of data.

## Considerations in Incorporating Student Voice

Regardless of how student voice is incorporated, it is imperative to consider who is represented and to what extent they are invited and encouraged to share their views—and how their views will ultimately be considered. Fielding (2001) provides an evaluation for the conditions for student voice with the focus on speaking, listening, skills, attitudes and dispositions, systems, and organizational culture. Drawing on this evaluation, I pose the following questions for consideration:

- Who are we inviting to speak and are we limiting who they are allowed to speak to and what they are allowed to speak about?
- Who is listening and how are they listening?
- How do the cultural norms and values of the institution focus on, support, and value student voice?
- Have we created or encouraged a space (physical and metaphorical) in which dialogue can occur?
- How have we invited students into the program review process and what is their role?

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