CALIFORNIA COLLEGE PATHWAYS

Conducting Focus Groups with Students and Other Stakeholders: Tips and Tools

Overview and Purpose of the California College Pathways Focus Groups

In order to create campus and network plans that are responsive to student needs, network campuses are encouraged to conduct focus groups with foster youth and other key stakeholders as part of their program planning and implementation process. The purpose of the focus groups is to help campuses gather the perspective of students and other stakeholders in order better understand their quantitative milestones and momentum metrics, and to identify ways they can improve their support to foster youth, which should ultimately result in more foster youth achieving important education and career milestones. Additionally, a baseline data report that summarizes campuses' quantitative milestones and momentum metrics, as well as qualitative data collected from students and other campus stakeholders will be provided to network campuses in January 2015.

This Resource Guide is intended to support campus grantees in planning, conducting, analyzing, and reporting on student and other stakeholder focus groups. It was developed by RTI International, drawing upon tools and strategies we have used, as well as a guide developed by Andrea Venezia of WestEd and Alison Kadlec of Public Agenda for Completion by Design, an initiative aimed at helping community colleges boost completion rates.

What is a Focus Group?

Focus groups are structured discussions of specific topics used to generate and better understand multiple perspectives, insights, or experiences. Focus group participants should be "A group of people who possess certain characteristics and provide qualitative data in a focused discussion to help understand a topic of interest" (Kruger and Casey, 2009). It is important that participants feel comfortable and safe during the discussion, and that their perspective and experiences are valued. Focus groups are often used to explore the meaning of survey findings. For our purpose, they will be used to help dive into the quantitative milestones and momentum points data. Additionally, focus groups can be used to examine complex problems from various perspectives, identify obstacles and opportunities, and create a stronger sense of engagement from stakeholders in problem-solving.

The number of participants in a focus group should be relatively small—between 6 and 12 participants—small enough to give everyone the opportunity to express an opinion, but large enough to provide diversity of opinions. Unlike random samples, focus groups do not necessarily need to be representative in many common measurements (race, gender, age), but ideally should include individuals who come from different backgrounds and can provide a variety of ideas, opinions, or insight.

Preparing for the Focus Group

Here are six points to consider when designing your focus group.

- **Keep in mind the overall goal of the focus group and create specific lines of inquiry**
  - The first questions to ask yourself when you begin to design your focus group are what information are you most interested in learning and how are you going to use this information. Based on a review of initial milestones and momentum metrics from different networks, we have identified three lines of inquiry we are suggesting each campus pursue with the focus groups (see Appendix C).

- Additionally, each campus may have particular challenges or opportunities, suggested in your data or from other sources that you want to pursue in your student focus group. We suggest preparing one or two campus-specific lines of inquiry in addition to the three suggested for all campuses. The John Burton Foundation technical assistance advisors can provide assistance with identifying the most salient questions.

❖ **Develop focus group questions that spark a conversation, and don't try to cover too many topics**

- When refining your questions, try to think about how they might spark a conversation that will allow for members of the focus group to both provide their opinions, and build off one another to create new ideas and problem solve. Questions should be open-ended, and require more than a yes/no answer. However they should not be too broad, but rather narrow enough to stay on topic.

- Appendix A provides a draft protocol, and Appendix C provides three lines of inquiry we are suggesting all campuses pursue.

❖ **Question Checklist**

- Are my questions concise and direct?
- Are my questions focused on a narrowed topic/inquiry?
- Are my questions worded in a clear way that is unambiguous?
- Are my questions opened ended? That is, do my questions require more than a "yes" or a "no" to be answered?

❖ **Invest adequate time to recruit enough students, and students you think may have a diverse set of experiences to share**

- Having too few participants decreases the value of the focus group, so do not overlook the important step of recruiting enough participants. When planning outreach, colleges can ask themselves the following questions.

  1. Do foster youth students gather regularly for another purpose, and can the focus group be added before or after that gathering?

  2. Is there an email list serve that can be used to invite students to participate in the focus group? (see Appendix E for a sample email).

  3. Can flyers be used effectively to target these students? (see Appendix B as an example).

  Even if colleges can use all three ways to reach foster students, it can still be difficult to obtain a sufficient sized focus group. Because of this, colleges should not solely rely on advertising, but could invite students in person when the opportunity arises.

  When members are recruited, it is important to request and track RSVPs. A few days before, and the day of the focus group, contact those who have RSVP'd yes to remind them and confirm their participation. Over-invite in anticipation of a no show rate of 10 to 20 percent.

- Provide incentives for participation. At the very least, the standard is to provide the participants with food and drink. But time eating should occur before or after the focus group, not during the focus

group as it will detract from the conversation. We have found $10 gift cards to cafes (Starbucks, Peet's Coffee, a campus café, etc.) to be particularly appreciated by students. Letting them know their voices are important and will be heard can also help with recruitment.

- **Identify an appropriate location and convenient time**

  - Physical environment can have a major impact on the quality of a focus group. The ideal space is one that is quiet, and one in which everyone can see each other and is close enough together for a comfortable conversation. A round table or chairs organized in a circle is the ideal configuration for a conversation. It also allows for all voices to be picked up by a recorder (see below regarding the importance of recording focus groups).

  - Focus groups should be at least an hour and no more than two hours; 90 minutes is usually ideal. It should not be held at a time most students have classes (e.g., perhaps 10:00 AM is a popular course time on your campus and should be avoided). Once potential participants have been identified, the facilitator can reach out individually and ask for times that work best and select a time that works best for everyone.

  - The facilitators should have two recorders, just in case one fails. Having a note-taker can also be helpful for later analysis, as they can document who is speaking and at what time during the recordings.

- **Choose the facilitators carefully**

  - The facilitators have the most important roles when it comes to conducting a successful focus group. They should be attentive, respectful, and guide the conversation, not dominate it. Ideally you will have two facilitators, a lead facilitator and an assistant who will focus on taking notes and managing the audio recording.

    Qualities to look for when choosing a lead facilitator

    - Attentive, sensitive, empathetic
    - Clear communicator
    - Can multitask by listening to participants and formulating additional questions at the same time
    - Understands the value in all members' opinions and ideas in the focus group
    - Demonstrates an understanding or competency in the related field
    - Can appropriately manage challenging group dynamics
    - Does not exhibit personal bias

    Qualities to look for when choosing an assistant facilitator

    - Ability to quickly take notes and listen at the same time (usually on a laptop or notebook, with the interview protocol)
    - Can manage the recorders
    - Allow the moderator to do all the talking during the group

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Conducting the Focus Group

Below are some tips and guidelines for facilitating student focus groups. A sample protocol is provided in Appendix A.

Checks to make before the focus groups

1. Participants have been sent a reminder of the focus group 24 hours in advance.
2. Consent forms have been drafted and are ready to be distributed. A sample consent form is included in Appendix E.
3. The recorders have been tested and charged.

- **The facilitator must establish an open, supportive environment**

  - Start the process as soon as participants enter the room, and be sensitive to the atmosphere throughout the session. Greet each person as they enter the room and get settled. Introduce yourself if you don't already know each other.
  - If refreshments are available at this time, allow the participants to eat/drink.
  - Once they arrive, present them with a consent form. Reviewing and signing the form is something they can do while eating/drinking.
  - Set norms to help set the tone for the group. Student might feel uncomfortable talking about what might feel like sensitive topics to them. The draft protocol in Appendix A provides assurances to students that their comments will be kept anonymous and their names will not be used in any materials developed from the focus group information.
  - Give an outline to how the focus group will be conducted (i.e. "we will be sitting at this table, I will ask a set of questions…").
  - Ask if anyone has any questions before beginning and turning on the recorder.
  - Monitor your body language throughout the session: make eye contact, lean forward, keep open hand gestures.

- **The facilitator must guide the focus group to address the topics in the time allotted, elicit responses from the participants, and provide clarity when needed**

  - Be on the lookout for ways to quantify responses to important questions. If a participant brings up a situation or point of view you think others are likely to share, and it's important to understand, ask the other participants to raise their hands if they have experienced something similar or agree. For example, if one student says they were not able to log on to an important website, and others seem to agree, ask them to raise their hands if this happened to them. Then state out loud how many raised their hand ("I see all eight of you are raising your hand"). It is important not only to try to measure how pervasive this issue is, but when listening to the recording you cannot see who raised their hand, so it's important to say it out loud.

- If a participant gives a response you don't quite understand, ask them to provide an example or rephrase their response and ask if you understand it correctly. Questions such as "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give an example?" can help to elicit detail and ensure that all participants explain their answers.

- Invite more reticent members to share their experiences with the group if they feel comfortable (e.g. "Jan we haven't heard from you about this website, do you want to talk about your experience?").

- Don't talk too much (generally less than 20%), and do not cut off participants or try to speak for them. Let them give you their answer, and only speak to clarify an answer, ask for more detail, or ask an additional question.

- When time begins to run out, make mention of this to the participants so if you have to stop, no one feels like you are cutting them off (i.e. "I have ten minutes left, and would like to quickly ask one last question").

- Thank the participants for their time. Provide contact information so participants can contact you afterwards with any additional questions.

❖ **Handling difficult group dynamics**

Dominating Participant: This person wants to only talk about their experiences. Thank them for sharing their view, and turn toward the rest of the group and ask them if they've had a similar experience or had something they wanted to contribute.

Rambling Participant: This person talks at length. Take a look at the clock/your watch, and when they seem to break for a breath, jump in, thank them for sharing their perspective and ask others if they would like to contribute.

Quiet Participant: This person is very shy, and might not feel comfortable jumping into the discussion. Directly ask for them to share their experience if they are comfortable, smile at them, and thank them for sharing when they finish.

Circling Participant: Often a Dominating Participant, this person is usually upset about something, and they end up going back to the situation over and over again. The facilitator can take sparse notes, and when this participant brings it up again, the facilitator can look at their notes, read them to the participant, and ask if there was anything else they should add.

Self-Appointed Voice: This person usually tries to assert themselves as the representative for other group members and tries to speak for them. Thank them for sharing their views, and ask to hear from some other people.

Summarizing Results from the Focus Group

There are many different approaches for summarizing and analyzing focus group data, with varying levels of research rigor. Because the primary purpose of these focus groups is inform your planning and implementation of effective supports and programs for foster youth, we are less concerned with research rigor and most concerned with the process being helpful to your campus. In addition to informing your programs, by gathering results from across the campus focus groups we hope to support learning across the networks and beyond the networks. More

specifically, we plan to incorporate some qualitative data from student focus groups in an annual report that RTI will provide to networks in the winter. Funders are requesting that campuses summit a focus group report (see Appendix D) with their interim grant reports.

Below are tips for summarizing your focus group data:

- **Flesh out the notes taken by the assistant facilitator**

  - We recommend this be done as soon as possible after the session. Use the audio recording to fill in gaps in your notes. This does not need to be a detailed word-for-word transcription. The goal should be that someone who was not at the focus group could read the notes and have a very clear sense of the full conversation. You'll see in the attached reporting template that we suggest identifying illustrative quotes. Those should be written word-for word, although you can omit "Umms" and other mumbles.

  - Often times to protect confidentiality, alias names are given to the participants in notes and results, with a key of real names to aliases being stored separately. Alternatively, participants can be assigned a number ("participant 1 stated…").

- **Both facilitators read the notes, then come together to discuss and identify themes, prepare the Focus Group Report**

  - When the notes are fleshed out, the two facilitators should review them independently, jotting down notes regarding themes as they emerge. Through this initial run-through, it is also helpful to highlight quotes that the facilitators think are important.

  - After reading the notes independently, the facilitators should come back together and discuss the themes they each identified, making sure that through this discussion they come to agreement on what information emerged from the focus group. This discussion can be guided both by the initial reading each facilitator did with the notes, as well as the Appendix D form. Plan how you will complete the form.

  - One of the facilitators should complete Appendix D. Facilitators are encouraged to engage with John Burton Foundation technical assistance advisors and also to involve other team members in thinking about how to use the information from the focus groups to inform the campus' planning and implementation.

References

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Venezia, A., & Kadlec, A. (2012). Student Focus Group Resource Guide | Completion by Design. *Student Focus Group Resource Guide | Completion by Design*. Retrieved March 28, 2014, from http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/resource/424

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