

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus groups are an excellent way to gather qualitative data on the issue or problem you are exploring. This protocol was developed to provide consistent guidelines for departments within the division of student affairs who plan to conduct focus groups.

There are three phases to conducting a focus group and these phases are explained below:

PHASE 1: BEFORE THE FOCUS GROUP

1. **Fill out an assessment project plan** to identify your overall purpose and outcomes for the focus group. The assessment project plan can be found on the VPSA website:
<http://www.bc.edu/offices/vpsa/Assessment.html>
2. **Determine how many focus groups you want to run.**
 - a. Multiple focus groups will enable you to compare and identify themes which emerge from each discussion.
 - b. Focus groups should run between 60 and 90 minutes.
3. **Identify your participants:**
 - a. Determine how many participants you want in each group. Each focus group should have between six and ten participants. Fewer than six participants may limit the conversation and yield poor data while more than ten can be unwieldy.
 - b. Develop a list of key attributes to seek in participants based on the purpose you have identified.
 - c. Secure names and contact information and send invitations.
4. **Generate your questions.**
 - a. Based on the purpose and goals of the focus group, identify *no more than five questions*.
 - b. Revisit the questions to make sure that they will yield the kind of information you are seeking.
 - c. Order the questions from general to specific.
5. **Develop your script**
 - a. *Part one:* welcome participants, explain purpose and context, explain what a focus group is, and make introductions. Explain that information is confidential and no names will be used. You will either have a note-taker or record the proceedings.
 - b. *Part two:* ask your questions; remember to use probes and follow up questions to explore the key concepts more deeply.

- c. *Part three*: close the focus group – thank participants, give them contact information for further follow up if requested, explain how you will analyze and share the data.

6. Select a facilitator

- a. The facilitator *should not* be someone who directly oversees the issue or topical area you are exploring. This may make participants less open to sharing their thoughts or concerns.
- b. The facilitator *should be* knowledgeable about the topic at hand, and can be a grad student or staff member from the same department.
- c. The facilitator should be able to keep the discussion going, deal tactfully with difficult or outspoken group members, and make sure all participants are heard
- d. The facilitator should ask the questions and probes, but not participate in the dialogue or correct participants.

7. Choose the location

- a. Choose a location which is comfortable, easily accessible, and where participants can see one another.
- b. Choose a setting which does not bias the information gathered.
- c. Consider food or snacks.

PHASE 2: CONDUCT THE FOCUS GROUP

1. Bring materials:

- a. Notebook/computer or tape recorder to record proceedings
- b. Flip chart paper if no board is available
- c. Focus group list of participants
- d. Focus group script
- e. Name tags
- f. Watch or clock

2. Arrive before the participants to set up room, refreshments, etc.

3. Introduce yourself and the note-taker (if applicable) and carry on the focus group according to the script.

4. Conduct the session, being mindful of the following:

- a. Set a positive tone.
- b. Make sure everyone is heard; draw out quieter group members.
- c. Probe for more complete answers.
- d. Monitor your questions and the time closely – it is your job to make sure you are on track.
- e. Don't argue a point with a participant, even if they are wrong. Address it later if you must.
- f. Thank participants and tell them what your next steps are with the information.

PHASE 3: INTERPRETING AND REPORTING THE RESULTS

1. Summarize each meeting

- a. Immediately after the meeting, the facilitator should write up a quick summary of his/her impressions.
- b. Transcribe the notes or audio recording of the focus group. This should be done as soon as possible after the focus group has been conducted.
- c. If multiple facilitators have been used for two or more groups, discuss your impressions with the other facilitators before reviewing the transcript.

2. Analyze the summaries

- a. Read the notes and look for themes/trends. Write down any themes which occur more than once.
- b. Context and tone are just as important as words. If comments are phrased negatively or triggered an emotional response, this should be noted in the analysis.
- c. Interpret the results
 - i. What are the major findings?
 - ii. What recommendations might you have?

3. Write the report

- a. A report template is on the VPSA Assessment website:
<http://www.bc.edu/offices/vpsa/Assessment.html>
- b. Your report should include your purpose, outcomes, process, findings, and recommendations.
- c. Submit the report to your director and to Katie O'Dair in the VPSA office.

4. Make adjustments/take action on what you learned

- a. Schedule a meeting to discuss the implications.
- b. Highlight the main themes, issues, or problems that arose in the focus groups. Discuss how you will address these.
- c. Prioritize the results and make action plans for the most important priorities.

For more information on focus group training, go to the Workshops link on the VPSA Assessment website