QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data consists of non-numerical information that describes characteristics, properties, or attributes. It aims to examine and interpret the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue. This type of data can come from various sources, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents. This document provides an overview of qualitative data analysis, a critical component of student affairs assessment.

Step 1: Organize the Data

The best way to organize your data is to look at the questions you asked. Data should be organized in a way that is easy to read and is easy for you to review each topic/question. Below is an example of a table to organize your data.

Example Focus Group Data Table:

Focus Group Question	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Common Themes
What is Mentorship?	"A mentor is someone who provides guidance and support, helping you navigate through challenges. They motivate you and help you build connections that make you feel part of the community."	"Mentorship is about guidance and support. A mentor helps you grow by sharing experiences, providing direction, and motivating you to overcome obstacles."	"A mentor offers support, listens to your concerns, and helps you connect with resources. They're there to guide you and help you reach your goals."	Support, guidance, connection, challenges, motivation

Step 2: Review the Data

Make a quick pass over the data and examine what initial trends you might see. As shown in the table above, it is helpful to make note of the initial recurring words, ideas, themes, or concepts that you see in responses.

Step 3: Code the Data

Coding is the process of assigning words or numbers to data, such as phrases or sentences, to identify patterns, themes, and relationships. This helps to organize and make sense of large amounts of qualitative data. Coding can be done manually or with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software.

There are three common approaches to developing themes when coding qualitative data:

Plan Themes Before Analyzing the Data

In this approach, you begin by defining the themes or key concepts that you expect to find in the data, based on prior knowledge, theories, or your research objectives.

Example:

> Prior to analyzing the interview responses about the campus mentoring program, you might identify themes such as support, guidance, motivation, and challenges. These themes serve as a framework to guide your analysis. As you read through the responses, you look for specific terms or ideas that align with the predefined themes. For instance, when a participant mentions that their mentor provided emotional help, you would categorize that response under the support theme.

Let Themes to Emerge from The Data

In this approach, you don't begin with predefined themes. Instead, you read through the data and allow recurring concepts to naturally surface.

Example:

> When analyzing responses about mentorship, words like support, guidance, and connection may repeatedly appear, indicating these as key themes. In the table above, these words could serve as the themes to categorize the responses.

Combine Both Methods

In this approach, you start with a working definition and a few anticipated themes but remain open to new ideas as you analyze the data.

Example:

> You may initially define mentorship as providing support and guidance, but while reading through the responses, you notice the term motivation frequently arises. You can add "motivation" as a theme to your coding framework as needed, making your analysis more flexible and comprehensive.

Example Coding:

You conducted interviews about student experiences with a campus mentoring program. You are now analyzing the interview transcripts.

Coding by word:
- You identify keywords related to "support," "guidance," "connection," and "challenges." Each time these words or synonyms appear in the interviews; you would assign the corresponding code.
- If a student answers a question with, "My mentor was really *supportive* and helped me navigate the *challenges* of college," you would code this response with "support" and "challenges".

Coding by number:
- You might assign numerical codes to represent themes or categories. For example, you could assign "1" to " support", "2" to "guidance", "3" to "connection", and "4" to "challenges". You would then mark each relevant segment with the appropriate numerical code.
- If a student answers a question with, ""My mentor was *supportive* and helped me navigate the *challenges* of college," you would code this response with "1" and "4".
  - This method can be useful for quantitative analysis of qualitative data, such as calculating the frequency of specific themes or categories.
  - i.e. If you have 100 interview transcripts and "support" (code 1) appears in 60 of them, you know that this is a major theme in your data.

Step 4: Analyze & Display the Data

You will comb through all the responses you have and count each time a certain theme appears across responses. This will determine the relative significance of each theme.

Example Data Display:

You are analyzing data from a campus mentoring program where you interviewed 15 student participants about their experiences. You have chosen the approach of letting themes emerge from the data. After coding the interview transcripts, you identified the following key themes related to the mentoring program's impact:

- **Theme 1: Academic Support**
- **Theme 2: Career Guidance**
- **Theme 3: Personal Connection**
- **Theme 4: Navigating Challenges**

After reviewing all 15 interview transcripts and coding each segment related to these themes, you find the following:

Theme	Mentions in Transcripts	Percentage (%)
Academic Support	12 out of 15	80%
Career Guidance	9 out of 15	60%
Personal Connection	14 out of 15	93.3%
Navigating Challenges	11 out of 15	73.3%

Based on this count, "Personal Connection" appears to be the most prominent theme, because it was mentioned in 14 out of 15 interviews. "Academic Support" and "Navigating Challenges" are also significant, appearing in 12 and 11 interviews respectively. "Career Guidance" is less frequent but still noteworthy, with 9 mentions.

The frequency of each theme provides insight into which aspects of the mentoring program are most impactful or relevant to the students. In this example, building personal connections seems to be a major strength of the program. Analyzing data in this manner will help you to prioritize improvements to the program.

Step 5: Note Compelling Responses in The Data

Finding compelling quotes and sharing them in your final assessment report is an effective way to demonstrate the findings and highlight the top themes. Pick quotes that support the identified themes or represent the idea of a theme. The purpose of qualitative assessment with students is to hear students' stories and including these stories using quotes in your report can be a powerful tool.

Step 6: Take a Step Back

After completing the analysis and counting the frequency of themes, it's essential to examine your findings. Taking a step back allows you to gain a broader perspective on the data, identify patterns and connections that you might not have seen during the coding process, and consider the implications of your findings for improvements to practice. This reflective step is crucial for ensuring the validity and usefulness of your assessment results. It helps you to understand the data's deeper meaning and significance.

Here are questions to consider when examining your findings:

- What do the data tell you about your assessment question?
- What are the limitations?
- What are the implications? Does it lead you to make changes to or confirm your approach?
- What, if anything, will you change about your assessment process?
- What, if anything, will you change about your practice?

Step 8: Implement Your Findings

After you've examined your findings, the next step is to develop an action plan based on the insights gained.

- **Develop goals**: Based on the qualitative assessment findings, create specific goals for improving the program or service you assessed.
- **Identify action steps**: Determine the concrete steps that need to be taken to achieve each goal.
- Assign responsibilities: Delegate responsibility for each action step to specific individuals or teams.

- **Allocate resources**: Identify and allocate the necessary resources (e.g., funding, personnel, training) to support the implementation of the action plan.
- **Implement the plan**: Put the action plan into action and monitor progress regularly.
- **Communicate results**: Share the assessment findings and action plan with stakeholders, including students, staff, and administrators.
- **Re-assess**: After implementing changes, reassess to determine if the changes made a difference. This helps you to close the loop and ensure continuous improvement.

By developing and implementing an organized action plan, you can ensure that your assessment efforts lead to meaningful improvements in student affairs programs, services, and outcomes. The final step of implementation ensures a continuous cycle of assessment and improvement.