

# Quick Guide to Focus Groups for Program Assessment

This quick guide was prepared by the WSU Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness (ACE) and is intended to help WSU programs and faculty consider good practices for designing focus groups for program-level assessment. ACE is also available to collaborate with WSU undergraduate degree programs to conduct focus groups for program-level assessment. Contact us at [ace.office@wsu.edu](mailto:ace.office@wsu.edu) for more information.

## Introduction

For program-level assessment, focus groups offer a way to gather feedback from students about their experiences, motivation, and perspectives about aspects of their educational experience, skills, or knowledge, revealing the “how” or “why” of student behavior and thinking. In this way, focus groups can provide insight into the ways a curriculum can be most effectively designed to support student learning.

## Choosing to Do a Focus Group

When choosing whether a focus group, or another assessment method, will be appropriate and useful for your program, consider what you would like to know, how the results will be used, and if the method is realistic in terms of resources and logistics.

Examples of different purposes for focus groups might include:

- Asking a group of seniors nearing graduation about their experience in the major, such as students’ perceptions of how well pre-requisites prepared them for learning in later classes
- Assessing the experience of the first student cohort in a new curriculum when they are mid-way through the curriculum, so that adjustments can be made
- Responding to results from other assessment measures, to add depth of understanding to other data

**Surveys vs Focus Groups.** Some assessment questions can be better addressed using a focus group than a survey. When deciding whether to use a survey or a focus group consider the following:

Purposes	Survey	Focus Group
To understand what, how often, to what extent	X	
To understand how or why		X
To get information from many people (100+)	X	
To test a new idea	X	
To get feedback on a new idea		X
To contextualize survey findings		X

## Focus Group Logistics

Below are some good practices to help programs and faculty efficiently handle the logistics of recruiting participants and setting up student focus groups.

### Questions

Focus group questions should be developed in advance, customized to target the program's assessment needs, and fit within the program's overall assessment plan.

### Facilitation

It is best practice for an outside person or organization (a neutral third party) to conduct focus groups. Avoid having your focus groups conducted by someone directly involved with the students or in a position of power, such as a faculty member, teaching assistant, advisor, or administrator.

### Location

Focus groups should take place in a convenient and comfortable location that is quiet with some degree of privacy. In an academic setting, the most convenient and comfortable place is often the classroom where students are already meeting. If this is not possible, alternatives include: a lounge or meeting room close to the classroom, a common living area (such as a residence hall), or a similar location well-known to students. If possible, amply-spaced seating placed in a circle can help participants feel they are part of a respectful discussion in which their individual experiences and opinions are valued.

### Time

Choose a time of day that's convenient for participants.

- 75 minutes is an ideal length for a focus group, but a focus group can also be structured for a 50-minute class session.
- Add 15-30 minutes if serving food or a meal.

### Size

- A focus group should ideally include 8 to 12 participants. However, focus groups can be run successfully with larger groups, especially in connection with a whole class.
- To ensure that enough students show up, invite 10% to 25% more students than you want to participate. For example, invite 10-15 students for a target group of 8-12.
- Depending on the size of your student population, you may need to hold 2-3 focus groups on a given topic, so that patterns emerge from a range of students and opinions.

### Incentives

Modest incentives help ensure students' participation. Below are several possibilities; you may choose to offer more than one incentive as well (such as some food, plus a drawing for a gift).

- If done during a class period, a small amount of credit can be given.
- A meal, such as a boxed lunch or pizza. Note: Please keep any lists of names collected for accounting purposes administratively separate from focus group results and communication with faculty.
- Money or gift cards are generally an effective incentive, such as a gift card to the campus bookstore, Ferdinand's or a local business that students frequent. Other modest incentives in university settings include a mug, CD, etc. Participants can be entered into a drawing for one gift.

## Interpreting Focus Group Results

Keep in mind that focus group results are often suggestive, rather than definitive, and are best used in conjunction with other sources of evidence.

- Focus group results can suggest avenues for further investigation.
- The relative small size of focus groups typically does not allow statistically significant generalization of results to a larger population. Focus group results alone should not be used for high stakes decisions.
- ACE recommends conducting several focus groups to determine repeated emergent themes and/or using focus group results to corroborate or illuminate results from other data.
- Students' perspectives can be limited for various reasons. For example, if most students have had little or no workplace experience in their chosen field, their ability to speak to the professional value of the skills and knowledge taught in the curriculum is necessarily limited.

## ACE-facilitated Focus Groups

An ACE staff member can serve as a neutral third party to facilitate focus groups for undergraduate academic programs, consulting in advance to customize questions and topics that target the program's assessment needs, including student learning outcomes, and fit with their overall assessment plan.

### Focus Group Structure

An ACE staff member will facilitate a whole group discussion with students about their experiences in the program. Students will respond to a set of questions developed in advance by the program in concert with ACE.

- Works best with a fairly small group: 8-12 students, with a maximum of about 20 in a classroom setting
- Requires 50-75 minutes
- Facilitator manages safe space to maximize individual participation
- Facilitator can follow up as needed: gently probe, ask clarifying questions, request examples, check agreement within the group, invite quieter students to participate, read non-verbal cues

### Roles and Responsibilities

- ACE will: help create questions, facilitate the focus group, take notes of student responses without student names (no recordings are made), report results, consult with the program regarding how to present results to the faculty or a faculty group (such as an assessment or curriculum committee) interpretation
- The program will: work with ACE to plan how to obtain a reasonably representative number of students (using multiple focus groups if necessary), identify and recruit participants, plan the event, provide any food and incentives, use the results for program-level decisions, in conjunction with other assessments

## **Confidentiality**

Focus groups are by nature semi-confidential (unlike surveys or online course evaluations that can be anonymous and protect student identity). ACE cannot ensure confidentiality but can encourage semi-confidentiality.

### Student Confidentiality

- In our notes, we will not record student names.
- We will not identify any student names in the summary we give the program, or on any activity sheets we share, or in any use of the data.
- We will ask students not to attribute names to comments they hear in focus groups. (If they talk to people later about the focus group, instead of saying “Susan said such-and-such in this focus group I went to,” we will encourage them to say “there was a discussion about such-and-such in this focus group I went to.”)
- ACE will withhold focus group results until after grades are due at the end of the semester, unless the program chair or director requests otherwise.

### Faculty Confidentiality

- The chair or director of the program will receive the results unless otherwise requested, and the chair or director needs to give approval for who will receive results besides him or herself. Programs in receipt of focus group results choose when to share data, with whom to share the data, and how much to share. ACE can consult with you on this issue.
- In facilitating focus groups, ACE will steer the conversation toward program assessment and away from teacher evaluation. However, sometimes program assessment and teacher evaluation overlap. As stated above, program leadership is responsible for deciding how to handle this data (which parts to share for faculty discussion, etc.).

## **Additional Resources**

- Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research, Sage Publications, 2009
- Focus Groups: A Guide to Learning the Needs of Those We Serve, University of Wisconsin, 2007
- Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group, Eliot & Associates, 2005