

Student Affairs Retreat: How to Conduct a Focus Group  
January 14, 2014  
12:30 Breakout Session

**Focus Group Quick Reference Sheet**

**Deciding on a Focus Group**

- A focus group is a group of people assembled by researchers to comment on a topic by giving feedback based on their personal experience.
- Select a focus group as a method of research when you seek attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, and want deeper insight than a survey may provide.
- Groups exert normative pressure on individuals, so personal or intimate topics may best be approached with individual interviews.

**Recruiting Participants**

- Ideally, you would identify all people in the group you want to study (e.g. commuter students), then randomly sample participants from that group. We call this Simple Random Sampling and if you can do it, you have a good chance to get a representative sample.
- It is often hard to get a complete list of all the people in a your target group, so you might consider convenience sampling – asking the people you know from the target group but not necessarily ending up with a representative sample.
- You might consider snowball sampling by identifying one person from that group, and asking that person to refer you to others. You might also recruit through colleagues - contact a faculty member who is offering a research methods course, reach out to presidents of student groups, etc. and ask for assistance in identifying participants.

**Preparing to Run a Focus Group**

- Select and invite participants who have similarity on important characteristics, who do not know each other, and who you think will be open to group discussion.
- Plan for 6-10 people, 6-8 questions, over 2 hours.

**Leading a Focus Group**

- Pick a comfortable, neutral location.
- Welcome people, introduce them to each other, and create a comfortable environment so people are open to sharing honest opinions.
- Start with softer questions and build to more difficult questions, monitor time to cover all questions, encourage group discussion to elicit thoughtful feedback, be flexible with follow up questions and let the group control the response content.

**Data Analysis and Reporting**

- Begin by gathering all responses within question.
- Look for categories/themes to emerge from the data and use them to draw major conclusions.
- Label the categories/themes you found, and describe them based on the responses.

**Data Analysis and Reporting:  
I finished the focus groups and have my data. Now what?**

1. Begin by gathering all responses within question.

Question 1. What are your impressions of the content?

It looks great

I think there's too much information – it will overload site visitors

I don't really know what to say about the content

It's difficult to read because it's just one long paragraph

I think all of the relevant content is here

I was just recently hired and am not sure I have acclimated enough to offer concrete feedback on the content.

WOW! What a good job. It looks really thorough.

No need to change the content

I saw a couple of statements that I'm not sure are accurate

2. Look for categories/themes to emerge from the data.

- By just grouping together responses and listing them in a report, it's difficult for a reader draw conclusions.
- Instead, look for patterns (sometimes called themes) to emerge from the data. Can we group any of the responses into categories?
- Also note outliers or discrepant responses, and follow up on these if you think they can bring greater insight to your conclusions.

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3. Label the themes/categories you found, and describe them based on the responses.

When asked about their impressions of the content, participants' responses yielded three main themes: no changes necessary, changes necessary, and no formed opinion. Four of the nine participants thought the content did not need to be changed, and two of these four said the content was very good. Of the three participants that suggested changes, two thought there was too much content and one noted some inaccuracies in the content. Finally, two people reported they had no feedback to offer at this time.