Agenda

• Purpose
• Advantages & Disadvantages
• Participant Selection & Structure
• Writing Questions
• Facilitating Focus Groups
• Analyzing the Data
• Activity
Learning Outcomes

• By attending this training participants will be able to:
  – Identify when it is beneficial to use focus groups
  – Implement “best practices” when conducting focus groups
  – Write appropriate focus group questions
  – Identify good facilitation skills
  – Analyze focus group data
Focus on the assessment cycle

- Foundational Documents (mission, goals, strategic plan)
- Establish Criteria for Success (outcomes or targets)
- Use results for Improvement
- Provide Programs and Services
- Determine Effectiveness

Use the cycle to:
- Establish criteria for success (outcomes or targets)
- Provide programs and services
- Determine effectiveness
- Use results for improvement
- Use foundational documents (mission, goals, strategic plan)
What is a focus group?

“...Carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is relaxed, comfortable, and often enjoyable for participants as they share ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussions.” (Krueger, 1988).
Is a focus group the best method?

• What are you evaluating?

• What do you hope to learn?

• What are your assessment or research questions?

• How will a focus group help to inform your project?
What type of data do you need

Quantitative

• Focus on numbers/numeric values
• Who, what, where, when
• Match with outcomes about knowledge and comprehension (define, classify, recall, recognize)
• Allows for measurement of variables
• Uses statistical data analysis
• May be generalize to greater population with larger samples
• Easily replicated

Qualitative

• Focus on text/narrative from respondents
• Why, how
• Match with outcomes about application, analysis, synthesis, evaluate
• Seeks to explain and understand
• Ability to capture “elusive” evidence of student learning and development
Disadvantages

- Facilitation requires skill
- Making sense of the data (not as clear as numbers)
- Time and effort of researchers
- Challenging group dynamics (shy, dishonesty)
- Focus groups can influence individual responses
- Format/structure can be challenging

Advantages

- Understand perceptions, beliefs, or opinions of wide variety participants (Why?)
- Depth of information
- Influence of the group context
- Flexible and dynamic with a relatively low cost
- Useful for exploratory initiatives (Stage & Manning, ‘03, Schuh & Upcraft, ‘01)
Focus groups should not be used:

- For asking closed-ended questions
- For assessments that require statistical data
- In situations where participants are not comfortable with each other
- In situations where the group may sway individual opinion
- In unsafe or not confidential environments
- In situations that are emotionally charged
Selecting Participants

• Purposeful sampling
  – Demographics (representative of population, or targeted population)
  – Experience and knowledge (ability to provide rich data)

• By the numbers
  – 7 to 10 participants per group (recruit 12)
  – 3 to 5 groups (1 hour groups)
Focus Group Environment

• Make location and timing convenient
  – Free from distractions
  – Availability and accessibility key

• Comfortable seating arrangements
  – Setup chairs in a circle so participants can hear and see each other
Roles

• Moderator/Facilitator
  – Manage the group (tone/participation)
  – Ask the questions
  – Guide the conversation (probing)
  – LISTEN

• Scribe
  – Sit quietly and take notes
    • Dynamics, body language, quotes, themes
Structure for Typical Focus Group:

• Should include:
  – A brief welcome
  – An overview of the topic
  – Explain recording devices, confidentiality, and the role of the facilitator and scribe
  – Some guidelines or ground rules

• Icebreaker/Introduction
  – Sets the tone for the group

• Facilitation of questions
  – Order: low → high risk & most → least important
Ground Rules Example

• This is a voluntary process and you have the right to pass answering any or all questions.
• Respect others’ opinions, even if you disagree with them.
• Only one person talks at a time, so everyone has the opportunity to hear each other.
• What’s said in the room stays in the room.
• Use “I” rather than “we” or “they”
Tips to developing questions

- Move from general to specific
  - Ask for examples to accompany

- Concrete, specific, simple, and open-ended
  - Avoid yes/no questions (1-word answer)

- Use phrases such as “what is your opinion of,” and “what would you change,” or “tell me about a time when”

- Use questions that encourage participation

- Plan structured approach given your time constraints
Types of questions

• Experience and behavior questions
  “How does your organization utilize the Student Center?”

• Opinion and values questions
  “Why do you think the University should consider including a multipurpose space in the Student Center expansion? Why shouldn’t we?”

• Feeling questions
  (Intro about inclusivity) “How do you feel when in the Student Center?”

• Knowledge questions
  “What Student Center resources are you aware of?”

• Sensory/environmental questions
  “What do you see when you enter our Student Center?”

• Background and demographic questions
  “Please tell us your name, class year, major, and what student organizations you are associated with.”
Developing questions

• Be clear.
• Avoid biased, loaded or leading questions.
• Avoid making significant memory demands.
• Ask only one question at a time.
• Keep the question short.
• Don’t make assumptions.
• Define terms and concepts.
• Consider whether they will feel comfortable answering honestly.
• Let participants admit they don’t know or can’t remember.
• No closed-ended.
Example

**Introductory questions:**
• How does your organization utilize the Student Center? What are some of the reasons that students, faculty, and staff utilize the Student Center?

**Transition questions:**
• What are some events for which you would like to utilize the Student Center but don’t? Why don’t you utilize the Student Center?

**Key questions:**
• Why do you think the University should consider including a multipurpose space in the Student Center expansion?
• After providing operational definition of the multipurpose space: What is missing from the definition? Are there other ways that your organization would utilize the space?

**Summary questions:**
• Do you have any final comments?
Facilitating the Focus Group

• A good facilitator must:
  – Maintain impartiality through tone and body language
  – Involve all participants
  – Not let one person dominate the conversation
  – Ask open ended but not leading questions
  – Embrace silence
  – Keep the conversation moving without stifling opinions
  – Stay on topic without inhibiting discussion
Facilitating Question Examples

• Can you tell me more about that? (Probing)

• I saw you shaking your head when he said that, why is that? (Reading nonverbals)

• Thank you for the comment. Would someone else like to add to that? (Dominant)

• Mark, what do you think? (Shy)
Debrief with Team after FG

• What themes or issues were discussed and how did these differ from what we expected?

• How did these differ from what occurred in earlier focus groups?

• What points/quotes need to be included in the report?

• Should we do anything differently for the next focus group?

(Kruegger, 1998)
Analyze the Data

- Transcribe the recordings (if possible)
- Identify major themes and sub themes across groups
- List key words and phrases
- Identify useful quotes
- Summarize the insights you gathered
Importance of Reporting in Qualitative Data Analysis

• Writing is essential to qualitative data analysis

• Fuzzy writing stems from fuzzy thinking.

“Writing is thinking.”
~ H. Wolcott
Activity

• Quick half sheet assessment

• Conduct a focus group on a possible “Assessment Professional Development Curriculum”

• Model good/bad focus group behaviors and work to identify each
### Remember Good Focus Groups =

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitated</th>
<th>• Moderator solicits opinions from group &amp; encourages participants to discuss topic with one another</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended questions</td>
<td>• Ask questions about Why, How, &amp; What, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check opinions</td>
<td>• Moderator refrains from offering his/her own opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>• Opinions solicited are inclusive of all participants’ perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe space</td>
<td>• Participants feel free to share their opinions without judgment or ridicule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions?