



## SCHOOL OF FOREST RESOURCES: STUDENT FOCUS GROUP

Michael J. Dooris  
Center for Quality and Planning

November 2002

### Introduction

Penn State's School of Forest Resources is examining the appeal of its programs to students and potential students. It is considering the SFR's recruiting-oriented publications and its website, student perceptions of the School and its majors, what attracts students, and so forth, with the goal of learning how to better communicate with and attract potential majors. As part of that process, a focus group was held with 13 students enrolled in the School of Forest Resources on November 6, 2002. Participants represented a fairly representative mix of the student body: five women and eight men; one graduate and twelve undergraduate students; traditional-aged and returning adult students; University Park initial enrollees and change-of-assignment students; in-state and out-of-state students; and majors from all three of the School's programs (wood products, forest science, and wildlife & fisheries science).

The groups were moderated by the director of planning research from the Center for Quality and Planning, joined by Betty Harper, the undergraduate program coordinator in the School of Forest Resources.

### Issues and Ideas

**Positive Tone.** Throughout the focus group, it was absolutely clear that the students are pleased to be enrolled in the School of Forest Resources. They seem to genuinely enjoy and take pride in the climate, size, friendships, and programs of the School. They were enthusiastic and positive.

The purpose of the focus group was to explore what the School might do better, so the remainder of this report emphasizes possible opportunities for improvement. It is important to reiterate, however, that students were very upbeat about their experiences in the School of Forest Resources.

**Website.** The invitation to students asked that they be prepared to discuss the School of Forest Resources' website ([www.sfr.cas.psu.edu](http://www.sfr.cas.psu.edu)), and they were. Participants said that they see the website as functional. The site is generally navigable and contains basic, relevant information. Improvement-oriented feedback included:

- The color scheme is "too metallic" and "the banner is too black." The site "could use some makeup."
- It would be helpful for the site to have examples of "why we're here" – short profiles of students of different ages and disciplines (the profiles of faculty and their interests now on the site are good).
- It would, similarly, be nice to see profiles of people working in the respective fields – something like, "what do you do with a major in -----?"
- The information about the program's requirements (in particular those for graduate study) may be "a little scary." Perhaps there can be a statement that if potential students are uncertain about

whether they meet certain requirements, they should contact the School and someone will be happy to work them.

- The search function is pretty horrible (this seems to be a generic Penn State weakness, though).
- There is a minor problem with the drop-down menus; sometimes the user must navigate backwards or can't scroll directly through the frame (*point of information: it is hard to explain well here, but the moderator did play with the website and there can be some awkwardness.*).
- The SFR website is not especially easy to find. Are there ways to help (through keywords, header tags, and so forth)?
- Is there a quick facts section of the website, with information about the number of students, number of graduates, jobs, salary ranges, size of the industry, and so on? If so, it is not easy to find.
- The site could do better on job possibilities. The job postings give the impression that opportunities are not very good for undergraduates, in particular.
- It seems that the site is pretty static; "it never gets updated."

**Brochures.** The participants reviewed pamphlets from the various programs. They prefer the more colorful, larger format publications (wildlife and fisheries, forest technologies) to the smaller, less-colorful format (forestry). They like the SFR folder (file folder with pockets). They don't believe potential students actually read much of the text in the folders; the overall impression and photographs are probably more important than the factual information and text in this type of publication. It is important for the pamphlets not to look outdated (so don't include photographs of students working on obsolete computers).

**Why Choose an SFR Major? "It's Fun!"** Clearly and as expected, many SFR enrollees are in the School because of some variation on the theme, "I wanted to work outside." In terms of messages to potential students, this is an obvious message. But appeals could also be clearer that "this is a fun School!" It is small, the classes are interesting, the interactions with other students and faculty are positive, there is a close-knit and friendly atmosphere – but the participants feel that very little of that comes through the School's recruiting and PR materials. More quotes and pictures of students would be helpful.

**Reach Out to High Schools.** Several of the participants learned about the School through personal interactions and contacts while they were in high school or (in one case) the Pennsylvania Governor's School. The SFR should do all it can to promote individual, personal, live contacts with high school students. At least two participants had the experience of going back to their old high schools as "guest teachers" and felt that this led to some interest among the students they met there. Can SFR do a better job of promoting and facilitating these types of visits? Can the School provide various freebies to go along with the informational brochures (pencils, rulers, candy, key chains....)? Can the School do more for visiting high school students along the lines of an open house, overnight stays with current SFR majors, sitting in on one or two classes, or organizing field trips to Shavers Creek?

**Job Prospects.** Most of the participants said they had factored job prospects into their decision to choose an SFR major. SFR could be clearer about career possibilities for its graduates. There are a lot of positive, related messages – such as the importance of current social/policy concerns (about renewable resources, water quality and so on) that are likely to keep knowledge and skills about Ag Sciences generally and SFR in particular very relevant. Also, the size and significance of the relevant industries (for example, wood products) are probably not widely appreciated and could be better communicated.

**Ties to Industry.** Ties to industry matter a lot to students; the School doesn't do as much as it might in terms of internships, field trips, summer camps, harvesting programs, and other hands-on experiences. A stronger alumni network could help with these kinds of activities, along with contacts for informational interviews with working professionals. The SFR has some of these types of opportunities and programs now, but the focus group participants feel that more can be done.

**Practitioner versus Scientist Orientation?** There was a sense that Penn State's SFR is stronger at and more interested in preparing students for graduate school and careers as scientists, as opposed to working in the field as practitioners. Again, more hands-on work is desired. Similarly, can the SFR arrange a job shadowing program with practitioners for its students?

**Quality of Penn State's Program.** The participants aren't sure that potential students realize the high quality of Penn State's School of Forest Resources – that it is one of the oldest and largest schools of its kind in the country, offers the strongest and only accredited program in Pennsylvania, and so on. On a related note, the positive academic and experiential aspects of being part of “a small school in a big university” could be better communicated.

**On-Campus Visibility.** The participants offered several ideas on how the School could make itself more visible on campus, as a way of perhaps reaching out to underclassmen undecided about their majors. Ideas included having woodsmen demonstrations near the center of campus and posting temporary “did you know....?” signs near trees on campus, with interesting facts about catalpas or the American elms, and a note about how to learn more.

**Interactions with Faculty.** What can be done to promote interactions with SFR faculty, for potential students and current students? Can there be a drop-in or take a faculty member to lunch program? How available are faculty members to meet with visiting high school students, or with Penn State underclassmen considering an SFR major?