

PACE Focus Groups

Monday, March 13, 2017 4:30-6pm & 6:30-8pm

Introduction:

Focus group facilitators met with two separate groups of first-year student athletes to obtain feedback regarding PACE (the Pack ACademic Edge). The objectives of the focus groups were to:

1. assess the impact of the program on first-year athletes transition to university.
2. find ways to improve the delivery of the PACE program.
3. have student athletes share their perceptions about the efficacy of the PACE program.

Method:

Focus groups were advertised and promoted through PACE leaders, posters, and recruitment emails to student athletes.

Two focus group sessions were scheduled on Monday, March 13, 2017 from 4:30-6pm & 6:30-8pm. The PACE recruitment email was sent out two weeks prior to the focus group sessions. The Information and Consent to Participate in a Focus Group form was printed and available with a sign-up sheet to join the focus groups at two PACE sessions prior to the 13th of March. The verbal explanation was given to student athletes who showed interest in attending the PACE focus groups. As well, subsequent recruitment emails were sent and reminder emails were sent to student athletes who signed up.

The two focus groups each started with introductions and an overview of the study. After obtaining informed consent from the participants, student participants were asked eight questions. Probes were used as follow-up and for clarification. The audio recorder was turned on following the introductions. Pizza was served and Tim Horton's gift cards were given to all participants with a value of \$10.00 each.

There were 12 participants at the 4:30pm session and 3 participants at the 6:30pm session.

Following the face-to-face focus group sessions, the audio recorded comments were transcribed ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Comments and suggestions are thematically arranged: attendance, timing and structure; study habits; PACE leadership; future involvement; and challenges of balancing demands.

Summary of Participant Comments and Suggestions

Attendance, Timing and Structure

Comments of Participants:

Athletes generally commented that they attend PACE because it is mandatory and at a suitable time of the week.

- *It's mandatory.*
- *The coaches say it's mandatory.*
- *I wouldn't dare miss it.*
- *I don't want to find out [what happens if I don't go].*
- *It helps that you have to go.*
- *It's good to have it on a Monday.*
- *Because we have to.*
- *Yeah, I think Monday is ideal because you start the week feeling refreshed- plus people travel [on weekends] and stuff like that so...*
- *It's really good that it's on Mondays.*

Participants further commented that most of the time they are studying unless they do not have any pending assignments.

- *I have a lot of labs, so I would say 80:20 [ratio] for homework [and socializing].*
- *If there's people you're close with it's like 60:40 [ratio] for homework.*
- *It's mostly studying.*
- *Like 50:50 [ratio homework to study].*
- *It depends on when the project is due [how much study is completed].*
- *Most people are probably doing work and just taking breaks.*

Student athletes also stated that the classroom was where more focused study occurs, but the flexible environment was also good as one could move if others were distracting.

- *[The room] is like the quiet zone.*
- *I think the room is where you study more.*
- *The room is pretty small.*
- *When you study in the room, it's for people who are more focused.*
- *Yeah, but then you just move [when things are distracting].*
- *You can study where ever you want.*
- *I think it's down to certain individual. Everybody studies in a different way, so you can't really fit PACE to fit everybody.*

Some commented that the time was not great, if it was not mandatory the athlete might not attend, and sometimes there were distractions.

- *Uh, no, I wouldn't [attend] every week. Honestly, it's after practice. I am exhausted, and I'm not very productive.*

- *Every Monday, I'm kind of forced to go.*
- *Maybe if a time change were possible.*
- *I feel like different days of the week could be good because we miss a lot of it because of practice. If there was two days and you only had to go one day.*
- *Depending on your schedule and what you have [impacts attendance].*
- *Yeah, sometimes [I'd attend if it was not mandatory], probably not every week.*
- *Personally- no [attending if not mandatory] because I feel like it's easier to study in one hour blocks rather than four hours straight.*
- *I feel like it depends on your program because sometimes you have to study everyday regardless.*
- *I try to do stuff. I'll get like 100 words done in two hours. It's a lot of [being on my] phone.*
- *I think it would be more effective if I could use the resources better, if it was at a different time - it could be specific to [my sport].*
- *Sometimes it gets too noisy.*
- *I think I would like it to be more enclosed. The sound kind of goes everywhere.*

Study Habits

Comments of Participants:

Participants commented that PACE helped them to be accountable and that some would not study if they went home.

- *The big thing on our team was accountability, so it made PACE sessions make me accountable for my own grades because we couldn't just say oh I didn't do this.*
- *I think seeing the other athletes in the same boat as you; they're coming from practices, and I'm like 'okay, I should probably go too.'*
- *If I go home, probably won't get any studying done.*
- *I don't really study too much at home.*
- *It's more accountability having the leaders there watching you.*

Athletes stated that the Monday night study session helped them get their week organized, manage time and build routine.

- *Even if I go and don't get anything done, at least I set up and know what I have to do [in the week] so that helps a lot.*
- *I know if I go to PACE, I will have all my stuff done.*
- *PACE forces you to start the week off.*
- *Having a set amount of time is good because we're already used to practice and training times, so it's built into us knowing we have to do this for 2 hours. Rather than one you can go anytime in these 6 hours.*
- *I think just having the time marked out for you.*

- *I think at the beginning of the year [we go] because of coaches, but towards the end, we start enjoying going.*
- *It becomes routine. Like you know that every Monday you have a set amount of time.*
- *Usually [with PACE] you get a good head start on the week.*
- *Yeah, I like it because I am able to make a schedule out of it...in a way it forces me to do it but it's not an obligation. I want to be there to get my work done.*

Participants identified that the PACE study sessions helped set study habits, develop focus and work with groups.

- *It's helped me study because I'm forced to be here, and I might as well do some studying; where I if I go home, I'll just watch TV or something.*
- *It's helped me get better study habits.*
- *You use the time more efficiently. I feel like it's pretty easy to get distracted when you go to PACE, but if you actually use it properly, you actually learned to become proactive.*
- *I feel like as opposed to going to study with your friends, everyone was there to study, so it helped to stay focused.*
- *For me, it's helped. It allows me to catch up, and there is help here if I need it.*
- *[Someone] helped me with biology last semester and that was a huge help for me.*
- *It definitely helped to learn to study in a group.*
- *When you're in high school, you do your work at school. But [in university] you're just told and have to go home and learn it for yourself basically, so PACE helped with getting the concepts down. It's nice.*
- *The first couple of weeks you're with your team. Then you're like 'okay, I actually have to get stuff done.'*

Comments were made that student athletes usually studied with people that they knew from their teams and spoke to PACE leaders from their sport.

- *But people on the same team in the arts would study together.*
- *We all just sit together [with our teams].*
- *I would see people on other teams that were in my class that I would speak to but not study with them every day so to an extent yes [interaction with other teams].*

PACE Leadership

Comments of Participants:

As for individual relationships with PACE leaders, student athletes felt like they could turn to certain leaders, but knew little about all leaders. Participants indicated that they were unsure of which courses the leaders could support and suggested availability outside of PACE.

- *All of the leaders, almost all of them are in arts. There was one girl in science, but having math questions, there wasn't really anyone who remembered first year content that could help you with a lot of the science courses.*
- *I think the PACE leaders could maybe interact with more students that they don't know. To have a random PACE leader ask 'how's it going? Do you need help with anything?' Could be beneficial because you might not want to speak up to someone you don't really know. If they come to you, it could be easier.*
- *[The leaders] only introduce themselves at the beginning [of the year].*
- *It depends on the person; I really don't talk to them.*
- *I feel like everyone sticks with their own teams' PACE leader more because you know them.*
- *I know who [the PACE leaders] are, but I don't know what they're studying.*
- *I just go up and ask them for help with math.*
- *They're super friendly.*
- *Maybe this is asking too much, but having [the leaders] accessible outside of PACE? Being able to ask them questions by text or something.*

Some stated that PACE leaders are doing homework, not there at set times and not checking in with student athletes. While others clarified that the leaders were there for set times and were circulating/ checking-in.

- *I think [the PACE leaders] are just there to do their homework too.*
- *They're definitely doing their work. You can ask them a question, but they're not there to do that.*
- *They kind of just do whatever they want. They aren't there for set times. They leave whenever they finish their stuff.*
- *There is a set amount of time they have to be there, but they don't have to stay for the full time. So they can be there for a half an hour and leave and come back.*
- *Sometimes they do [circulate].*
- *It would probably help me focus more if somebody came around and checked in.*
- *I know from experience, a PACE leader does check in to see if we're still working.*
- *Yeah, sometimes they would come in, and I would be on my phone and be like 'oh'.*

Future Involvement

Comments of Participants:

Participants commented that they may use PACE in their second year and beyond.

- *Maybe once in a while.*
- *When I have a lot of stuff to do, and I need to focus.*
- *Or if I do have a question about something I need to study, I can ask one of the PACE leaders.*
- *I think I might use it every once in a while.*

Participants also stated that they feel unqualified to be a PACE leader or that it may be a possibility in the future.

- *I'm not smart enough.*
- *Maybe in the future but not for a while.*
- *Potentially, possibly.*
- *I don't think I'm qualified.*
- *I would maybe do it.*
- *PACE leaders kind of just happen.*
- *I think being educated in the process to what it is to become a PACE leader would determine whether I would like to become a PACE leader.*

Challenges of Balancing Demands

Comments of Participants:

Student athlete participants spoke about the difficulty balancing and managing their busy schedules.

- *It's all the same [struggle]. You gotta make sure you're on top of [your sport]; you have to train, be in the gym, practice and make sure you're on top of school. It's hard doing it all.*
- *We just suffer silently.*
- *We [vent] about it to coach.*
- *Sundays we have off but have to do all of our homework.*
- *We have study hall hours we have to do.*
- *We have to do 8 hours a week [of studying]- 6 hours on top of PACE.*

Other

Comments of Participants:

Participants commented that overall, PACE was useful and that food or prizes would be an added bonus.

- *I think in general [PACE] is very beneficial.*
- *I don't think it's anything anybody dreads.*
- *Having pizza from time to time.*
- *Anything to do with food.*
- *Extra gift cards...for when everyone signs in they sign their name into a draw.*

Recommendations:

Overall, the mandatory first-year athlete requirement was accepted, and Mondays were identified as a good time of the week to get organized and set for the rest of the week. Although there are distractions at PACE such as socializing and noise, the flexible space and hallway environment allows student athletes to move to find a suitable study area. Athletes identified that PACE helped them to be more accountable, organized, focused and to work in groups.

As for the leadership, participants felt that athletes stuck with the leaders they knew and/or with their teams, suggesting that leaders could check-in and circulate more and make it more clear what subjects they could support. The participants identified that they might go to PACE in their second year and beyond and/or become a PACE leader. Finally, athletes commented about the difficulty of balancing their busy schedules and indicated that they are more likely to attend PACE when food is provided. Specific recommendations by the focus group facilitators are:

1. PACE leaders should circulate more and engage with students beyond those on their team.
2. Promote and advertise more on the subjects that each PACE leader can support, about their role and one-to-one session availability using the website, Facebook, whiteboard and in person announcements.
3. Eliminate distraction and noise by having quiet zones such as the classroom.
4. Offer greater support to athletes on how to balance demands: workshops, handouts, mini-lessons and such.
5. Increase focus and accountability by having deliberate goal setting at the beginning of each session.
6. Occasionally have snacks or food available at PACE sessions.

Conclusion:

The PACE focus groups provided insight about the impact, delivery and future of the program. The themes that emerged were attendance, timing and structure; study habits; PACE leadership; future involvement; and the challenges of balancing competing demands.

Student athletes identified that PACE helped them to get focused and organized for their week, study when they may not otherwise study and develop their ability to work in groups. The pack/community mentality emerged as several participants mentioned that they were motivated by being together and seeing others work. Participants commented that PACE held them accountable to studying and that they generally stayed in groups that they were familiar with such as with their teams or obtained assistance from the leader of their team.

The PACE leaders were identified as being friendly and helpful, but there was confusion over what subjects the leaders could support, when they were meant to be present and what their role actually is. Greater promotion and education about the role of the PACE leader would alleviate some of this mix-up.

Participants indicated that they may return to PACE in subsequent years as a leader and/or a student indicating value in the program. Finally, participants outlined the difficulty of balancing their schedules as an on-going challenge.

The goals of PACE are to offer first year students an informal study space where they can connect and get support from their peers. In these sessions, the aim is that student athletes have access to coaching on learning strategies, learn to improve their study habits, learn about campus resources, stay motivated and support time management/balance. From the focus groups, participants clearly identified that PACE helps keep them organized, accountable and focused; is motivating; and supports connection with leaders and each other.