

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS FOR PROGRAM ASSESSMENT: GUIDELINES FOR PROGRAMS

Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning, Washington State University, January 2018

Introduction

Focus groups are often a good choice for programs doing student learning outcomes assessment. They offer a way to get feedback about student experiences, perceptions, and motivations, revealing the “how” or “why” of student behavior and thinking. They can provide insight into the ways a curriculum can be most effectively designed to support student learning.

We recommend discussing the general guidelines below with an Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning (ATL) assessment specialist as you plan your focus groups. ATL is available to conduct focus groups for undergraduate programs with the following expectations of roles and responsibilities:

- **ATL will:** help create questions or design activities, facilitate the focus group, report results, consult with the program regarding how to present results to faculty and how to use results
- **The program will:** work with an assessment specialist 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

Choosing to Do a Focus Group

When choosing whether a focus group, or any other 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 (see Figure 1).

Conduct several focus groups to determine repeated emergent themes

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Purposes for Focus Groups

For programs and departments wishing to assess the learning experiences of undergraduates in their majors, there are several possible purposes for focus groups. ATL can provide sample questions that can be adapted to your needs. Examples of different purposes for focus groups include:

- A group of seniors nearing graduation (capstone or other context): Focus groups provide an opportunity to ask a number of different program assessment questions about students’ overall experience of the major, such as students’ perceptions of how well pre-requisites prepared them for later classes and their understanding of the skills they have developed through the curriculum.
- Assess the experiences of the first student cohort in a new curriculum mid-way through the curriculum, so that adjustments can be made.
- In response to results from other assessments—to add depth of understanding to the results of a survey, for example. Focus groups can add a dimension of causality to assessment, helping us understand why students behave the way they do and how they perceive their learning experiences.

Confidentiality

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

- In our notes, we will not connect any comments with students' individual names.
- We won't identify any student names in the summary we give the department, 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," they could say "there was a discussion about such-and-such in this focus group I went to.")

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. ATL can consult with you on this issue.

ATL will withhold focus group results until after grades are due at the end of the semester, unless the program chair or director requests otherwise.

In facilitating focus groups, ATL 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.).

Focus groups reveal the "how" and "why" of student behavior and thinking

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

*With closed-ended questions

*Figure 1: Choosing between a focus group or survey
Adapted from the Assessment Office at University of Hawaii, Manoa*

Interpreting and Using Focus Group Results

If ATL facilitates your focus group, we will provide a focus group report, which typically includes a summary of results and some discussion notes or student comments. The discussion is not audio recorded. Notes may be recorded by a note-taker or gathered as part of the activities, depending on the focus group format. 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 does not allow statistically significant generalization of results to a larger population. Focus group results alone should not be used for high stakes decisions. **ATL 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.

Logistics

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

Facilitation

It is best practice for an outside person or organization (a neutral third party), such as ATL's assessment specialists, 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.

ATL provides a facilitator and, if needed, a note-taker for focus group questions and/or activities which we develop with your program in advance. ATL will also provide students with information about the purpose of the focus group and the semi-confidentiality of their responses (for more, see the section about confidentiality on Page 2).

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

- 75 minutes is an ideal length for a focus group, but a focus group can also be structured for a 50-minute class session if needed.
- Add 15-30 minutes if serving food or a meal.
- Choose a time of day that's convenient for participants.

Focus group types and 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.
- ATL has alternative focus group activities and formats to accommodate a range of target groups, and group sizes of up to 100 students. Please discuss options with ATL to fit your assessment needs and student context.
- 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 listed 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. Participation can count as class attendance, with non-participation as an absence.
- A meal, such as a boxed lunch or pizza. *Please keep any lists of names collected for accounting purposes administratively separate from focus group results and communication with faculty. This will help protect student confidentiality.*
- 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.

Modest incentives help ensure students' participation

Selecting and Recruiting Participants

There are several ways to recruit for focus groups. Consider what group(s) you want to participate and plan accordingly. Each approach carries a selection bias that may skew results. Consider ways to minimize that bias, and consider the implications of bias when analyzing results.

- *Entire class*: Allocate a regularly scheduled class period in a course. If available, include multiple sections.
- *All members of the same group*: If there are different types of students in the program (i.e., the program has more than one major or degree, there are age or gender differences that might be significant, etc.), you can recruit students based on those characteristics. In that case, you may choose to run multiple focus groups as homogenous groups tend to provide a safer environment, increasing the willingness of participants to speak honestly.
- *Random selection*: If the department or program is large, students can be randomly selected to participate.
- *Nominate students*: Faculty members, advisors or others can identify key students they think would make good participants --students who are familiar with the program and can speak to the questions asked.
- *Existing interested group*: Depending on the purpose of the focus group, you might invite an existing group, such as a student association, club, or residence hall.

Communicating with Students

- **Invitations**: Students respond best to personalized invitations, from their instructor, advisor, or someone else they know. The invitee should be a name the students recognize and respect, and the email should be individualized (one email per recipient). Invitations should go out at least two weeks before the focus group. The message should communicate the value/purpose of the focus group, set clear expectations, and provide the time and location, and a contact for questions.
- **Confirmation emails**: Send a confirmation email to each participant, if the focus group will not be held during a class period.
- **Reminders**: In connection with a course, the faculty member should remind students prior to the class period. Otherwise, send out reminders 24-48 hours in advance via email, text, or phone call.

Communicating with Faculty or Other Person Inviting Students

Provide the faculty member, advisor, or other person inviting students with a written message, worded to communicate the value/purpose of the focus group, set clear expectations, and provide all logistics and a contact for questions. (ATL can provide a draft invitation for you to adapt.) *All students should get the same invitation.*

Consider ways to minimize selection bias when recruiting participants

Additional References and 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