OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

FOCUS GROUPS

Conducting focus groups with students in your major can provide a unique look at their experience and perceptions.

How do focus groups contribute to assessment?

There are two types of data collection in assessment - Direct and Indirect Data

- Direct data measures student learning from direct demonstrations of knowledge. Ways to collect direct data include: tests, exams, essays, research papers, laboratories, evaluations

- Indirect data measures students' attitudes and perceptions. Indirect data collection can be performed by: focus groups, interviews, reflective essays, surveys

HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP

Focus groups are essentially small group interviews. They are referred to as "focus groups" because the group itself can have a common attribute (e.g. students.) Or, the group might have a focus (e.g. senior history majors) or have all gone through the same experience (e.g. study abroad in London). Holding focus groups with students provides specific insight and perspectives that only a student can provide about learning and the curriculum.

PROCESS FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

1. **Informed Consent:**
    a. Start the focus group by telling students the purpose of the meeting. E.g. In this focus group, we will be talking about our learning outcomes on critical thinking and problem solving.

b. Provide students with an informed consent. Example:

   Participation is completely voluntary, names will not be included in the transcript, we ask that you not discuss what we speak about in this meeting once it is over but we cannot ensure total anonymity since students in the class may share with others what was said in the meeting. If you have something you would like to speak about that is confidential we can arrange a one on one interview. Please speak with me at the end of this session.

Explain how the data will be used (it will be used for a report or it will be read by administration), and if there are any other ways you will protect students.

2. **Set up for the Focus Group**: It is important to set ground rules for focus group meetings. Please tell students:
   a. to not use faculty or student names
   b. that an individual student should not dominate the discussion
      i. give everyone in the room a chance to speak
   c. that everyone has a right to their opinions
      i. do not criticize other student's comments

3. **Topic and Objective of the Focus Group:** Be clear about what you are seeking to learn or understand as a result of each meeting. You may wish to understand how students learn specific information or skills. You may want to know about curriculum sequencing or teaching styles. Begin with the end in mind: *When the meeting is over, what will you want to have learned?*
   - Identify a method or strategy to best meet your needs. (See "Methods" below.)
   - Develop questions and possible follow-up questions (prompts) accordingly in advance of the meeting. If you have 3-5 key questions prepared, you can use them to help guide the conversation to ensure that you leave the meeting having learned what you wanted to learn.
   - <u>What</u> and <u>How</u> questions always work best.

4. **During the Meeting**
   - Develop rapport with the people you are meeting with by exhibiting objectivity, fairness, courtesy, and respect for their time, expertise, and various points-of-view.
   - In group meetings, manage participants who over or under-participate by asking a question such as: "I would like to hear some other voices on this topic – would someone else be willing to share their perspective or experience?"
   - Prior to asking a question, you could informally poll participants to get a sense of participation or agreement with a statement.
     - *Example:* "How many of you thought we spent adequate time on how to write a thesis statement?
   - Listen carefully and confirm your understanding by paraphrasing back to participants what you think you heard.

- Take notes so you can refer to them when writing the transcript. You may want to tape record the meeting.
- Conclude by giving the participants the opportunity to share anything else (positive or negative) that may be relevant.
    - *Example*: "Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know?"
- Identify any high-priority follow-up questions you may have for particular individuals and groups; you may be able to find time for some one on one discussions.

Techniques for Conducting Group Meetings

1. **The instant mini-survey:** Distribute 3"x5" cards and ask everyone in the room to write the answers to two questions. Discussion can be guided by the issues that attendees themselves have raised. Periodically the focus group leader has a reason to say "Well, let's move on now to another topic …. "
2. **Listing:** At the beginning of the meeting, the team leader can invite suggestions from the floor for topics that should be covered and can use a flip chart or board to list them, and then refer back to the list periodically.
3. **Stacking:** If a lot of people want to speak on the same topic at the same time, the team leader can ask them to raise their hands, count off, then speak in that order to the end of the "stack."
4. **Straw poll:** This is an informal vote or show of hands. It can help an interviewer to get a feel for the audience at the beginning of a session *"How many of you (students) believe that you learned how to write at a professional level? Show of hands?"* or to get a sense of the room at the end of a lively discussion *"So how many of you now think there should be more online course offerings?"*. The important thing is to keep the questions simple and the procedure informal and non-binding. It should not be used if there is any danger of isolating or intimidating a minority.
5. **Go-round:** This works best if the group is relatively small to begin with and chairs can be arranged in a circle. The team leader throws out a question and then goes around the room inviting everyone to answer briefly. This technique gives everyone an equal chance to respond. It can break the ice and be used for the first part of a meeting, before turning to a more open discussion format.

Tips for Effective Interview Questions

- **Open, not closed:** Open questions are designed to encourage narrative on the part of the interviewee and conversation. Closed questions typically result in a precise answer, such as "Yes" or "No."
    - *Example*: (to students) "What are the qualities of your program that you like best and why?" versus "Do you like your program?"

- **Phrased to understand, not to judge**: Most often you will be seeking to learn more about the curriculum. Questions phrased to illicit explanation versus those that hint or state pre-conceived judgments may result in more useful and meaningful information.
    - *Example*: “Tell me about how the…”
- **Focused and rigorous, versus “beating around the bush”**: If there is specific information you are seeking, be focused in your questions versus hoping that participants can guess what you’re trying to learn.
    - *Example*: “Please explain how you…”
- **Ask for concrete examples:** Concrete examples will provide you with a glimpse into the specific practices of the institution (what they do, which may be different from what they say they do).
    - *Example*: (to students) “What are some specific experiences you have had with your advisor that have helped you succeed?” and “Please walk us through the orientation you had as a new student.”
    - *Example*: (to faculty) “What are some specific learning assessment activities that you’ve participated in? What did you do?” and “Tell me about…”