

Final Draft
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How to Conduct a Focus Group

I. Introduction - Why hold a Focus Group?

Why hold a focus group?

1. Explore in greater depth the experiences of a subset or cross-section of a larger group like a class/course, program and/or population
2. Learn more from interaction between a small group of individuals
3. Identify communication barriers or opportunities
4. Engage students as partners in problem-solving
5. Inform the design of a future survey
6. Explore the meaning of findings from a previous survey - to have a qualitative data source to help triangulate other findings among more quantitative data sources like surveys as part of a broader evaluation plan

Determine what you are most interested in knowing or what you most want to learn. Ask yourself what problem or need will be addressed by the information gathered during the focus group, e.g. examine if a new service or idea will work (or if people believe it will work), further understand how a program is achieving its goals or objectives or not, etc. **Some examples of questions a Cañada focus group might investigate are:**

1. **Examine if new service ideas in the Library and Learning Center grants will generate student interest/participation.**
2. **ADD ANIQUA AND JESSICA'S EXAMPLES HERE**
3. **who are interested in developing a rubric for their department and/or multi-disciplinary program.**

Other examples of possible research questions include:

- The information gathered can be to understand how well a service or idea is being implemented and/or perceptions of the new service or idea.
- Does the college's enrollment management ensure sufficient offerings for a student to transfer in a reasonable amount of time?
- At which point in the credit accumulation process is the college most likely to have an impact in improving the number of students who transfer from targeted groups?
- Are student groups progressing through and succeeding in remedial math and English, at the same rates? If not, which groups are progressing at lower rates? Which group is the most essential to focus attention on? What can be done to improve their success rates?
- Are ESL students less likely to realize their educational goals?

While you will want to create a high-quality focus group that generates useful and reliable information, this guide is not designed to generate focus group events for published research. All focus groups must create a safe space for participant dialogue and insure participant anonymity.

See [Section VIII](#) for more research questions examples.

II. Develop Focus Group Questions

1. Organize questions based on general themes or areas of interest. Each question should tie back to your research question(s). This will help to include relevant questions and eliminate redundant or extraneous questions.
2. Develop five to six questions
3. Focus groups are basically multiple interviews. Therefore, many of the guidelines for conducting focus groups are similar to those for conducting interviews.
4. Avoid yes/no questions whenever possible, ask open-ended questions.
5. Questions should be clear and easy to understand and be relevant to participant's voices and experiences.
6. Prepare follow-ups if you do get a yes or no answer like why, how or tell me more.
7. Practice expanding on responses that may provide interesting insights. For example – "You mentioned you used to see yourself as a bad writer, can you tell me more about that"
8. Assume students are not experts on what it takes to be successful in college. However, do not use leading questions that would lead participants to answer a particular way.
9. Avoid acronyms, jargon, education speak and technical language.
10. Strategize ways to extend questions to those who are not participating. For example - "I see a lot of nodding, do you agree? Tell me why..." or "we've been hearing a lot from this side of the room, what this side thinks ...?" "Please tell me (more) about that...?" "Could you explain what you mean by...?" "Can you tell me something else about...?" "Could you give me an example of ..."?

III. Prepare the Focus Group Session - Logistics

1. **Select a facilitator.** For example, a student assistant or another faculty or staff member from your division. It is best if the facilitator is not connected to focus group participants and the subject matter to ensure participant anonymity and/or conflicts of interest.
2. **Determine how you will recruit the students/faculty you most want to participate.** Members generally have some similar nature, e.g., similar age group, status in a program, etc. Avoid selecting only those who are most engaged, motivated or academically successful. But do select members who are likely to be participative and reflective. Attempt to select members who don't know each other.
3. **Limit participants to 3-12 members.** You may need to start with a larger group to reach the optimal number of participants.
4. **Plan meetings to be 1 to 1.5 hours long.** After class or over lunch seems to be a very good time for others to find time to attend. Fridays may also work as most students and faculty have no class.
5. **Select and reserve a meeting location.** Hold sessions in a classroom, conference room, or other setting with adequate air flow and lighting.

6. **Choose and contact all potential members to invite them to the meeting.** Too many choices will overwhelm students so provide a single meeting choice or a limited choice of meeting times. Doodle poll works well to elicit a quick response.
7. **Develop an agenda.** Consider the following agenda: welcome, review of agenda, review of goal of the meeting, review of ground rules, introductions, questions and answers, wrap up. Send **members** a follow-up invitation with a proposed agenda, session time and list of questions the group will discuss and all supplemental materials. Plan to provide a copy of the report from the session to each member and let them know you will do this.
8. **Generate/Order/Collect necessary supplies:**
 - a. Agendas
 - b. Nametags
 - c. Participant Consent Forms (See Appendix for sample consent form)
 - d. Recording device - record the session with either an audio or audio-video recorder. (If this isn't practical, involve a co-facilitator who is there to take notes.)
 - e. Refreshments - provide refreshments, especially box lunches if the session is held over lunch.
 - f. Other Incentives – you may wish to offer other incentives to encourage/reward participation
 - g. Signs to direct participants to focus group location
9. **Remind participants to attend** about three days before the session and provide facilitator(s) with the agenda and questions for review.
10. **ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS** – If you decide to offer an online focus group consider the following:
 - a. In addition to 1-7 above you will need to select and setup the online forum you will use for the focus group (See Appendix for online focus group options).
 - b. You will be able to skip most of number 8 above but will still need to record the session and collect signed consent forms from participants. You may also still want to offer an incentive of some kind for participation.

IV. Facilitating the Session

Major goal of facilitation is collecting useful information

1. **Configure chairs** so that all members can see each other. Provide name tags for members as they arrive. **Test the recording equipment.**
2. **Set Ground Rules** - Because the session is often a one-time occurrence, it's useful to have a few, short ground rules that sustain participation, yet do so with focus. Consider the following three ground rules: a) keep focused, b) maintain momentum, c) there are no right or wrong answers and c) get closure on questions.
3. **Introduce yourself and the co-facilitator, if used.** Ask if there is anything they would like to ask before you start. Keep casual conversational tone.
4. **Explain the means to record the session.** Reaffirm the anonymity of group participants. **Collect the signed participant consent forms. (See Appendix for sample consent form)**
5. **Carry out the agenda** - (See "agenda" above).

6. **Carefully word each question** before that question is addressed by the group. Allow the group a few minutes for each member to carefully record their answers. Then, facilitate discussion around the answers to each question, one at a time.
7. **Create space for conversation flow** and follow up questions. Make this a safe space for students. Be curious and expand and extend questions when you think they are leading somewhere interesting.
8. **After each question is answered, carefully reflect back a summary of what you heard (the note taker may do this).**
9. **Quantify responses when possible.** After a response ask “how many others have had this experience” and then state the number with the same experience (for the recording).
10. **Elicit details and examples.** Specifics and examples will allow you to better know if you are all talking about the same thing. Simple requests like “Does anyone have an example” or “Can you say more about that” will extract the details you are looking for.
11. **Ensure even participation.** If one or two people are dominating the meeting, call on others and state “when you are comfortable speak up”. Consider a round-table approach, going in one direction around the circle, giving each person a minute to answer the question. If domination persists, note it to the group and ask for ideas about how to increase participation.
12. **Close the session** - Tell members that they will receive a copy of the report generated from their answers, thank them for coming, and adjourn the meeting.

V. Findings and Reporting

1. **Verify if the recording device, if used, worked throughout the session.** If there was a person taking notes debrief to capture initial impressions.
2. **Record the number members in attendance.** Record no-shows and basic information about group recruitment and composition as well as the date, time, location and length of the session.
3. **Make any notes on your written notes,** e.g., to clarify any scratching, ensure pages are numbered, fill out any notes that don't make senses, etc.
4. **Write down any observations made during the session.** For example, what was the nature of participation in the group? Were there any surprises during the session?
5. **Transcribe recording or notes.** Have 2 people read the transcription and take notes regarding themes or issues that arise as well as noting important quotes. Readers should then compare notes.
6. **Common themes can be synthesized into findings and reported.** The final report should be quote rich and allow the reader to discern if the quote is representative of the group or unique to the speaker. For example, "one student felt that..." vs "most students expressed..."

VI. References

- <http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm>
- http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/Student%20Focus%20Group%20Resource%20Guide%20FINAL_0.pdf
- <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/howto/assessteaching/focusGroups.html>
- http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/research-questions.original.pdf

- <http://vanderbilt.edu/writing/manage/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Formulating%20Your%20Research%20Question.pdf>
- <http://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/resources/research/research-paper-steps/developing-questions/>
- <http://theresearchassistant.com/tutorial/2-1.asp>
- <http://libguides.mjc.edu/content.php?pid=163460&sid=1380252>
- Possible Research Questions

VII. Acknowledge

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