Focus Groups

Institutional Effectiveness
Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness
aie.vt.edu
A Focus Group Is . . .

- A controlled, carefully planned discussion
- Gathers information about a specific topic
- Conducted in a non-threatening environment
- Conducted by a moderator/facilitator
- Group members influence each other by responding to ideas, comments of others
- 6 – 10 participants
Why a Focus Group?

- To collect qualitative data
- To gather feelings and perceptions regarding programs, services, products
- To promote self-disclosure among participants, though not appropriate for emotionally charged environments
- To stimulate interaction among participants to gather more information
- To identify needs
Uses of Focus Groups

- Improve existing programs
- Improve planning & design of new programs
- Recruit new participants
- Understand decision-making processes
- Generate information for larger studies
Advantages of Focus Groups

- Socially oriented research procedure – more interesting to participants than individual interviews
- Format allows moderator to probe, clarify
- High face validity – easily understood
- Can provide diverse opinions and ideas
- Can be low cost
- Speedy results
Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Researcher has less control
- Helpful to have a skilled moderator
  - Can introduce biases
  - May fail to follow up on crucial information
- Groups can vary considerably
- Groups may be difficult to assemble
- Does not allow generalization of results
Produces Qualitative Data

- Can precede quantitative approach
- Can be used at the same time as a quantitative approach
- Can follow quantitative approach
- Can be used alone
Preparing for the Session

- Identify major objective(s)
- Develop 5 or 6 questions
- Plan session – think of maximum time for session as 1.5 hours
- IRB approval?
- Materials?
- Invite participants
  - Be careful of mixing levels of education, authority, income, etc.
  - Incentives?
Moderator Traits

- Informed about the topic to be discussed
- Able to encourage all members to participate
- Able to encourage group members to discuss in greater detail
- Able to keep the session flowing smoothly – be adaptable
- Sensitive to cultural and gender issues
- Exhibit empathy, but maintain control
Beginning the Focus Group

- Welcome
- Introductions – Topic and Participants
- Ground Rules
- First Question
The Welcome

- You are the host – make participants feel welcome and comfortable
- Much of the success of a focus group is attributable to the development of an open environment
- First few minutes of a focus group are critical
Introduction

- Provide your name and who you represent
- Explain the purpose of the group and how the data will be collected and used
  ◦ Obtain informed consent if applicable
- Note that there are no right/wrong answers, but rather differing opinions, so please share your point of view even if different from what others have said
- Confirm amount of time allotted
- Participant introductions
Ground Rule Examples

- One person speaks at a time
- We will be on a first-name basis for the discussion
- Talk about note takers and/or audio recording if applicable
- Confidentiality – assured from your perspective and ask participants to respect confidentiality of others when outside the group
The Questions

- Get participants involved as soon as possible
- Use open-ended questions – be careful of phrases like “how satisfied” or “to what extent”
- Avoid dichotomous, yes/no questions
- Avoid “why?” questions – implies cause/effect that might not exist
- Use “think back” questions – take people back to an experience, not forward to the future
Moderator Tips: Balancing

- Use balancing to help the group round out its discussion rather than just follow the lead of a few
  - “Are there other ways of looking at this?”
  - “What do others think?”
  - “So, we’ve heard x and y points of view, are there any others?”
Moderator Tips: Encouraging

- Encouraging is about creating an opening for people to participate
- “Who else has an idea?”
- “Is there a student perspective on this topic?”
- “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken in a while.”
Paraphrasing helps support people in thinking out loud, helps clarify, provides a calming effect

“It sounds like what you’re saying is . . .”

“Let me see if I’m understanding you . . .”

“What I am gathering from your description is . . .”
Moderator Tips: Tracking

- Tracking lets the group see that several elements are being discussed.
- First, “I hear three conversations going on right now; I want to make sure I’m tracking them.”
- Second, “It sounds like one conversation is about …”
- Third, “Am I getting it right?”
Moderator Tips: Closing

- “Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?”
- “Have we missed anything?
- “Are there people we should speak to that we haven’t spoken to?”
- “Summarize; Is this an adequate summary?”
Analysis Options

- Transcript-based analysis
- Audio-based analysis
- Note-based analysis
- Memory-based analysis
Considerations for Analysis

- Be aware of the actual words used by the participants and the meaning of those words
- Participant responses are triggered by a stimulus – examine responses in that light
- Look at frequency/extensiveness of comments – some topics may be more important than others
- Consider intensity of the comments
- Give more weight to specific comments based on experiences rather than vague, impersonal responses
The Analysis Process

- Begin while still in the group – listen for inconsistent or cryptic comments and probe further
- Immediately after – diagram seating arrangement, debrief moderator and note takers, discuss initial themes
- Later – compare/contrast results, look for emerging themes across groups, use quotes to illustrate
- Prepare report – narrative style, format question-by-question or by theme, use quotes to illustrate, share report with the team for verification
Reporting

- Purpose is to report views of the group(s), not to generalize to larger groups
- Statement of purpose, key questions asked
- Participant information
- Results/findings
- Summary of themes/conclusion
- Limitations
- Recommendations