

Conducting Focus Groups

The How-To's

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness



What is a focus group?

A focus group is an in-depth, qualitative interview with a small number of carefully selected people brought together to discuss a host of topics.

Overview

F = Frontload

O = Organize

C = Control/Conduct

U = Understand

S = Synthesize

Frontload

- Review pertinent data
- Design purpose statement
 - Ineffective: *To find out what faculty think about the new library design* (too broad and general)
 - Effective: *To discover, clarify and record themes regarding faculty perception of and reaction to the new library design* (specific)
- Demographic Data

Organize

- Establish a timeline
 - Invite participants
 - Select a facilitator
 - Develop the questions
 - Develop a script
 - Gather materials
 - Conduct the group
 - Transcribe notes
 - Summarize session
 - Analyze and report on session

Control

- Develop the script
 - Opening: Welcome, purpose/context, explain what a focus group is and how it will proceed, make intros/duties, announce recording
 - Ask questions
 - Closing: Thanks, opportunity for further input (e-mail, etc.), how will the data be used, explain when the larger process will be completed

Control

- Question Development
 - Questions need to funnel back to the purpose
 - Questions should be arranged so that negative questions are followed by positive ones, and that the group ends on a positive note
 - Have backup questions (in case you run out)
 - Have questions that require thoughtful responses and not just one-word answers

Control

- Establish the setting
 - Encourage conversation
 - Outlets for recording devices
 - Comfortable
 - Accessible
 - Food

Control

- Facilitate
 - Set the tone (have fun and feel good)
 - Get full answers (listen for key words or concepts that will serve as probes for deeper/further discussion)
 - Deal tactfully with an outspoken participant
 - Keep group on track and make sure everyone is heard
 - Create safe space (respect, affirm)
 - Avoid being defensive or biasing conversation

Conduct

- Arrive early with materials: paper/pencils, white board markers/eraser, script, watch, name tags, recording devices
- Engage script: Introduce and explain roles (facilitator, recorder, and timekeeper)
- Floor plan/names
- Track participation/facial expressions/body language

Understand

- Organize the results into categories
- Major emerging themes from the data
- New or confirmed data
- Limitations (validity and reliability of the data)
 - Observer dependency
 - Setting – moderator, recording instrument, location
 - Lack of anonymity
 - Groupthink

Synthesize

- Absorb the data – do not make hurried conclusions
- Focus on insights less accessible without interaction
- Additional information needed – digging deeper
- Utilizing the results
 - Annual Report
 - Developing new objectives
 - Follow up surveys and/or focus groups
 - Future action plans

Lessons from Last Year

- Students tend to give short, un-engaged answers
 - Think of ways to solicit deeper responses from quiet students
- Explain what a focus group is before beginning
- Consider compiling a “preparation” document to send to participants prior to the focus group. Include:
 - What they can expect (food? Prizes?)
 - Some prep questions to get them thinking

Assessment Day Details

- Room assignments and needs
- Snacks and drinks
- Door prizes
- Incentive drawing
- Facilitators – inside or outside?

Questions?

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