Conducting Focus Groups in Student Affairs

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Steps Involved in Conducting a Focus Group

1. Develop purpose/objectives of the study
2. Design question protocol & recruitment strategy
3. Obtain necessary approvals/permissions
4. Recruit participants & manage logistics (e.g. date/location)
5. Prepare space
6. Complete participant arrival/welcome process
7. Conduct focus group using protocol
8. Complete wrap-up process
9. Debrief with fellow researchers
10. Transcribe audio tapes and/or notes
11. Analyze transcripts into themes and patterns
12. Report findings with implications for practice
Session Outcomes:

As a result of attending in this training, session participants will be able to:

✓ Explain what a focus group is, how it can be used for assessment, and what its advantages and limitations are as a methodological approach.
✓ Recognize the key steps involved in a study design involving focus groups.
✓ Understand logistics involved in facilitating a focus group.
✓ Utilize best practices for facilitating a focus group.
What is a Focus Group?

A discussion among a small group where the facilitator supplies a specific (or focused) topic and encourages a free flow of ideas in a setting where verbal and non-verbal responses can be recorded.

• Qualitative
• Structured
• Conversational
• Non-judgmental
• Confidential
• Safe
• Private
• Comfortable
• Neutral and/or Familiar Space
Using Focus Groups for Assessment

- **Qualitative information on its own** to inform direct practices for a small, specific group
- As a **pre-study**, ensuring more accurate questions and phrasing to collect the desired data
- As a **post-study** activity, gathering more information about unanswered questions
- **Test assumptions of data analysis** and results
- **Test recommendations**
Advantages

• Members respond to one another resulting in potentially rich data
• Flexible and dynamic
• Relatively low cost as compared with technology driven methods
• Participants may feel more comfortable in a group setting with others who are sharing similar opinions
Limitations

• Difficult to assemble
• Groups can influence individual opinions
• Strength of data drawn from focus group is largely dependent on the strength of the facilitator(s)
• Lack of control over discussion
Conducting a Focus Group

5. Prepare space
6. Complete participant arrival/welcome process
7. Conduct focus group using protocol
8. Complete wrap-up process
Prepare Your Space

What?
• Protocol
• Consent documents
• Note-taking materials
• Recording device
• Comfortable seating arrangement
• Refreshments

Who?
• 6-10 participants
• Primary facilitator
• Co-facilitator

Where?
• Quiet, private location
• Convenient for participants
• Available and accessible
The Participant Arrival Process

As participants arrive...

- Greet guests
- Ask participants to complete a demographic questionnaire (as needed)
- Encourage conversation as it feels appropriate (unrelated to focus group content)
- Determine cut-off point for start time
  - Typical no-show rate is 20-50%
Getting Into the Protocol

Main sections

I) Introduction
II) Questions
III) Wrap-up

General characteristics

• Exhaustive of entire process
  • Verbatim script (for certain parts)
  • Basic instructions/checklists for required actions
  • Expected timing noted
• Easy to read
  • Alternate text aspects (e.g., color, font, bolding, italics)
• Prioritized
  • Know what content/questions MUST be covered in case of time constraints
I) Introduction

- Facilitator introductions
- Purpose of the discussion
- Informed consent
  - Permission to record
  - Confidentiality
  - Purpose of study
- Ground rules
- Guidelines for speaking
- Questions?
- Introduction to recording
II) Questions: Overview

- Limit to 2-3 main topics (60 minutes for 2 topics; 90 minutes for 3 topics)
- Three types of focus group questions:
  1. Engagement questions: introduce participants to and make them comfortable with the topic of discussion
  2. Exploration questions: get to the meat of the discussion
  3. Exit questions: check to see if anything was missed in the discussion
II) Questions: Using Neutral Probes

Neutral probes allow us to gather more information without influencing what participants say.

- Why is that?
- Can you tell me more?
- Can you give an example of that?
- Please explain what you mean.
- Can you describe what that is/was like?
- How did that happen?
- How do you feel about that?

Sometimes silence is the best probe of all.
II) Questions: Managing Participants

- **Self-appointed experts**: “Thank you. What do other people think?”

- **The dominator**: “Let’s have some other comments.”

- **The rambler**: Stop eye contact; look at your watch; jump in at their inhale.

- **The shy participant**: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.

- **The participant who talks very quietly**: Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.
II) Questions: Managing Dynamics

• Set and maintain the tone
• Listening- active listening
• Time management
• Probe for further information
  • Pick up nonverbal clues and draw out information
  • Follow up with unclear statements
• Be prepared to bring get group back on track if they stray from the chosen topic
III) Wrap-up

- Remind participants about confidentiality
  - What happened here, stays here.
- Provide contact information
  - Invite participants to follow-up via e-mail if they didn’t get to say something
- Confer/debrief with co-facilitator
- Review notes
- Memo about any immediate feelings, themes, reactions you are able to identify
Critique

Based on what we have covered...

5. Prepare space
6. Complete participant arrival/welcome process
7. Conduct focus group using protocol
8. Complete wrap-up process

...critique the following:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJBRpylC9-Q
Practice

• Using a mock protocol (handout), we will practice conducting focus groups to address the following mock study objectives:
  
  • To learn more about Student Affairs staff’s thoughts and feelings about using focus groups for assessment.
  • To understand Student Affairs staff’s perceived strengths and areas for improvement related to conducting focus groups, in order to improve SAIRO’s programming to support such assessment efforts.
Recap

What did you accomplish today?

✓ Explain what a focus group is, how it can be used for assessment, and what its advantages and limitations are as a methodological approach.
✓ Recognize the key steps involved in a study design involving focus groups.
✓ Understand logistics involved in facilitating a focus group.
✓ Utilize best practices for facilitating a focus group.

• What’s can you expect next?
  • An email from SAIRO containing:
    • Today’s ppt. presentation
    • A guide to the complete focus group process (planning, conducting, analyzing)

• Ongoing support from SAIRO staff in the following ways...
You Can Use SAIRO as a Resource to:

- Consult on your focus group idea
- Review your question protocol
- Provide templates for forms and documents
- Help to develop your recruitment strategy/timeline

- Assist in facilitating your focus group(s)
- Identify helpful technology and/or processes for recording your focus group
- Develop an analysis plan
- Suggest ways to transcribe audio tapes
- Identify themes in your data
- Format useful reports
- Articulate implications for practice

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