

# Conducting Focus Groups

## *The How-To's*

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness

Elicia Charlesworth

Associate Director of Analytics

A high-angle, top-down photograph of a group of approximately ten people sitting in a circle on chairs. They are engaged in a discussion, with some looking at laptops or tablets. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue circular graphic that frames the group. The overall image has a blue tint.

# FOCUS GROUP

# Overview

F = Frontload

O = Organize

C = Control/Conduct

U = Understand

S = Synthesize

# Frontload

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

# Organize

- Timeline and Tasks

- Develop the questions
- Select a facilitator
- Develop a script
- Invite participants
- Gather materials

- Conduct the group
- Transcribe notes
- Summarize session
- Analyze and report on session

# Organize – Question Development

- Content

- Questions need to funnel back to the purpose
- Have questions that require thoughtful responses and not just one-word answers
- Have backup questions (in case you run out)

- Order

- Get to the important questions early in the session, you may run out of time if you save them for last
- Questions should be arranged so that negative questions are followed by positive ones, and that the group ends on a positive note

# Organize - Script

- Script Structure

- Opening: Welcome, purpose/context, explain what a focus group is and how it will proceed, make intros/duties, announce recording
- Ask open-ended 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 - Setting

- Establish the setting
  - Outlets for recording devices
  - Comfortable
  - Accessible (sign for the door)
  - Food
- When students arrive
  - Encourage conversation
    - Welcome participants
    - Ice-breaker
    - Follow-up



# Conduct

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

# Conduct

- Set Ground Rules
  - We want YOU to do the talking, everyone will be called on to participate
  - There are no right or wrong answers, speak up whether you agree or disagree
  - Have respect for one another, allow others to speak-up and respect the confidentiality of other participants
  - We will be tape recording the group/We will be taking notes on the group's discussion

# Conduct

- 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)
  - Allow participant questions
  - 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

# Understand

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

# Synthesize

- Absorb the data – do not make hurried conclusions
- Focus on the rich insight given by 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 Previous Years

- 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
  - Some prep questions to get them thinking, introduce topic

# Assessment Day Details

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

# Questions?

Elicia Charlesworth

[echarlesworth@liberty.edu](mailto:echarlesworth@liberty.edu)