

Conducting Effective Focus Groups

Surveys serve as a great resource to collect information on what the student is feeling or has been experiencing, but it is limiting on determining the why. In addition, surveys are typically used to collect data from a large group, but it is really hard to obtain detailed information and deep insight when including so many participants.

A Focus Group is a very useful assessment method for helping to determine the why and dive in deeper on student experiences. Focus groups allows for an intimate, small group and creates an accepting environment that encourages participants to share their different insights and opinions without fear of judgment. The purpose is to share their thoughts, not to vote or come to consensus. Focus Groups and Individual Interviews have very similar intentions, but focus groups are advantageous because the participants are often prompted to respond based on what the other participants have shared; many of us need to listen to others viewpoints before forming our own opinions. Focus groups provide the opportunity to receive multiple opinions in a shorter timeframe.

There are many details to consider when planning an assessment project utilizing focus groups such as developing the questions, sampling, recruiting and preparing for the participants, conducting the focus group sessions, and analysis.

Characteristics of a Focus Group

- A focus group is a facilitated, open discussion with a small group of participants led by an experienced moderator and co-moderator. A typical focus group should be between 6-10 participants that share common characteristics. If you allow the group to be too big, not everyone will be given the opportunity to share their thoughts and may be too intimidated by the size of the group. If it is too small, it could limit the diversity of the participants' perceptions.
- The focus group moderator provides an environment where the participants feel comfortable providing their opinions and experiences. The ultimate goal of the moderator is to collect as many diverse viewpoints as possible from the participants during each session.
- The standard length of time for a focus group is anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. Any longer and the sessions become inefficient and the participant's time needs to be considered.
- Focus groups should be conducted using focused, predetermined open-ended questions that will lead to a robust, continuous discussion. These questions need to be carefully developed with the intention to answer the larger question (often the research question).
- It is necessary to conduct at least three to four focus group sessions on one topic in order to yield accurate results. Your ultimate goal for focus groups is to reach saturation, which is when the researcher no longer needs any more data because additional data will not provide any new information on the topic.
- A focus group is not:
 - A debate
 - Group therapy
 - A conflict resolution session
 - A problem solving session
 - An opportunity to collaborate
 - A promotional opportunity
 - An educational session

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Selecting the Focus Group Topic and the Participants

- Before the focus group questions are determined, it is essential to determine the topic or purpose of the assessment project. What is the assessment question you are trying to answer?
- Next think about who can provide the information you are seeking. Typically you will want to choose participants who can best answer your research question, which is referred to as purposive sampling. Even though the goals of the focus group do not need to mirror the general population, sampling methods may be useful in choosing the focus group. The following are sampling methods utilized with qualitative assessment:
 - Typical Case Method: need to determine what characteristics make up the population of the group being assessed so there is a representative sample (knowing what type of student)
 - Extreme or Defiant Case Sampling: knowing there is an “atypical” student (students who have experiences that are vastly different from the typical student)
 - Stratified Purposeful Sampling: You may create one focus group that represents the “typical” case, one focus group that represents the “extreme” case.
 - Maximum Variation Sampling: method used to capture general themes or patterns when a variety of experiences or opinions exists.
 - Snowballing or Referral Method: involve asking other individuals to recommend or refer other participants for the focus group (ask advisors or faculty for recommendations)
 - Convenience Sampling: picking a group of students that are available at the right time or place (e.g. in the hallway)

Developing Focus Group Questions

- Now that the topic/purpose and the participants are identified, it can guide the development of your focus group questions. You should compose between eight to 12 questions, any more and you won’t have time to ask all of them.
- The participants won’t see the questions ahead of time, so be sure to ask questions that are understandable and participants can easily respond. The following should be considered when writing your questions:
 - Keep them short and to the point
 - Focus on one dimension each
 - Unambiguously worded
 - Open-ended or sentence completion types
 - Non-threatening or embarrassing
- There are three types of focus group questions:
 - Engagement questions: these are opening questions that introduces the participants to each other and makes them feel comfortable
 - Exploration questions: these questions are focused on the topic at hand

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- Exit question: these are follow-up questions to determine if anything else needs to be addressed related to the topic

Recruiting and Preparing for Participants

- Select meeting dates, times, and locations for each focus group
- Once your sample has been selected, call or email each one to confirm interest and availability. Provide them with dates, times, and locations of the focus group. Tell them you will email them a written confirmation and call to remind them two days before the scheduled group.
- Ask participants to RSVP to plan for enough facilitators and equipment.
- Over-invite in anticipation of a no-show rate of 10 to 20 percent. But you will never want a group of more than 10 participants.
- Determine if you are going to use incentives to increase participation (e.g. \$10 to spirit store, giveaway such as a t-shirt)
- Tell participants that the focus group will take about 45 to 90 minutes. Give them a starting time that is 15 minutes prior to the actual start of the focus group to allow for filling out necessary paperwork, having a bite to eat, and settling in to the group.
- When selecting rooms for the focus groups, reserve a room with a door for privacy and table and chairs to seat a circle of up to 12 people (10 participants and the moderator and assistant moderator).
- Arrange for food. At a minimum, offer a beverage and light snack (cookies, cheese/crackers, veggie tray, etc.). It is OK to offer a full meal but be sure to add an additional 30 to 45 minutes to the entire process so that everyone can finish eating before the group begins.

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- Ideally, the focus group is conducted by a team consisting of a moderator and assistant moderator. The moderator facilitates the discussion; the assistant takes notes and runs the recorder.
- The ideal focus group moderator has the following traits:
 - Can listen attentively with sensitivity and empathy, but also think at the same time
 - Believes that all group participants have something to offer
 - Has adequate knowledge of the topic
 - Can keep personal views and ego out of the facilitation; doesn't offer their opinion
 - Is someone the group can relate to but also give authority to
 - Can appropriately manage challenging group dynamics
 - Be someone not directly involved with the participants of the focus group
 - Does not make assumptions and ask leading questions
- The assistant moderator must be able to do the following:
 - Run a tape recorder during the session

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- Take notes in case the recorder fails or the tape is inaudible
- Note/record body language or other subtle but relevant clues
- Allow the moderator to do all the talking during the group
- Both moderator and assistant moderator are expected to welcome participants, offer them food, help them make their name tents, and direct them in completing pre-group paperwork.
- Name tents will be provided for students to write down their first name
- Students will be provided with a consent form that asks them to confirm that they understand the purpose of the focus group and that their information will be kept confidential.
- The moderator uses a prepared script to welcome participants, remind them of the purpose of the group and also sets ground rules.
- Before asking the first focus group question, an icebreaker can be inserted to increase comfort and level the playing field.
- The focus group moderator has a responsibility to adequately cover all prepared questions within the time allotted. S/he also has a responsibility to get all participants to talk and fully explain their answers. Some helpful probes include:
 - “Can you tell me more about that?”
 - “Help me understand what you mean”
 - “Can you give an example?”
- It is good moderator practice to paraphrase and summarize long, complex or ambiguous comments. It demonstrates active listening and clarifies the comment for everyone in the group.
- Because the moderator holds a position of authority and perceived influence, s/he must remain neutral, refraining from nodding/raising eyebrows, agreeing/disagreeing, or praising/denigrating any comment made.
- A moderator must tactfully deal with challenging participants. Here are some appropriate strategies:
 - Self-appointed experts: “Thank you. What do other people think?”
 - The dominator: “Let’s have some other comments.”
 - The rambler: Stop eye contact; look at your watch; jump in at their inhale.
 - The shy participant: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.
 - The participant who talks very quietly: Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.
- When the focus group is complete the moderator thanks all participants and distributes or draws for the incentive.
- Immediately after all participants leave, the moderator and assistant moderator debrief while the recorder is still running.

Case Scenarios

Difficult situations may arise during your focus group. The following are some examples of common situations that can occur and what you can do in each of these situations.

- What do I do if no one responds to a question?
 - Did you ask a question that was difficult for the participants to understand? If you think this might be the case, try asking in a different way or clarifying what you are asking. Be as knowledgeable about the subject before conducting the focus group, as it may be easier for you to rephrase the questions.
 - Do you think the question is a politically sensitive question (something that people are afraid to answer honestly because it might make others upset)? If so, you might move

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- onto another question or topic that is less sensitive and try coming back to the topic later or ask the question differently.
- Are people tired of talking about the topic or they don't have anything else to say? If this is the case, ask "Is there anything else anyone would like to add? If not, we can move onto our next question." This provides a transition to the next question.
 - Are people feeling uncomfortable about talking? This typically occurs at the beginning of a focus group. If it continues, you may need to back up and do a little work to make people feel more comfortable. Talk about easier topics, which might make the participants more comfortable with sharing their opinions and experiences.
 - What do I do if the group begins to talk about topics that are not relevant to the research?
 - Say, "Thank you for that interesting idea. Perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session. For the purposes of exploring further the specific topics that are the focus of this discussion, with your consent, I would like to move on to another item." Or mention that you are limited on time and want to be sure to cover all the prepared questions.
 - What do I do if people are having side conversations?
 - This can disrupt the focus group by making the other participants feel uncomfortable, making it hard for people to hear what others are saying, and making it hard for the facilitator to focus on what is being said. The best way to handle this is to discuss this before the focus group begins, so they understand the expectations. If it does still occur, don't stop the conversations abruptly but in between comments remind participants of the expectations.
 - What happens if a participant moves ahead, and provides information relevant to a question yet to be asked?
 - Do not interrupt them, but let them finish their thought and remain an interested listener. You will still ask that question when you get to it, acknowledge that so and so already shared information to this question. You might say, "[Name] had mentioned earlier about...." Then ask the question.
 - What do I do if I ask a question and the interview respondent says that they do not feel comfortable answering it?
 - This is fine. Make it clear that a respondent may elect to not answer any question at any time.

The Focus Group protocol that contains scripts is required when conducting a focus group. This creates a standard way for which focus groups are conducted.

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Resources

Krueger, R.A. (1991). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research (7th ed.)*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc.

Schuh, J.H. and Associates. (2009). *Assessment Methods for Student Affairs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Banta, T.W. and Palomba, C.A. (2015). *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
