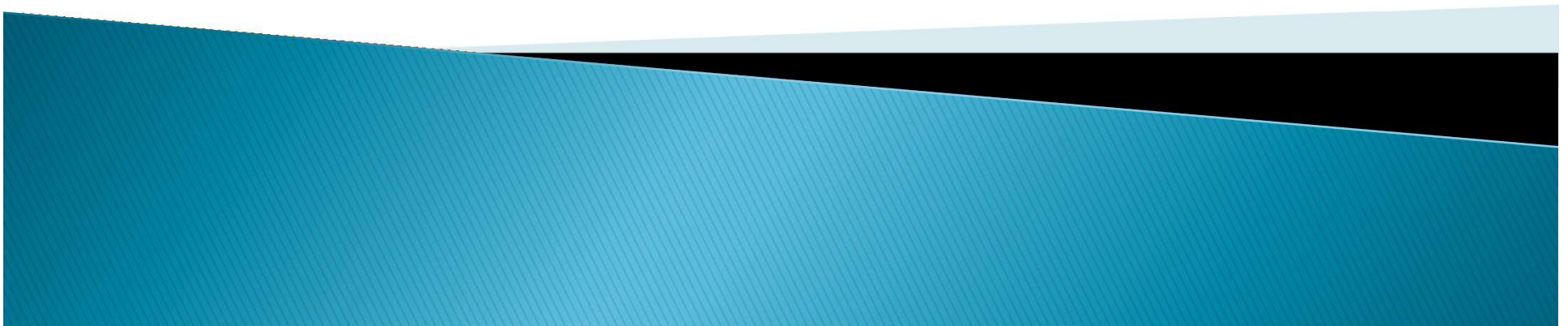


Focus Groups

Institutional Effectiveness
Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness
aie.vt.edu



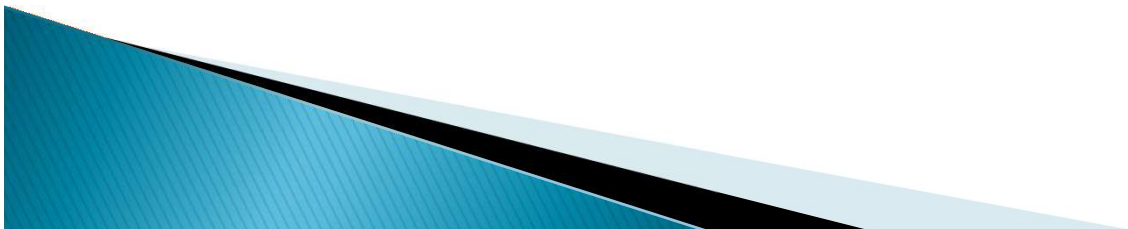
A Focus Group Is . . .

- ▶ 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



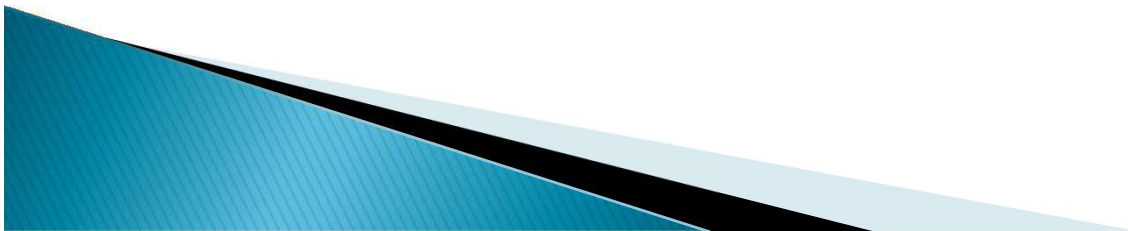
Why a Focus Group?

- ▶ 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



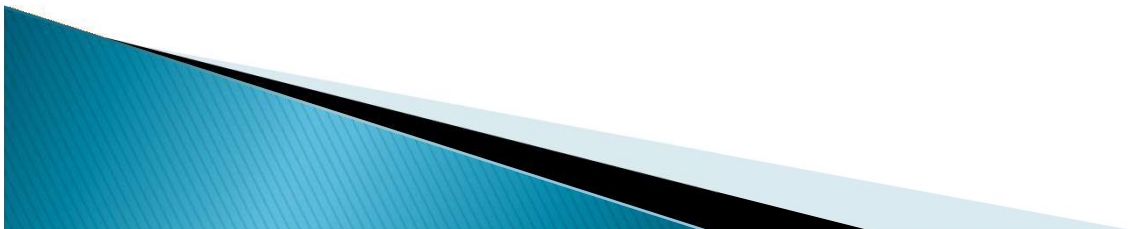
Preparing for the Session

- ▶ 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



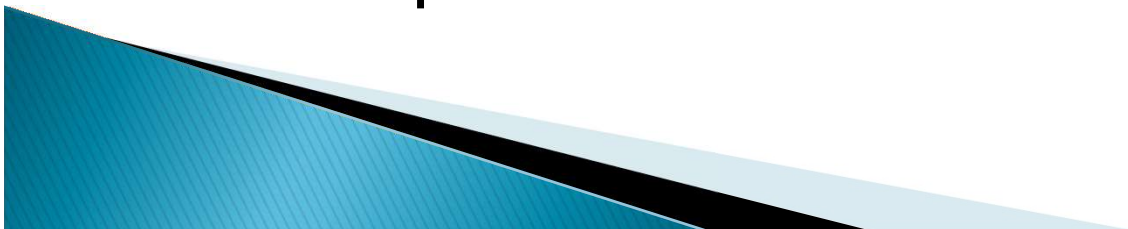
The Welcome

- ▶ 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



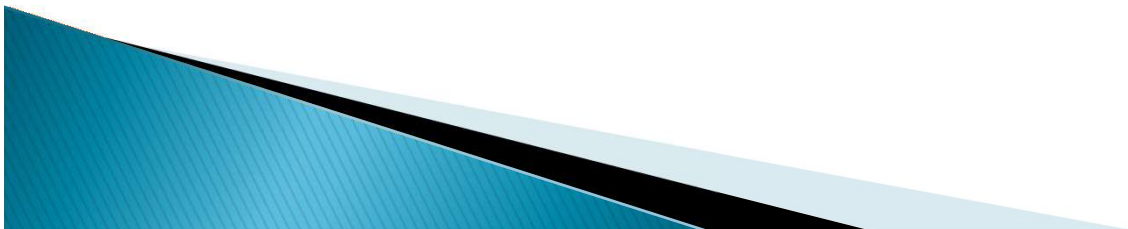
Introduction

- ▶ 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



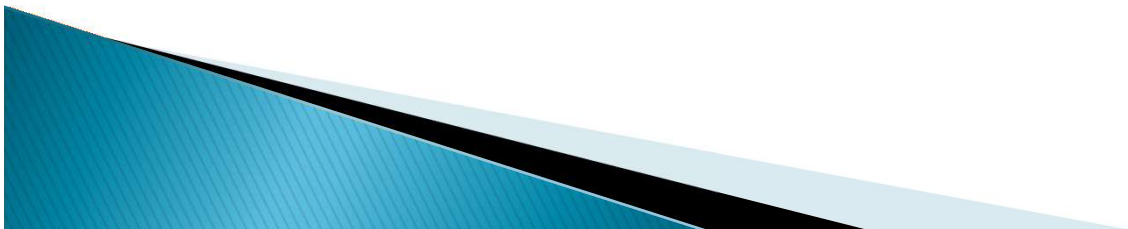
Ground Rule Examples

- ▶ 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



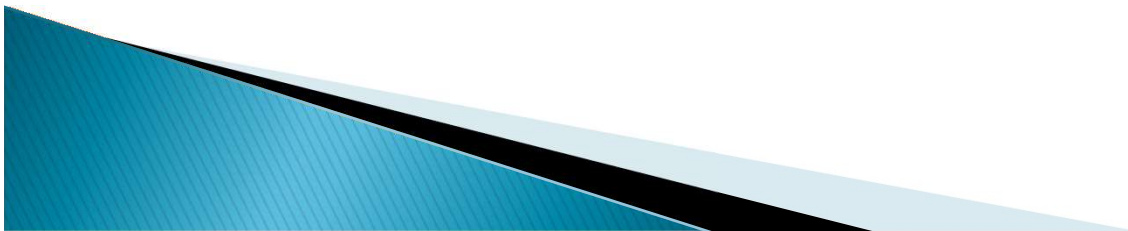
Moderator Tips: Balancing

- ▶ 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.”



Moderator Tips: Paraphrasing

- ▶ 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?”



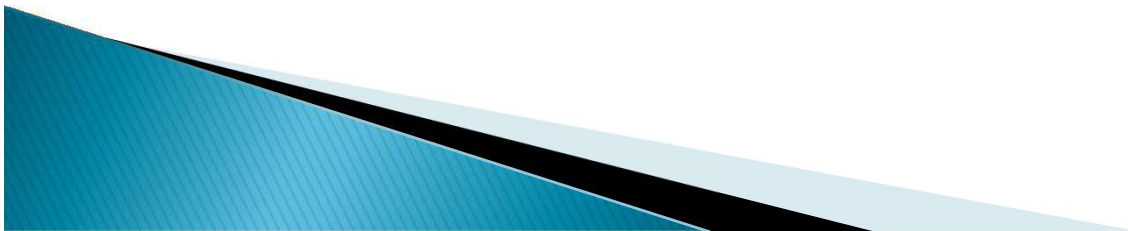
Moderator Tips: Closing

- ▶ “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

