

Focus Groups

A Method of Indirect Assessment

What are Focus Groups?

Focus groups are small groups (usually about 6-10 members) who meet for approximately sixty minutes in order to discuss a specific topic under the guidance of trained moderator. A focus group provides a method of indirect assessment for Program Assessment. Small programs can use one focus group to gather qualitative data; larger programs may want to conduct a focus group on each campus.

Focus groups are versatile in that they can be used to gather information before, during or after a program of study is completed. For example, students who are about to graduate from a particular program can discuss answers to specific questions regarding their perceptions of student learning throughout the program and as they enter the workforce.

They are flexible because they can be organized rather quickly and produce faster results than other methods, such as surveys and questionnaires. They are also inexpensive.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) identify four types of applications for focus groups:

1. Exploratory Data Gathering: used before a program is implemented.
2. Refining Ongoing Programs and Services: used to adapt programs to better suit student needs or to develop progress reports on a program.
3. Evaluating Completed Programs: used to assess what worked and what did not work and why.
4. Validating Results of other Research Methods: used to confirm or expand on direct assessment results.

What are the key components of a successful Focus Group?

The Organizer

The Organizer sets the dates, times, locations, and procures refreshments for the focus groups. The Organizer contacts all parties involved in the focus group and is present before and during the actual discussion in order to greet participants, handle refreshments, operate recording equipment, etc.

The Moderator

The Moderator guides the discussion by asking questions (which the moderator and others have designed prior to the session) and facilitating group interaction through use of probing techniques. Moderators welcome participants, review the purpose of the study, and present a set of ground rules for participation and confidentiality.

The Participants

Participants are recruited from the particular target audience that will help to achieve the specific purpose of the focus group. If a department wanted to assess its completed program, then the participants could include students about to graduate from a program or students currently enrolled in a capstone course. Participants may be referred to by their first name and are reminded that comments shared during the focus group should remain confidential.

The Questions

Focus Group questions should generate as much discussion as possible; therefore, questions should begin with the following types of phrases: “How do you feel about ...,” “What is your opinion of ...,” or “Please describe ...” Questions should be written by faculty and administration in the discipline/program area and should be linked to a particular Program Objectives that is to be measure for the year.

Organizer's Checklist

____ Do you have participant contact information?

____ Did you schedule room, time, and any equipment needed?

____ Did you send out meeting time to participants?

____ Did you confirm attendance at the session?

____ Did you make arrangements for refreshments?

____ Did you coordinate note taking and/or recording activities with moderator?

____ Did you and the moderator work with each other to collate responses and distribute this information to the appropriate constituencies for interpretation?

____ Did you send a thank you note to the participants for completing the focus group session?

Moderator's Guidelines

1. Work with appropriate faculty and administration in order to determine what type of focus group is needed.
2. Once type of group is identified, then work with the appropriate constituencies in order to create approximately 7-10 open-ended questions that will gather information that will achieve the purpose of conducting the specific type of focus group.
 - Open-ended questions begin with “How do you feel about...?” “What is your opinion of ...?” “Please describe ...?” Avoid questions that have potential yes/no answers or simple numerical responses. For example, instead of asking “How long do you typically wait before seeing an advisor?” you could ask “How do you feel about the length of time you wait before seeing an advisor?” Or get at more specific answers, “Which is more important to you: shorter waiting time or extended hours?”
 - Visual aids may help participants to provide more information. Make sure that you have any visual aids prepared prior to the focus group session.
3. Draft a Welcome Statement (approximately 5 minutes in length) that will explain the purpose of the study and a list of ground rules for participation. Remember to include the following information.
 - Welcome participants and introduce yourself and the organizer.
 - Explain purpose of study and why participants were chosen
 - Explain that answers will be kept confidential—results will not include student names—and explain any recording system, etc.
 - Outline basic rules: all people should speak up one at a time; moderator may break in or ask a follow-up question in order to assure clarity; participants may respond to each other's comments, etc.
 - Explain procedures for rest room use, refreshments, etc.

4. Review methods for probing, keeping people on track and having everyone participate. For example, probes include questions such as “Is there anything else?” “What do you mean by...?” If someone is monopolizing the discussion, interrupt at an appropriate time and say “That is an interesting point. I would like to know what others in the group think about that.” You may want to write a few notes under your copy of the questions so that you remember to get at some of the important points.
5. Have a concluding statement prepared and ask if anyone has anything else they would like to say. Thank everyone for their participation and again explain how the information will be used.
6. Using recording device and notes, prepare a written report of responses. This report should be objective: do not incorporate your own interpretations.
7. Distribute focus group data to the appropriate constituencies. Arrange a time when that group can meet in order to analyze the results. When analyzing results, highlight major themes, note strengths and weaknesses, and **MOST IMPORTANTLY, REVIEW INFORMATION IN ORDER TO DESIGN WAYS OF IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING.**

Materials prepared by D. Maldonado, 2008

Source Information: Much of this content is found in *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*. 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass.

Community College Survey of Student Engagement Focus Groups: Moderator Do's and Don'ts

MODERATOR DO'S

- Follow the discussion outline and activities, as designed, in a consistent manner from group to group; use the same key questions in each session.
- Use a neutral, yet comfortable and inviting tone of voice and facial expressions.
- Ask questions to clarify participants' points and increase understanding of each point made by participants.
- Ensure that each participant contributes throughout the conversation.
- Give people time to think by using pauses whenever needed. Be comfortable with silences.
- Be respectful of all points of view and instruct those in the group to do the same. *(Reminder: this is neither a debate nor an attempt to reach consensus on any issue.)*
- Use plain language! Avoid the jargon used by the college within the "inner circle."
- Keep the discussion moving to stay within the specified timeframe.
- **End the focus group discussion on time!**

MODERATOR DON'TS

- Don't try to guide the participants to your own conclusions.
- Don't share your own opinion or experiences.
- Don't dominate the conversation.
- Don't criticize or ridicule anyone's comments or allow anyone in the group to do so.
- Don't challenge the accuracy of participants' knowledge or views.
- Don't translate jargon or slang terms. *(If someone asks what a term means, ask the individual using the term to explain what he or she means.)*
- Don't interpret participants' comments for the group.
- Don't give answers to participants' questions.

Participant Consent Form

The faculty and staff of the Community College of Allegheny County are committed to doing all we can to help students achieve your academic goals. The purpose of conducting student focus groups is to learn about your experiences at this college and to hear your thoughts about what we are doing well and what we need to improve to help you and other students stay in college to achieve your goals.

Participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary. If you have any questions about this study, please contact [\[college contact person's name\]](#).

I, _____,
_____, understand and agree that:
(Name: please print) (Name of College)

- a. The information gathered in this focus group will be summarized and may be used by the college to report on the outcome of the discussion.
- b. My comments may be audiotaped and/or videotaped for the sole purpose of maintaining an accurate record of the discussion that will be a reference for any reports derived from the discussion.
- c. While my name may be listed as a focus group participant and my comments may be used in a report derived from the focus group discussion, my comments will not be attributed directly to me.

Information derived from this focus group discussion may be used in publications and presentations to further the educational goals of this and other community colleges.

I agree to participate in this project according to the preceding terms.

Participant's Signature

Address

City, State, Zip Code

(_____) _____
Telephone

E-mail Address

Date