

Basic Guidelines for Conducting Focus Groups

Should you conduct a focus group?

Focus groups are an assessment method where rich detail and deeper levels of information on a specific topic/experience are collected through an interview with a small group of people.

There are many myths that exist around conducting focus groups including that they are low-cost and quick, require professional moderators and special facilities, must consist of strangers, and will not work for sensitive topics (Morgan, 1998). In reality, focus groups require a substantial time commitment to conduct and analyze results, but can be conducted by anyone/in a quiet available space, are effective in groups where individuals know each other, and can provide a space for expressing sentiments and experiences about personal topics. Below are some basic guidelines for conducting focus groups.

1. Articulate the purpose of the focus group.

Focus groups provide a unique opportunity to gather deeper information and explanations to topics related to the programs/services you offer.

2. Create a focus group protocol and introduction for participants using the following information:

- Introductions of facilitator and note taker
- Organization conducting the focus group
- Purpose of the focus group
- Approximate length of the focus group
- Confidentiality or anonymity of the focus group
 - If facilitating the focus group without the assistance of a note taker, recording the session can be helpful to fill in notes later. Ask permission to record the session and remind the participants that data collected will not be attached to names and will only be reported out in aggregate.
- See below for an example of a focus group protocol

3. Determine the question sequence for the focus group protocol i.e. topic defining questions, scenario questions, personal experience questions, etc.

4. Develop the focus group questions. As you develop the questions ask yourself the following:

- Questions to consider.¹
 - *What kinds of things will you want to say about this topic?*
 - *What kinds of things do you expect the other people in the group to talk about?*
 - *What would you like to learn about the other people in the group?*
- Will the questions provide the data you need to answer your questions or make decisions?
 - *Open-ended questions* can provide valuable insights into participants' perceptions and require more drawn out responses from participants. As a general rule of thumb, open-ended questions should not allow for a simple 'yes' or 'no' response.
 - Consider including follow-up questions that will prompt participants to respond through alternative phrasing.
- Are all the questions consistent with the objectives of the survey i.e. are there redundant, irrelevant, or unnecessary questions?
 - Consider the wording of your question to keep it clear and to the point.
 - Questions that address multiple topics and are vague will not result in usable data.
- How will the data be used? Develop an action plan for utilizing the data.

5. Limit the protocol length. The open-ended nature of focus groups limits the number of questions that can be asked.

6. Select and solicit participants.

- Soliciting participants for focus groups can sometimes provide difficulty as participation requires a greater amount of time.
- Consider personal invitations sent to individuals who have been identified as potentially willing to participate from their point of contact (i.e. supervisor, organization advisor)
- Intact groups such as student organizations, fraternity and sorority life chapters/councils, etc. can be an opportunity to facilitate a focus group with a group of individuals who are familiar with one another, potentially increasing participant comfort.

7. Think about utilizing incentives.

Incentives can be an effective strategy to increase the interest in your focus group. The considerations below can help you when thinking about providing an incentive.

- The incentives that you use must be appropriate for your audience and should match the amount of effort the participant is spending through their participation in the focus group.
 - Providing food or a meal can be an effective focus group incentive (i.e. burritos, granola bars). Factoring in time for the participants to plate food and eat will be important for this incentive option.
 - Incentives, especially money and gift cards, may have an impact on a student's financial aid package. Make sure to inform students of the potential impact and to notify the Office of Financial Aid about the amount received.

¹ Morgan, D. L. (1998). *Focus Group kit 1: The focus group guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781483328164

8. Prepare to moderate the focus group.

- The role of the moderator is simply to read the questions to the group and facilitate the discussion. This includes monitoring the time spent on each question, the time of the session and participation.
- The moderator should avoid vocal affirmations/negations toward responses in order to maintain topic neutrality.
- The moderator should be comfortable sitting for periods of silence with the participants, prompting individuals for responses, and regulating participants who may be inadvertently 'taking over' the discussion.
 - Helpful phrases in this scenario can be:
 - "Let's hear from someone else."
 - "Would anyone else like to share?"
- At the end of the focus group, it is important to thank participants for their time and contributions. This can be included at the end of the protocol to serve as a reminder to the moderator.

Focus Group Protocol Example

Womxn of Colour Network Focus Group Protocol

Welcome to the focus group. Let us start by introducing ourselves. [Introductions]. The purpose of this focus group is to better understand your experiences with the Womxn of Colour Network (WOCN) through the Women's Resource and Action Center (WRAC). The focus group will last 25-30 minutes. Information from this focus group will be used to improve WOCN programming and the participant experience, and will be reported out only in aggregate. Does anyone have any questions before we get started?

1. What topics are you interested in WOCN exploring in the future?

2. What other areas of support could WOCN address for you as an individual?
 - a. For campus as a whole?

3. What other groups/organizations/places could we share our programming offerings with?

4. What has been positive about your experiences with WOCN?

5. What could be improved?

5. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions you would like to share about your experience with WOCN?

Thank you for your participation.