

Building a Marketing Focus Group Facility: What Do You Need and What Will It Cost?

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This article provides a practical guide and insights into developing a focus group research center or a similar “learning lab” for the purposes of experiential learning, by describing a project to remodel a set of existing contiguous spaces within a school of business into a focus group research facility that enhances teaching, fosters faculty collaboration, and serves the marketing research needs of the community. The article presents some of the key trade-off design issues and connects these decisions to cost impact. A schematic for the facility and summary budgeting model are presented to aid in the development of similar projects.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to provide a practical guide and insights into developing a focus group research center or a similar “learning lab” for the purposes of experiential learning. An important trend in marketing education is the expanded role of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Wright, et. al. 1994; Wood, 2003; Corbett, 2005). While the need for developing students’ professional skills has become more acute (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Kelley and Bridges, 2005), students usually lack real world experiences (Ghose, 2013), making teaching methods that engage students with the business community increasingly necessary. One broadly defined teaching approach is the site visit (Van Doren and Corrigan, 2008), where students leave campus to observe “how different marketing disciplines work in the business world” (2008, p. 189). The alternative approach is to bring the “site” onto campus; work is performed via collaborative projects involving students and marketers. McKay-Nesbitt and Zdravkovic (2013) have shown that client-sponsored projects enhance learning and improve students’ confidence in their skills.

Recently, Marketing faculty at an East Coast business school determined that an on-campus, commercial-grade focus group research facility would provide a way to approximate the “learning

laboratories” in fields such as nursing (Joyce et. al. 1999; Jeffries et. al. 2002) and engineering (Dym et. al., 2013) and “trading labs” in business finance (Kish and Hogan, 2012). Much to their surprise, however, faculty members found a paucity of practical information regarding how to design such a facility. The lack of literature led to “reinventing the wheel” in many respects, which involved many hours of “best practice” fact-finding in the field, plus many more hours of adapting the facts to the particular needs of an academic setting. A small team of faculty volunteers took up the challenge to design and then manage the construction of the focus group facility over the course of two academic years. Upon completion of the project the team reviewed the planning process and agreed that a procedural guide would have greatly simplified the project and shortened its duration and cost.

This article provides such a guide to future planners by describing the project, which involved repurposing a set of existing contiguous spaces within a school of business, from goals-setting to the final incurring of expenses. Many of the findings can be applied with little modification for a variety of needs; however, some users will want to adapt the findings to special circumstances, and still others may wish to go in a different direction altogether (such as to create a different kind of facility). Thus, we describe the decision methodologies that were used so the findings can be adapted to a variety of other uses.

TARGET BENEFITS OF THE FOCUS GROUP FACILITY

The planning process began with a clear articulation of the benefits that the facility needed to provide. This statement was developed by the team working in close collaboration with the Marketing Department; it was agreed that the voice of other stakeholders would play a larger role in the upcoming “design” phase. A facility for conducting focus groups was viewed to provide the following benefits:

1. A realistic “field” setting in which students could assume various marketing research and decision-making roles. For example, students could act as moderators, clients (in role-play), account managers (for client-based projects) and research analysts. By serving as respondents students would have the chance to understand better how research design affects respondent behavior and the overall effectiveness of the focus group methodology. Since qualitative exploratory analysis can play a critical role in any type of marketing decision-making, a broad variety of courses could benefit from this feature.
2. Easy access for students and faculty, with applicability to a variety of courses and situations.
3. A signature component of the curriculum that promotes the school’s emphasis on “concept-to-practice” methods to stakeholders.
4. A “gathering place” for collaboration and socialization outside of discrete projects involving the facility.
5. A sufficiently functional facility for faculty to carry out academic research.
6. Potential for revenue via client-based research.

METHODOLOGY FOR FOCUS GROUP FACILITY DESIGN

Facility design here refers to (1) the architectural configuration of spaces (rooms) along with the requisite fittings (furniture, lighting, display boards) assigned to each space and (2) technology that permits communication and monitoring among spaces as well as between the facility and an external site (for example, via Internet streaming). At a bare minimum the design must have separate rooms for the focus group event itself and the observing group. In the marketing literature, the concept of focus group design has applied exclusively to the research method itself (e.g. Morgan, 1988; Edmunds, 1999); virtually nothing has been written about facility design. Therefore, the design team had to establish a methodology for how to gather information germane to the facility’s design. Their methodology hinged on four components:

1. Stakeholder interviews to capture a rendering of each vision.
2. Visits to other facilities to collect trade and craft details from experienced site managers.

3. Studies of web-site promotions for focus group research facilities (both traditional and non-traditional designs).
4. Interviews with subject-matter-experts (SME) in focus group research facilitators and coordinators.

Stakeholder Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to establish the initial design constraints and goals and dialog on how the stakeholders envisioned the space being used. Department faculty, the Dean of the Business School and a university facilities project manager were interviewed to identify common goals and hard constraints. Some of the key goals were that the facility:

1. Be operational within 9 months, or identify the critical path items necessary for completion
2. Support the educational experience of undergraduates and graduates.
3. Deliver a professional space that could be used to support commercial/research grants.
4. Require minimal training to reconfigure or operate.

At the same time the group was held to the following constraints:

1. Utilize existing space (initially, two adjacent conference rooms were offered as a possible target).
2. Ensure that the facility could continue to be used as a faculty meeting room.
3. Limit the budget to \$120,000. If exceeded, the group would have to secure additional funding.

Given the ambitious deadline and the complexity of the design task, the design team agreed to have weekly face-to-face meetings in addition to regular, ad hoc communications.

Visits to Focus Group Research Facilities

The design team invited key stakeholders (faculty, the Dean) to join tours of other facilities in order to develop a tacit, mutual understanding of the project and some of the nomenclature surrounding the facilities. This helped facilitate communications between the design team and its stakeholders at subsequent stages. The primary goal, however, was to find common principles underlying the facilities' design and operation as well as priorities on which to focus.

The design team's first visit was a brief, on-campus tour of a research facility run by the Psychology Department. Their space is designed for two to four interviewees and two to four observers (4/4). The design team found these rooms to be constrained in size and viewing angles. In general the team gained an appreciation for having adequate space for respondents as well as observers and made this an explicit imperative for the design.

Visits to commercial focus group facilities proved to be more informative. The largest of the spaces could accommodate 25 interviewees and 25 observers (25/25), which the design team defined as too large given the target space constraints. Given that the most effective focus groups involve six to twelve interviewees (Hair et. al. 2009) the team focused on medium-sized (12/12) facilities as its prototype with the thought that half of a class, 12 to 15, could observe while the other half of a typical class size could participate directly.

Some of the key design priorities uncovered during the tours:

1. Bland is beautiful. Color schemes ranged from shades of grey to shades of beige; no facilities used bright or emotive colors. This was expected, as there should be nothing to distract from the "focus" of an event.
2. Silence is golden. Several of the commercial space providers warned that background noise from air handling units were a critical concern, as were street noise, sirens, co-tenants (above and below). Importantly, observation and recording of focus group events demand good clean sound more than visual quality; nothing matters as much as audio quality.
3. Never the twain shall meet: the pathways of interviewees should not allow interaction with the observers.

4. Light the room for the cameras. For the purpose of video recording or broadcasting a live feed, uneven lighting would create “hot and cold spots” that ruined the video clarity. Fluorescent ceiling fixtures, some indirect and sometimes augmented with incandescent “top hats” provided an evenly distributed, clear lighting with few shadows sufficiently bright for recording and not too bright to be uncomfortable.
5. Furnish for comfort (especially in the observation room). The observation room adjacent to the main event room should be as comfortable as possible because observers typically watch multiple events for several hours, possibly for a number of days in a row. Normal standards of comfort could be applied to the room(s) in which focus group responds.

Studies of Website Promotions

After the tours the design team expanded its exploration by going to the Web, studying dozens of websites promoting focus group facilities for hire. While the sites were of some value, their targeting – opinion polls, health care, food marketing, and broadcasting – precluded their appeal to the design team’s needs. Moreover, facilities information was extremely limited with details of subject area expertise and methodology dominating. The team found only a few references to any “marketing” focus rooms in use in education. On the other hand the team found some useful information on observation rooms used in police interrogation; this in fact was what led the design team to use “surveillance web cams” or “home care monitoring” as a technology solution later in the project.

Interviews with Experts in Focus Group Research

After exploration of facilities and Websites, the team felt prepared to conduct interviews with subject matter experts in the field. The interviews helped to confirm priorities from previous stages as well as identify a narrower set of priorities. In general, the interviews converged on a common set of priorities that included the following:

- Good quality seating, especially in observation room.
- Simple design.
- Presentation rails.
- Alternative camera angles to work around the meeting facilitator.
- Sound is far more important than visual.
- Stairs and other handicap issues to be avoided.
- Tables in flexible configurations and other than 4 sides; round is good but semi-circle is better.
- Clear signage for bathroom locations.
- Food and refreshments for commercial observers.
- Reception area close to or adjacent to interview room.

After reviewing these findings the business school Dean was able to commit an additional (third) adjacent room to the focus group space to serve as a reception area (final item in the list, above). The office would double as office space for the faculty member who would act as the facilities coordinator when the rooms were operational.

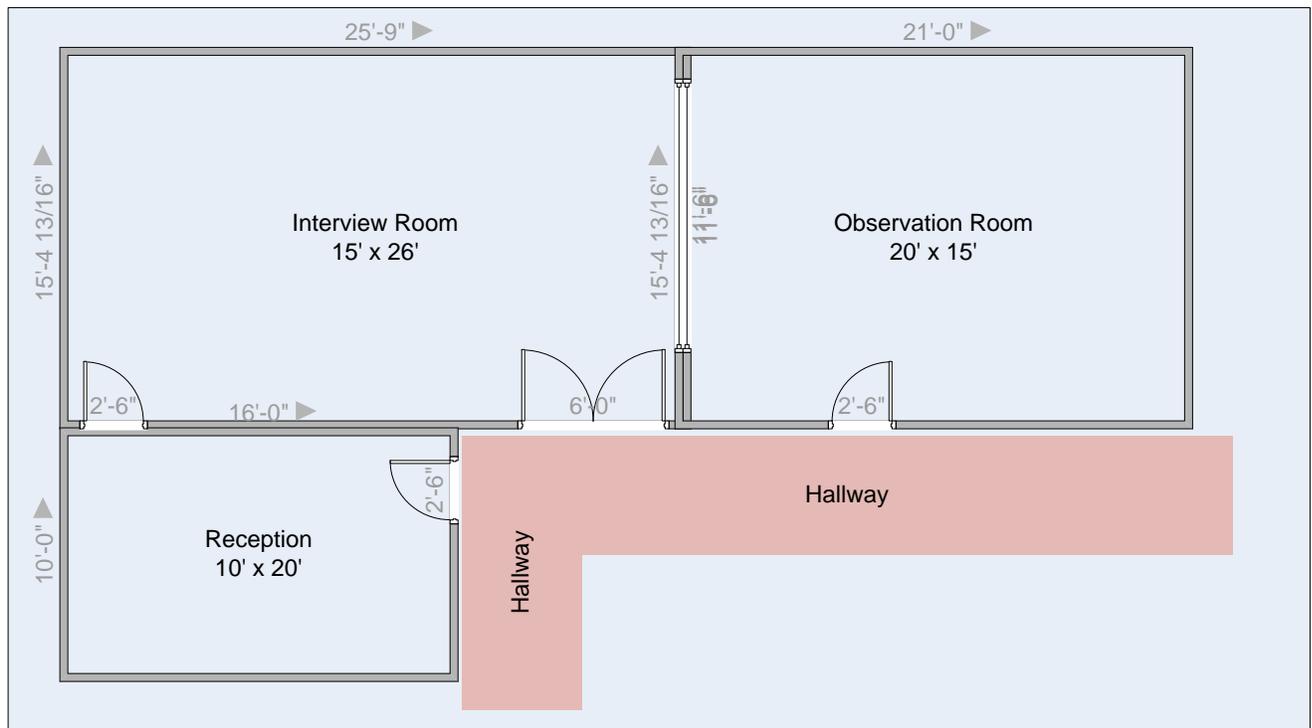
THE PRELIMINARY FOCUS GROUP FACILITY DESIGN

The facility evolved into a three-room structure that includes (1) a reception room, (2) focus group interview room and (3) observation room. Figure 1 shows a generic schema for three rooms developed at the outset of the project. Some key features of the design:

1. A doorway connects the reception room and interview room; the interview room and observation room are linked via a one-way observation window.
2. Subject traffic follows a clockwise loop (reception room to interview room to exit) and separates pre- and post-event participants.
3. A reception area stages early arrivers.

4. A comfortable observation room holds 12 observers.
5. Hallway paths assist in separation of subject participants and observers.
6. (Not shown in the Figure): Furniture for the interview is adaptable to different room configurations (for example, tables can be broken out into triangles & squares, or combined into one long table).

FIGURE 1
THE PRELIMINARY THREE-ROOM FACILITY LAYOUT



Having established a basic schema for the room layouts and fittings, the design team was able to focus on the underlying technology issues germane to the interface between the interview and observation rooms. The key design issues identified:

1. Interaction with moderator from the observation room is now done using text messages via personal communication devices (PDA's, smart phones), and therefore requires no equipment expense.
2. Both video and sound need to be delivered to the observation room simultaneously; video is presented on one or more monitors.
3. Video cameras in the interview room must provide line-of-site visuals for when the subject group is looking at/using a product (such as in a product use test), looking at the facilitator, and looking at wall display monitor.
4. Microphones must be kept away from AC fans and dampers and vent blow noise.
5. An "audio mixer" is required for when microphone and pre-recorded sound are both live in the room (i.e. when a video clip such as an advertisement is playing and being discussed).
6. An amplifier and multiple low-level speakers are needed to keep amplified sound within the observation room from being heard as an echo in the interview room.
7. The recording equipment may record a video track per camera but only one common sound track should be recorded.

Also, the design team decided that the interview room would rely on wireless laptop connections to the network and Internet in order to avoid the use of tech jacks in the furniture. The sole wire connection in the interview room would be for the moderator's laptop connection to the video wall display. On the other hand, wired connections would be provided in addition to wireless in observation room, as well as a generous number of power outlets (for use over extended hours).

REFINING THE DESIGN: INCORPORATING ACADEMIC IMPERATIVES

The next planning phase focused on customizing the basic design so that it more carefully matched the needs of the business school. A key concern was that the focus group space be flexible enough to accommodate two academic imperatives: teaching and faculty collaboration (meetings).

The teaching imperative involved enriching the student experience through exposure to and experience with the facility. It was agreed that many teaching objectives – for example, students could learn how to sample respondents, guide them to the facility, moderate the discussion, observe the discussion, analyze the qualitative data and report the findings – would be addressed by the facility regardless of its configurations. However, other academic purposes impacted design. For example, the design team wanted to ensure that students would be able to observe focus group events and “behind-the-mirror” operations. Moreover, development of student's technical skills was deemed a secondary, but important, criterion (Benbunan-Fich et. al., 2001). The team therefore envisioned that students would become involved with the operation of the facility, to develop research-specific AV and other technical skills. From these priorities emerged three key criteria:

1. Seating must be provided for up to 15 individuals in the observation room.
2. Equipment must be manageable by students with little training.
3. Installation should be enclosed to minimize equipment walking off.

The faculty collaboration imperative created some minor design challenges. The team envisioned that the room could accommodate teleconferences and Web meetings, as well as media-rich presentations for or by faculty. Also the room would be used for departmental and school committee meetings, where private discussions often are the norm. Finally, space for faculty meetings was deemed to be at a premium and therefore the facility needed to accommodate as many meetings as possible. From these priorities emerged three additional criteria:

1. AV equipment should be as simple to use as possible so that presenters require little to no set-up time.
2. Privacy is a must – there must be a way to prevent observation and recording from the observation room when desired.
3. To minimize scheduling conflicts the observation room should be configurable for meeting purposes as well.

Some of the emergent criteria had overlapping implications with those identified earlier. For example, easy-to-use AV equipment would enhance the functionality of the room for research as well as academic purposes; the need for flexibility in room configurations had already been established, and AV equipment for focus group research could be repurposed fairly easily for faculty use. However, five key conflicts were identified:

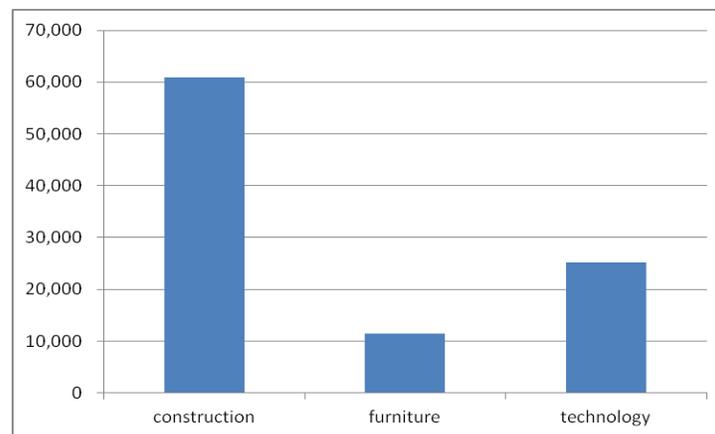
1. Visibility from observation room normally dictates a type of seating arrangement that takes up space and limits seating capacity.
2. Observability conflicts with privacy.
3. “No loose bits” means that certain sound transmission/reproduction technologies cannot be used.
4. Simplicity of equipment compromises some functionality (for example, zooming cameras are excluded from consideration).
5. Neutrality of interview room décor (demanded by research) results in less “academic” looking space; it also constrains placement of power and Ethernet jacks.

THE DESIGN SOLUTION

A combination of furnishings and technology provided suitable compromises for some of the conflicts noted in the previous section. For example, privacy for faculty meetings was addressed by adding to the interview room both (1) a curtain for the one-way monitoring window, and (2) a dedicated “kill switch” for the microphone (lighted to alert to its on or off state). Also, some Ethernet jacks and electrical outlets were added to the interview room walls for faculty meetings, but kept to a minimum to prevent the space from looking too “technical.”

In other cases, the team had to make trade-offs (for example, simplicity of operation versus versatility; the “neutral research décor” versus “academic” décor). In general, simplicity and neutrality trumped their conflicting alternatives. The primary concern was to have a functioning space that could be set up and operated at a very low cost. In the final result, three adjacent rooms totaling approximately 890 square feet provide the functionality needed. From start (conceptual planning) to finish (ribbon cutting) the project involved the continuous (but not dedicated) effort of the design team and stakeholders one year to actualize on the plan. The final costs of \$110/sq. ft. were earnestly managed to a total of \$97,000. A summary budgeting model, presented in Figure 2, provides some of the key planning elements that will be helpful for similar projects.

FIGURE 2
SUMMARY BUDGET – TOTAL BUDGET (MANAGED TASKS) \$97,462



Implementation saw a few small but very significant complications that unlike a typical campus space remodeling effort required some creative solutions.

1. Specification for the one-way glass included a decision on visibility of shadowy observer figures to focus group participants. We chose a modest but not high security level both for cost and ease of installation. We also chose three equal sections of glass with a narrow glazed joint to avoid a single annoying seam in the center of the viewing field. We also used the picture window format rather than ceiling to floor format, to reduce materials and installation costs.
2. After consulting with three sound engineers, we concluded that a single high quality flush ceiling mounted microphone, placed away from any air noise from vents, would be the least complicated to manage and most reliable to use. A line-amplifier, normally added for signal quality, was required for the “privacy” wall switch which permits disabling the microphone when the room was used by faculty for meetings.
3. Three high quality PTZ security web cameras were installed shifting to more modern technology than the classic video camera configurations both for cost and ease of installation. Three slave monitors were mounted above the window in the observation room to allow easy reference of

details as viewed from the opposite end of the room greatly increasing observation vantage points.

4. Sectional tables with wheel legs that fasten in alternative configurations and can be gimbaled to 90 degrees for easy removal and reduced storage requirement. Also, while there are three rows of seating each with a continuous counter work surface, we decided to use three different and increasing heights of counters and chairs instead of the more expensive and complicated rake or platform construction of the observation seats.
5. With the installation of one internal door we were able to provide for the circulation into and out of the focus room with minimal opportunity for participant contamination between groups.
6. Manual framed opaque blackout curtains were used to eliminate all light from the pre-existing windows in the observation room. Raising the curtains reverts the space to a more normal meeting room.

All other implementation decisions were easily within the realm of standard interior design questions for office space and represented no unique challenges. Indeed, once the above issues were understood the demolition, construction, and implementation steps were completed in about 45 days. In the first year of operation, the only serious problem involved replacing the ceiling microphone line amplifier after it unexpectedly shorted out.

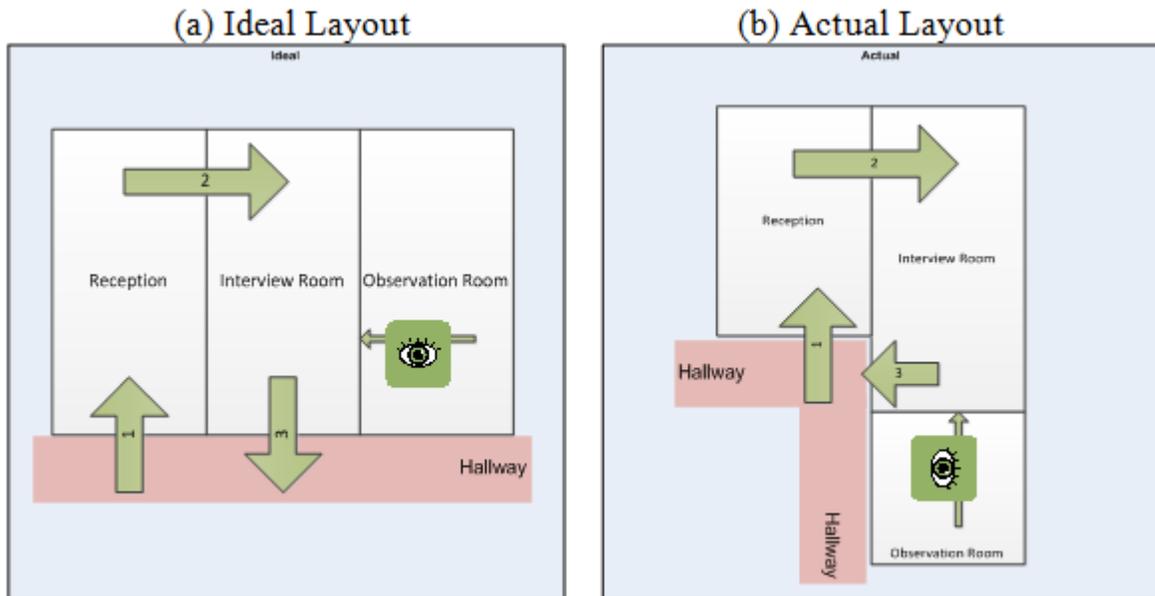
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The design project summary presented here can be emulated for a variety of similar projects in business schools that focus on designing hands-on work/laboratory spaces. In particular, the cross-functional design team model and methodology for fact finding and design criteria is recommended for a broad variety of projects (e.g., trading room, polling center, training lab). In retrospect the design team was satisfied with the approach it took.

The discussion of physical layout and technology naturally are limited to developing focus group facilities, but even there the specifics should provide practical guidance for a broad range of situations. Again, the design team was satisfied with the design solutions and implementation; however, a few recommendations are warranted for future projects:

1. A 3-D design rendering of the target space might have reduced the time to sit in the space and imagine the future demolition and changes. This of course is more expensive and introduces an “expense versus time” trade-off decision.
2. The building corner that accommodated the facility provided the only workable, though not ideal, rooms available. Figure 3 shows two configurations. The ideal layout (3A) has three deep rooms sharing long walls that allow for a broad viewing line of sight and clear segregation of groups entering the focus event and groups exiting the focus event. Instead, the design team was constrained with a setup akin to (3B), which provided none of those benefits, and increased the amount of cabling needed for AV equipment.
3. The team chose to use a security recording device for video capture for a variety of good reasons, but in practice it has proved too complicated for student management. It continues to search for a simple and effective process for recording to DVD.

FIGURE 3
ALTERNATIVE LAYOUTS FOR A THREE-ROOM CONFIGURATION



Technical issues aside, the focus group facility has proved to be an unqualified success. Over the first two years the Marketing Department used it for over two dozen client-based student projects in a variety of courses. Some advanced projects have led to substantial donations by satisfied clients. Others have led to improvements in on-campus services (e.g., library, computing services). Client involvement with the center has increased the availability of guest speakers at special events and in classrooms. Moreover, student enthusiasm for the center has made it one of the “faces” of the Marketing Department. Growing interest in focus group research has inspired a course dedicated to qualitative research, and that interest has spilled over into other disciplines (quantitative analysis, project management). Finally, the facility has provided a highly visible and “sticky” platform for the Marketing Department’s relations with its various constituencies; a web site showcases the facility and actual case studies of student projects and their impressions of the experience. All indications point toward a growing interest in Marketing as a major.

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