Office of Institutional Research and Assessment

CCSU

Central Connecticut State University

Helpful Hints for Conducting a Focus Group

Focus groups offer a powerful alternative to conducting surveys when you are interested in measuring satisfaction and self-reported outcome measures from students or other groups your unit serves. While surveys produce the most reliable results when a large number of respondents conscientiously complete survey questions so that aggregate quantitative data can be analyzed, focus groups allow for the collection of qualitative data from a smaller group of individuals whose responses are often more useful for closing the assessment loop.

1. Purpose: When conducting a focus group for assessment, the primary purpose is typically to collect opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of the focus population about your program or unit regarding outcomes (e.g. attainment of learning outcomes for majors, satisfaction with student events) and services (e.g. staff responsiveness, effectiveness of classroom teaching). Answering some of the following questions can be helpful in clarifying your purpose: 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?

2. Population: The ideal size of a focus group is 8-10 subjects, plus a facilitator and a note taker, about the size of a lively seminar class. A larger group will limit the detail of some responses because participants feel a pressure to share airtime with others. Conversely, participants in a smaller group may feel an uncomfortable pressure to talk more than they would otherwise to fill dead air. Size of group also can depend upon the experience and comfort of the facilitator with conducting discussions.

3. Setting: The setting for the focus group may be any comfortable room; a quiet lounge or salon with comfortable furniture is preferable to a brightly lit classroom or noisy public space. If refreshments are provided (pizza is a favorite of undergraduates), make sure that participants have a convenient area to place plates and beverages as they engage in conversation.

4. Questions: Questions should be generated ahead of time and aligned with the purpose identified for the focus group. Types of questions include:

1. Demographic Information: age, race, full-time/part-time status, transfer, etc. It is often best to collect relevant data through observation or an information card.

2. Behavior: what participants do or have done
3. Knowledge: what participants know (or report they know)
4. Opinions/values/feelings: what participants think or feel

It is best to begin with factual questions (what, when, where) before proceeding to conceptual questions (why, how).

5. Conducting the Focus Group: Two researchers should conduct the focus group, one to lead discussion, the other primarily to take notes. There are advantages and disadvantages to having faculty or staff from the unit lead the group. On the plus side, a faculty or staff member associated with the unit may have more rapport with students and expertise with relevant issues that will prompt discussion at a deeper level. Alternatively, focus group members may be less candid in their criticisms of the unit if faculty or staff members from that unit are present. The discussion leader should begin by explaining the purpose and format of the focus group, noting your methods of analysis (direct quotations, coding of responses, etc.) and confidentiality practices appropriate to your study. Best practices suggest that participants should grant informed consent for participation and use of their responses; that is, all participants should affirm that they recognize they are voluntary participants and can leave at any time and they also know how the research will be used. Use the set of questions as a general set of prompts but be willing to explore other directions as the discussion takes shape. Some of the most useful feedback you receive can come from questions you did not think to ask. You may choose to use flip charts to capture ideas during the session. It is generally not necessary to transcribe the focus group, but there can be reasons to do so (see #7 below), in which case, recording the session is recommended.

It is often quite useful to begin the focus group with a structured activity that requires participants to do small group work and/or individual writing in order to become engaged in the activity. Possible activities include (distribute note cards and pencils):

- Ask participants to write down 3-4 strengths and weaknesses about the topic and then to rank these in order of importance (most important weakness, most important strength).
- Ask participants to write down one word or phrase that describes the class, department, or issue being discussed.
- Ask participants to write down four items: 1) what aspects initially attracted you, 2) what aspects make you want to go somewhere else or do something else, 3) what should be changed tomorrow, 4) what should never be changed
- Lay out 50-60 pictures (magazine clippings, photos, drawings) and ask each participant to pick two pictures; one that exemplifies the current state of the program or organization, and a second that exemplifies how it should be. In small groups of 2-4, participants should tell brief 30 second explanations or stories or how each of their pictures represents their actual and ideal program [note: this activity takes 30 minutes, so allot additional time if it is used)

In addition to ice-breaking and stimulating some initial thought about the topic, these types of data collection can later be tabulated to provide some usefully quantifiable information.

6. Taking Notes: Even if a focus group is being tape recorded, one researcher should be designated to take notes. Unless you are trained in shorthand, it is generally not possible to write down what is said word for word, and so you will need to summarize the concepts and ideas advanced in the discussion, preferably by individual respondent. As time and occasion warrants, write down direct quotations that seem poignant or particularly interesting. Immediately, following the focus group, notes should be reviewed and fleshed out. It is always best to summarize these findings as soon as possible following the conclusion of the focus group.

7. Reporting Results: Whether the entire session is transcribed or not, a summary of the findings from the focus group should be a priority. The overall results of the focus group should govern the shape of the summary and report, and these results may not mirror the order and/or priority of the questions asked. Thus, as much as possible, summarize by importance of finding and major topic rather than by sequence of events in the discussion. If the session has been tape recorded, the decision to transcribe an entire session can be made following the focus group. Generally speaking, readers will not bother reading an entire transcript and so there are really only three reasons to transcribe a session: 1) the results are so surprising that readers will question the validity of the results – the transcribed session offers compelling evidence that the focus group took place and the actual discussion merits the conclusions you have drawn, 2) the respondents offered numerous responses that are too good not to quote at length and/or merit being placed inside of the context of the larger discussion, or 3) verbal responses will be coded so a quantitative analysis can be performed, e.g. of the 234 utterances in the session, 24 of them (10%) were about the problems of scheduling. Whichever option you choose, share the summary of findings as widely as possible within your unit and institution at-large.

8. Using the Results: Ultimately the use of results is the most important aspect of conducting the focus group, yet perhaps is the activity given the least emphasis. Reasons for not acting on findings from a focus group include lack of a clear-cut opinion or feeling among the group (some think this, some think that ...), belief that results are not representative of the larger population, and resistance to change regardless of evidence suggesting change may be beneficial. To address these in order, don't be limited by the thinking of the group. If some students want more of X and some want less of it, consider ways to accommodate both points of view (also, if you have picked up on this during the course of the session, you can probe into reasons motivating these opinions). Skeptics will always attack methodology whether a focus group or a more quantitative survey has been used; if there are truly widespread concerns that the findings are unrepresentative, then further research is required, but minimally the research questions can be sharpened to clarify the issues under investigation.

Reference

Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M.A. (2008) *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. 4th edition. New York: SAGE.