

Focus Groups/ Interviews

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HARTWICK COLLEGE

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Focus Groups:

Focus Groups are used in qualitative studies and assessment activities when the purpose is to learn about perceptions, beliefs, or opinions of the students or others.

The goal is to expand on one's understanding of something or dig deeper into a topic





Focus Groups: Asking face to face open-ended questions in a group setting. Questions are meant to be a discussion.

Strengths:

- Helps to understand perceptions, beliefs, thought processes
- Small number of participants (n #)
- Focus groups encourage group interaction and building upon ideas
- Responsive in nature
- Need skills set in facilitating discussions
- Relative low costs involved

Challenges:

- **Getting participants (think of time/places)**
- Data collection and analysis takes time
- Data is as good as the facilitator
- Beware of bias in analysis reporting
- Meant to tell story, may not help if numbers are needed
- Data is not meant to be generalizable

Resources needed: question protocols, logistical considerations, incentive?, facilitator, note taker, recording device (optional)

Steps to Planning focus groups

- Participants – Who and #
- Number of focus groups needed
- Plan logistics
- Create questions and protocols
- Find facilitator
- Practice with your facilitator
- Make plan for recording

Who are the participants?

- ▶ Those who know something about the topic we are investigating.
- ▶ Homogeneous groups - those sharing many of the same characteristics.
- ▶ Heterogeneous groups – mix it up, different people with different backgrounds



How many participants are involved?



Ideally, 5 to 8 individuals

How many groups should be conducted ?

THREE TO FIVE...
Or until redundancy is reached.



How should groups be contacted ?

Oversubscribe group 20% - 35%

▶ Face to Face

▶ Email

▶ Student
Groups

▶ Time at
meetings

▶ Social Media

▶ Word of
Mouth

▶ Phone Call



Planning Logistics

- ✓ Location:
 - ✓ Easy to find and convenient
 - ✓ Participants can see each other
 - ✓ Confidential
 - ✓ Quiet
- ✓ Incentives – food or otherwise
- ✓ Recording or note taking
- ✓ Number of facilitators needed



Create a Protocol: Types of Questions

- ▶ Highly structured or standardized interviews – ask exactly the same question for everyone
- ▶ Semi-structured – a mix of structured questions and free-form questions.
- ▶ Unstructured or informal interviews –no predetermined questions, interview is exploratory.



Ensure questions are open-ended and not...

1. **Multiple Questions** – two in one sentence - one may be overlooked in the answer.
2. **Leading Questions** – may skew the results, the interviewer should strive for objectivity.
3. **Yes and No Questions**- one word answers do not translate into the richness desired.



Format of a focus group...

- ✓ If needed – ask participants demographic and other basic information on a short survey when they arrive
- ✓ Make a welcoming statement, discuss subject matter to be covered, and guidelines for the discussion
- ✓ Begin with introductory questions (easy ones)
- ✓ Follow with transition questions...more complex



Facilitator Traits

- ▶ Build rapport quickly
- ▶ Remain neutral
- ▶ Non-directive counseling
- ▶ Stay on target with time
- ▶ Reign people in
- ▶ Pull people into conversation
- ▶ Manage group dynamics
- ▶ Ask appropriate follow-up questions



Collecting Results

▶ Recording (video or audio)

- ▶ Adds a layer of technology to manage for facilitator
- ▶ But facilitator can lead group alone (without notetaker)
- ▶ Allows for easier word for word transcription
- ▶ Need access to technology
- ▶ If video, should get people's permission prior to filming
- ▶ If audio and anonymity is important, have students introduce themselves with pseudonym

▶ Notetaking:

- ▶ Plan ahead how detailed you would like the notes
- ▶ Plan for technology – pen/paper, laptop, etc.
- ▶ Just notes ok if word for word transcription is not needed
- ▶ Can also note body language
- ▶ If anonymity is important, can avoid using names when taking notes (numbers or pseudonym)

One really great resource:

- ▶ Boston College Focus Group Protocol Worksheet:

<http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/vpsa/pdf/assessment/focus.pdf>



Time to practice

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Sam Snead

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