Student Voices: Using Focus Group Data to Inform Student Success Initiatives

RP Conference 2016

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Office of Institutional Research & Planning
I. Introduction to Focus Groups
II. Focus Group Tools & Things to Consider
III. Interactive Break Out Exercise: Mock Focus Group & Roleplay
IV. Qualitative Data Analysis
V. Case Study: Student Equity
VI. Q&A/ Wrap-up
Workshop Goals

• To discuss the value & importance of incorporating student voices in institutional research
• To introduce focus groups as an effective tool for collecting qualitative data
• To share RHC’s experience using focus group data to inform student success initiatives
• To provide tools, tips & other helpful resources
What is a focus group?

A focus group is a form of qualitative research, in which a small group of people participate in a guided discussion, led by a trained facilitator, to learn more about their perspectives, experiences, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards programs, initiatives, services or events they have participated in. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to speak with other group members. It gives individuals the opportunity to tell their story in their own words.
When should you use focus groups in research?

• When you are considering the introduction of a new program or service.
• When you want to ask questions that can't easily be asked or answered on a written survey.
• When you want to supplement the knowledge you can gain from written surveys.
• When you know, or can find someone, who is an experienced and skilled group leader.
• When you have the time, knowledge, and resources to recruit a willing group of focus group participants.
• When interaction among participants will increase your understanding or the quality of information.
Focus Groups: Pros & Cons

**Advantages**

1. Focus groups can produce valuable information that is not likely to come from a personal interview or a survey.
2. One focus group meeting uses fewer resources (time and money) than multiple personal interviews or large surveys that fail to ask the important questions.
3. Responses can be clarified and expanded upon with probing follow-up questions.
4. Non-verbal responses can be recorded and interpreted.
5. Group members can react to and build upon each other’s responses to produce information or ideas that they might not think of on their own.
6. Focus groups can be a natural forum for new ideas.

**Limitations**

1. Confidentiality of sensitive information can not be insured.
2. Since focus group members usually attend the meeting voluntarily, we might wonder how they differ from the larger population.
3. Focus group members may be difficult to recruit.
4. Open-ended responses may be difficult to group into categories.
5. Opinions presented by assertive focus group members may overwhelm ideas held by the rest of the group.
Planning a Focus Group

• Determine your goal/purpose: What do you hope to learn?
• Decide who should be invited and determine number of focus groups
  • Group size 8-10 people
  • Generally lasts 1-1.5 hours
• Develop protocol
• Decide on meeting logistics: What? Where? When? How?
• Develop recruitment plan
Focus Group Questions

• Goal and purpose of focus groups
• Start broadly, then zero in on topic of interest and end broadly again
  • Ideally 10-13 questions
  • Group questions by themes
• Ask about things participants know about
• Avoid yes/no constructs or “leading” questions
• Ask questions that can be answered in a group setting
• Translation
Protocol Structure

- Welcome/Introduction
- Consent
  - Confidentiality vs. anonymity
  - Voluntary participation
  - Risks, benefits and alternatives
- Guidelines
- Warm-up questions
- In-depth questions - bulk of discussion lies here
  - Use probes
- Wrap up/Thank you/ Next steps
Focus Group Facilitation

Good Facilitators:
- Are good at coordinating group discussion
- Are knowledgeable about the topic
- Can relate well to participants and establish rapport
- Can think about what the group is saying and connect it to their experiences
- Stay neutral

Note Takers:
- Keeps track of time and discussion on track
- Notes major non-verbal cues (head nods, etc.)
- Asks for clarification from participants

The idea is that the participants have the conversation among each other and not look to the facilitator as the one directing the conversation
Timeline

3-4 weeks before
- Set up date and time
- Decide on incentives
- Assemble contact sheet with information
- Select location
- Select facilitator and a note taker

2 weeks before
- Begin contacting participants
- Decide on snacks
- Arrange childcare (if needed)
- Arrange transportation (if needed)
- Finalize protocol

1 week before
- Confirm participants
- Check equipment
- Confirm childcare & transportation
- Prepare incentives
- Send out reminders (email/text)
- Recruit for any cancellations
- Confirm location, date and time

1 day before
- Confirm location, date and time
Interactive Session - Mock Focus Group Exercise

• Activity

• Reflections
Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952; GAO, 1996; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990)

**Inductive**
- “Bottom up”
- Themes emerge from the data
- Data-driven
- Process of coding data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame

**Deductive**
- “Top down”
- Search for pre-identified themes in data
- Analyst driven
- Process of coding to answer specific research/evaluation questions
Begin with...

• Research/evaluation questions
  • What is being investigated?
  • How will the findings be used?

• Know your data

• Identify and extract themes (codes)

• Operationalize concepts/themes

• Summarize and analyze the data

• Tell your story
Coding

Involves marking segments/portions/chunks of data with descriptive words or category names - divides the data into meaningful analytical units.

- Who is a part of your team?
  - Data collectors, analysts, writers
- Develop codes
- Operationalize Codes: code book
- Reliability
- Quotes

“Our capacity was enhanced by the trainings where we learned how to connect existing data with the work to make parent engagement even more powerful.”

- Grantee
Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

- Atlas.ti
- MaxQDA
- NVIVO
- Other programs available online
Rio Hondo College and Student Equity Focus Groups

- Foster Youth
- CalWORKS Students
- DSPS Students
- Veterans
- EOP&S Students
The Role of Student Equity in Focus Group Research

Students are not the same. Historical, socio-economic, cognitive, and cultural factors determine differences in their behavior.

The institution contributes to inequity of opportunity that leads to inequity in outcomes.

Conduct Focus Group
Uncover themes that prove or disprove theory of the institution.

Tell the story.

Existing Theoretical Framework ->

(Equity by Design Framework)

Theory

Hypothesis

Observation

Conduct Focus Group

Patterns

Findings

Uncover themes that prove or disprove theory of the institution.
Focus Group Contribution

Understand and account for the subtleties in how different students access/use educational opportunities and why.

This understanding should inform how equitable programs, practices, policies, etc. are developed.
Five Student Equity Focus Groups at Rio Hondo - Summer 2015

1. Formulated questions for focus groups based on Student Equity Plan
2. Developed rough draft of code book
3. Recruited students through different student services programs
4. Held Focus Groups in one week
5. Transcribed data from five session recordings
6. 2 researchers conducted inter-coder reliability to establish final codebook
7. Assigned codes to text using QDA Miner
8. Developed themes from codes
9. Produced focus group report and summary table
10. Disseminated to student services programs
Sample Equity Focus Group Question

Course Completion
1. How did you determine what classes to enroll in?
2. Has anyone worked with a counselor or another staff member on an educational plan?
   a. When did you complete it? *(Probe: Immediately after enrolling or later?)*
   b. How did the educational plan change what classes you chose to take? Has it made your educational goals more focused?
How the Summer 2015 Focus Group Data Was Used

Foster Youth Office
- Program Orientations at Beginning of Semester, College Readiness
- Office was relocated to the Student Services Building
- Now uses Remind, sends text messages

Focus Group Data also referenced in various Student Equity Funding Proposals

Ctr. For Career & Re-Entry Svcs.
- Diversified hours, offer workshops in evening
- Focusing more time on basic skills during appt.
- Give strategies to students to get through basic skills
How to Spread the Word

Inverted Pyramid (example)

Tailored Counseling Help: 35 responses
Need Evening Workshops: 25 responses
More Computers: 10 responses

Focus Group Summary Table

PowerPoint Your Results
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Course Completion</th>
<th>ESL &amp; Basic Skills Completion</th>
<th>Degree and Certificate Completion</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VETERANS</td>
<td>+ Drawn to office because of support/encouragement from counselors &amp; other similar students</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Need more computer options in Veteran’s Office for HW" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Hirable at beginning of semester to help with registration questions" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Hire a psychologist in Veteran’s office to reduce dropouts from stress, etc." /></td>
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<td>+ Need more counselors in office that double as VA reps to inform about funding chapters &amp; assist w/civilian reintegration</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Encourage faculty to announce events, workshops, assistance, etc. at the beginning of classes. Diversity workshop times to accommodate residential/commuting students, FT/PT, etc." /></td>
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<td>FOSTER YOUTH</td>
<td>+ Supportive relationship was a draw to connect w/counselor</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Lack of college knowledge, basic skills progression, transfer sequence/requirements" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Found early-preparatory counseling sessions, Ed Plans, Student Services orientations helpful" /></td>
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<td>+ Priority registration was incentive to connect with Foster Youth office</td>
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<td>+ Announce application deadlines for student services at registration time</td>
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<td>EOP&amp;S</td>
<td>+ Black vouchers, meal vouchers, workshops all motivators to connect w/office.</td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Preferred old tutoring area in EOPS office w/apt times &amp; familiarity w/individual’s needs" /></td>
<td><img src="Image" alt="Like access to computers, printing area, scholarship info, and other supplies in office." /></td>
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<td>+ Drawn to personalized counseling service at office</td>
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**Notes:**
- Positive experiences students mentioned during the group
- A need students mentioned during the group
- Needs that are shared by students in 2 or more groups
Q&A

• Questions?
Online Resources

- **Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews**, by Richard A. Krueger is concise resource with specific steps and tips on conducting group interviews.

- **Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group** is provided by Eliot & Associates. In this guide you will find checklists and samples of items such as focus group questions, recruitment flyer, invitee tracking form, introductory remarks, sample consent form, data analysis format, and synthesized report format. This is another excellent and detailed example.

- **Introduction to Conducting Focus Groups**, by NOAA Coastal Services Center, is a comprehensive introduction to key elements and practices that will increase the success of a focus group effort. Topics covered in this publication include focus group basics, preparing for the focus group, developing effective questions, planning the focus group session and analyzing the data.

- **Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups**, provided by Omni, is a great resource intended to assist in conducting focus groups and enhance one’s facilitation skills. It contains two sections: Research Basics and Focus Groups.

- **The Community Tool Box**, is a resource for community researchers with a comprehensive section on Conducting Focus Groups. The Tool Box was created by the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas.
For more information regarding focus group research method (or just to stay in touch 😊)

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THANK YOU!