

What are students thinking?
A practical guide to focus groups for
assessment

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Student Affairs Assessment

DISCLAIMER:

- The process described is for assessment-related focus groups ONLY.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the workshop, you will be able to:

- List the 8 steps in conducting a focus group
- Name one practical tip you learned

What is a focus group?

- “ A carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.”

- Krueger, 2000

When to conduct a focus group

- Generate **feedback** on new ideas
- Identify programs **strengths/weaknesses**
- Examine **attitudes or opinions**
- Provide information for **designing surveys**
- **Interpret results** from other assessments

When NOT to conduct a focus group:

- Topic is **sensitive or emotionally** charged
- **Confidentiality** is required
- **Statistical projections** are needed
- There is **no intention of using results**

8 Steps

1. Determine goals & purpose
2. Establish a timeline
3. Identify & invite participants
4. Select facilitator & assistant facilitator
5. Choose location
6. Generate questions, develop script & rehearse
7. Lead focus group
8. Make sense of data & report

Step 1: Determine Goals & Purpose

Ask yourself:

- What do I want to know?
- Why do I want to know it?
- What answers might I expect?
- What will I do with these answers to improve my program?

Your Turn

Using your handout, please answer:

- What do I really want to know?
- Is a focus group right for me?

Step 2: Establish a Timeline

- Determine when you need the results
- Decide length & number of sessions
- Select session dates
- Set deadlines for recruitment

Step 3: Identify & Invite Participants

- Determine inclusion/exclusion criteria
- Similar types of participants
- 8-10 participants per group
- Over invite

Step 4: Select Facilitator

- Create a comfortable atmosphere
- Guide discussion & keep on track
- Sensitive to gender & culture issues
- Good speaking, listening, & synthesis skills

Step 4: Select Assistant Facilitator

- Takes notes for the group
- Makes note of group dynamics
- Monitors time
- Assists individual participants

Step 5: Choose Location

- Convenient & easy to find
- Free from auditory & visual distractions
- Comfortable & accessible seating
- Large enough to fit the group

Step 6: Generate Questions

- Short and to the point
- One question at a time
- Open-ended
- “Think back” questions

Step 6: Generate Questions – Be Engaging

- Create list
- Rate aspects of a program
- Choosing amongst alternatives
- Sentence completion
- Drawing a picture or diagram

Step 6: Generate Question - Sequencing

- Easy beginning & sets the tone
- Logical sequence
- Move from general to specific
- Prioritize questions

Your Turn

- Draft one question
- Draft one engaging activity

Step 6: Develop Script

- Opening
 - Welcome, review purpose, explain process, establish ground rules, and introductions
- Questions
 - Include a list of probes
- Closing
 - Thank participants, answer questions, explain how the data will be used

Step 6: Rehearse

- Conduct a mock session
- Familiarize yourself with the script
- Review and revise questions

Step 7: Lead Focus Group

- Maintain eye contact with the speaker
- Make connections between participants' comments
- Summarize discussion before moving to next question
- Probe when necessary

Step 7: Lead Focus Group - Hearing Everyone

- No response: Pause & ask again
- Talkative: "Thanks, does anyone else have something to add?"
- Self-appointed expert: "Thank you, does anyone have a different experience?"
- Shy: Make eye contact, smile, then ask general question to group

Step 8: Making Sense of Data

- Within hours of the session
 - Date & time all notes
 - Review notes and fill in any gaps
 - Combine facilitator notes and assistant facilitator notes
 - Prepare a brief report of this group in a question-by-question format

Step 8: Making Sense of Data

- Within days of the groups
 - Compare and contrast results between focus groups
 - Identify emerging themes by question
 - Look for emerging themes overall
 - Use quotes to illustrate the key points
 - Beware of letting initial results tainting later groups

Step 8: Reporting

- Report key findings
- Relate findings to the goals and purpose of the focus group
- Include recommendations
- Prioritize findings and make action plans
- Submit Compliance Assist report

Be ready for the unexpected

- Nobody shows up
- Only a few attend
- Participants bring others or uninvited show up
- Group doesn't want to leave
- Group won't talk
- Early questions take too much time

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For more info

- Ohio State Center for the Study of Student Life
- Richard Krueger

Characteristics of Focus group Interviews

<http://www.eiu.edu/~ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf>



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