

IOWA

Division of Student Life

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are a powerful qualitative research tool that collect detailed insights through small group interviews. Effective focus groups require careful planning and significant time commitment. They can be conducted in any quiet space, even with groups of friends, to capture nuanced, personal experiences. Whether you are a staff member or a student at the University of Iowa, these guidelines provide step-by-step instructions for planning, executing, and analyzing focus groups, with examples to help guide your own journey in conducting a focus group.

ARTICULATE THE PURPOSE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

Focus groups allow us to “listen and learn” by engaging a small group in a structured discussion. They are ideal for problem identification, planning improvements, and assessing program/service impact.

Begin by clearly defining why the focus group is being conducted. A well-articulated purpose guides all subsequent steps, from question development to participant recruitment.

Guidelines:

- Define your objectives (e.g., problem identification, planning, program assessment).
- State how the findings will be used (e.g., to improve intramural scheduling, facilities, or communication).

Example:

Purpose: “To assess students’ perceptions of the current intramural sports offerings, determine factors influencing their participation, and gather suggestions for program enhancements.”

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL & PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTION

A structured protocol ensures consistency and clarity throughout the session. Prepare an introduction that covers essential details and sets expectations for participants.

Guidelines:

- **Introductions:** Introduce the moderator and note-taker, and their roles.
- **Organizational Information:** State the University of Iowa Division of Student Life as the conducting body.
- **Purpose and Duration:** Explain the focus group’s purpose and expected time commitment.
- **Confidentiality or anonymity:** Assure participants that responses are confidential or anonymous and will be reported in aggregate form.
 - If a note-taker is not utilized, consider recording the session to review for data analyzation later. Ensure all participants grant verbal permission to be recorded.

Example:

“Welcome to the focus group on intramural participation! My name [Facilitator Name], and I will be guiding today’s discussion, while [Note-taker’s Name] records key points. Our focus group, sponsored by the Division of Student Life, is designed to understand your experiences as students participating in intramurals. Today’s session will last approximately 30 minutes, and all information shared will be kept confidential and reported in aggregate. We can begin by introducing ourselves to each other!”

DEVELOPING FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS & SEQUENCE

Plan your discussion by sequencing questions that start broad and then narrow in on specifics. Use various question types to create a natural flow. Use a mix of question types to create a natural flow that captures detailed insights:

Question Types:

- **Opening Questions:** Icebreakers that help participants feel comfortable.
- **Introductory Questions:** Establish the topic and gather general impressions.
- **Transition Questions:** Lead the discussion toward more specific aspects of the topic.
- **Key Questions:** Address the primary research objectives.
- **Ending Questions:** Summarize the discussion and allow for any final thoughts.

When crafting your questions, consider these key points:

- **Content Considerations:** What do you want participants to express? What insights do you expect, and what do you want to learn about the group?
- **Data Relevance:** Ensure that your questions will elicit the information you need. Open-ended questions should encourage detailed responses rather than simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. Incorporate follow-up questions to prompt further discussion.
- **Clarity and Consistency:** Review each question for clarity and relevance. Avoid redundant or ambiguous questions that may confuse participants or lead to irrelevant data.
- **Data Utilization:** Plan how the gathered data will be used to inform decisions or improve programs. Develop an action plan based on the insights collected.

Example:

- **Opening:** “What motivated you to join intramural sports at Iowa?”
- **Introductory:** “How would you describe your overall experience with intramural activities?”
- **Transition:** “Can you share a specific moment during an intramural event that stood out to you?”
- **Key:** “What changes or improvements would you suggest for our intramural programs?”

- **Ending:** “Do you have any additional comments on how we can better support students in intramurals?”

LIMITING THE PROTOCOL LENGTH

Focus group sessions are inherently open-ended; therefore, it is crucial to keep your protocol concise to ensure that the discussion remains focused, and all key topics are covered.

Guidelines:

- Limit the number of questions to allow for in-depth discussion (typically 5–7 main questions).
- Prioritize quality over quantity; each question should directly tie back to your objectives.

Example:

For a 30-minute session on intramurals, you might use 5 main questions with pre-determined follow-up prompts, ensuring each question is clear and directly linked to assessing program satisfaction and areas for improvement.

SELECTING & SOLICITING PARTICIPANTS

Selecting the right participants and effectively inviting them to join your focus group are key to gathering meaningful insights. Successful recruitment means identifying individuals who are engaged with the topic and ensuring that they are comfortable committing their time to the session.

Recruitment Considerations:

- **Targeted Recruitment:** Identify participants who are directly involved or interested in the topic.
- **Screening:** Ensure potential participants meet the criteria relevant to your research objectives.
- **Group Composition:** Consider forming groups with shared characteristics to encourage open discussion.
- **Personal Invitations:** Reach out directly through trusted points of contact (e.g. supervisors, organization advisors) or referral networks.
- **Leverage Existing Groups:** Utilize intact groups (e.g., student organizations, class cohorts, sororities/fraternities) where participants are already familiar with one another to enhance comfort and engagement.

Example:

For a focus group on intramural sports, recruit students who have participated in intramural activities in a given semester. Send personal invitations via sports coordinators or intramural program advisors and consider inviting members from existing intramural teams to foster an environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

CONSIDER UTILIZING INCENTIVES

Utilizing incentives can be an effective strategy to boost participation and show appreciation for your participants' time and insights. Choosing the right incentive ensures that the reward aligns with the effort required and is suitable for your audience.

Guidelines:

- **Appropriate Incentives:** Select rewards that resonate with your audience (e.g. food items, gift cards, or program-related perks)
- **Value Matching:** Ensure that the incentive's value reflects the time commitment and effort participants are investing.
- **Consider Impact:** Be mindful of how certain incentives (like money or gift cards) might affect participants, such as implications for students' financial aid packages, and provide clear information about these impacts.

Example:

For a focus group on intramural sports, consider offering incentives like snack bars, free intramural merchandise (e.g., t-shirts or water bottles), or meal vouchers. These options are relevant to the students' intramural experience while acknowledging the time they spend sharing their feedback.

PREPARING TO MODERATE THE FOCUS GROUP

The moderator is critical in keeping the discussion balanced, focused, and productive. The moderator's role is to guide the conversation by reading the questions and facilitating discussion without inserting personal opinions. This ensures that all participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts while the session remains on track.

Guidelines:

- **Neutrality:** Avoid vocal affirmations or opinions that might bias responses.
- **Time Management:** Monitor discussion time to ensure all questions are addressed.
- **Encouraging Participation:** Use prompts and follow-up questions to engage all participants.
- **Managing Dominance:** Politely redirect the conversation if one participant is dominating the discussion.

- **Facilitation Role:** Read questions clearly, allow for thoughtful pauses, and maintain a neutral stance throughout the session.
- **Questions and Misinformation:** While it can be difficult, avoid correcting misinformation or answering questions posed by participants. Engaging with participants in this way could potentially stop the conversation about that topic or shift the focus to participants asking the facilitator questions about the topic.
- **Closing the Session:** Conclude by thanking participants for their time and contributions.

Example:

In a focus group discussing intramural sports, the moderator might say, “Let’s hear from someone else,” if one person has been speaking at length, or “Would anyone else like to share?” to invite additional viewpoints. The moderator would also keep an eye on the clock to ensure that topics like scheduling, facilities, and program improvements are all discussed before wrapping up the session.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Conclude the focus group session by summarizing key points and outlining the next steps. This ensures participants leave with a clear understanding of how their input will influence future decisions.

Guidelines:

- **Thank Participants:** Express gratitude for their time and insights.
- **Summary:** Provide a brief recap of the main themes discussed.
- **Follow-Up:** Explain how the results will be analyzed and shared. Include any further opportunities for involvement.

Example:

At the end of our intramurals focus group, the moderator might say: “Thank you for sharing your valuable insights. Today, we’ve heard suggestions on improving scheduling and diversifying intramural options. Your feedback will directly inform our next steps in enhancing the intramural program, and we will share a summary of our findings with you soon.”

ANALYZING & REPORTING FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

A systematic approach to data analysis helps identify themes and actionable insights.

Guidelines:

- **Data Collection:** Use recordings, transcripts, and detailed notes.

- **Coding:** Organize responses by themes such as satisfaction, barriers, and suggestions for improvement.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Look for patterns across different groups or segments.
- **Reporting:** Tailor the report to your audience, using narrative summaries, direct quotes, and actionable recommendations.
- **More Information:** For more information on qualitative data analysis, take a look at our guidelines document: [Qualitative Data Analysis](#)

Example:

After conducting the intramurals focus group, the analysis might reveal common themes such as “convenience of event times” and “need for more diverse sports options”. These insights can be summarized in a data report with direct quotes from participants and percentages of theme occurrences to support recommendations for future adjustments.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS & CONFIDENTIALITY

Maintaining high ethical standards is essential to protect participants and ensure the integrity of the research. Special consideration should be taken when discussing sensitive topics, and participants should feel safe, comfortable, and be informed of their rights regarding the focus group.

Guidelines:

- **Confidentiality or Anonymity:** Clearly communicate how responses will be protected. If possible, report findings in aggregate form instead of attributing comments to individuals. Remind participants to avoid sharing others’ responses outside the group.
 - **Confidentiality:** Participants’ identities are known to the facilitator, but data is reported in aggregate, without linking responses to individuals.
 - Consider asking participants not to share any details discussed outside of the focus group.
 - **Anonymity:** Participants’ identities are completely unknown, ensuring responses cannot be traced back to individuals, and data is reported in aggregate.
 - Ensure that participants do not introduce themselves at any point during the focus group.
 - Consider using pseudonyms or aliases to protect participants’ identities.
 - Consider using Zoom with participants’ cameras turned off.
- **Informed Consent:** Ensure participants understand the purpose, procedures, and any potential risks.
 - Consider impacts on financial aid packages if utilizing monetary incentives.
- **Sensitive Topics:** Be mindful when discussing potentially sensitive topics (e.g., alcohol and drug use). Inform participants of the sensitive nature of the topic in advance and

provide resources for support if necessary. Ensure participants are aware of their rights to decline to answer any questions and leave at any time.

- **Create a Safe Space:** Set clear expectations for a respectful and situationally sensitive environment. Acknowledge that some topics may be personal and encourage participants to share only what they are comfortable with.

Example:

In the intramurals focus group, the introduction might include: “All responses today are confidential. We will not attribute any comments to individuals, ensuring that your honest feedback on the intramural program is protected. You may decline to answer any questions and may exit the focus group at any time.”

INVOLVING COMMUNITY MEMBERS & STAKEHOLDERS

Engaging community members, such as experienced student leaders, can enhance the credibility and relevance of the discussion. It is important to consider whether the involvement of these individuals would support open and unbiased conversation.

Considerations for Involving Community Members

- **Collaboration:** Involve community members in planning, moderating, or analyzing the session.
- **Training:** Provide appropriate training to any community members who will take on moderator or note-taking roles.
- **Levels of Involvement:** Decide whether community members will have a supportive role or participate as peers in the discussion.
- **When to include:** If the community member’s presence fosters an environment of comfort and trust, they may enhance engagement of the focus group members.
- **When not to include:** Avoid including community members that are authority figures or any individual that may discourage open and honest feedback from the focus group members.

Example:

Consider inviting an experienced student intramural captain to co-facilitate the session. Their familiarity with the intramural experience can help bridge the gap between focus group staff and participants, fostering a discussion that is relevant and comfortable. You may choose to exclude an intramural program director, as members may not feel comfortable sharing their negative feedback in their presence.

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL EXAMPLE

Intramural Sports Focus Group

Welcome to the focus group on Intramural Sports being conducted on Zoom. The purpose of this focus group is to better understand your experiences with intramural sports at the University of Iowa. The discussion will last 25-30 minutes, and your feedback will help improve intramural programming and the overall experience for participants. All responses will remain confidential and will be reported only in aggregate. Please do not introduce yourself or turn on your camera at any point during the session to ensure anonymity of responses. Does anyone have any questions before we get started?

1. What motivated you to participate in intramural sports?
2. How would you describe your overall experience with intramural sports?
3. Can you share a specific moment during intramural sports that stood out to you?
4. Are there any challenges you have faced with intramural sports?
5. Are there any improvements you would suggest for scheduling or programming for intramural sports?
6. Please share any additional comments, suggestions, or thoughts about your experiences with intramural sports.

Thank you for your participation. Your feedback is valuable to helping us improve intramural sports for all participants. As a reminder, your responses are confidential and are reported in aggregate.