Using Focus Groups for Holistic Assessment on Campus
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Campus Adoption
Campus Labs
What are we missing?
The Student Conversation
The University is a Mecca to which students come with something less than perfect faith. It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known but to question it.

*Jacob Bronowski*

*The Ascent of Man*
What are some of the questions you wish you had student feedback on today?

Why did students choose to attend here?

How do students view success?

Do program graduates understand the curriculum they have been exposed to?

How can I help students grow academically within the classroom?

What types of activities would help students want to remain on campus?
Why Focus Groups?
A Brief History

• Late 1930s: problems emerge with interview (Stuart Rice)
  • “Data obtained from an interview are as likely to embody the preconceived ideas of the interviewer as the attitudes of the subject interviewed”
  • Move toward nondirective interviewing

• World War II: Robert Merton’s efforts examining morale in the U.S. Military
  • Becomes the basis for The Focused Interview
  • Still ignored by academics who had a preoccupation with quantitative methods and numbers
  • Market researchers buy-in, though

• By the 1980s, academics are back
Why Focus Groups Work

• Help us move beyond what Jourard (1964) refers to as our “public self”
  • Participants will “disclose more about themselves to people who resemble them in various ways than to people who differ from them”
Key Characteristics of Focus Groups

- Involve People that Possess Certain Characteristics
- Provide Qualitative Data
- Have a Focused Discussion
Focus Groups for Assessment

- Focus Groups
- Create Alternatives
- Revise Best Alternative
- Implement

TIME
When to Use Focus Groups

• Seeking range of opinions, perceptions, ideas, or feelings
• Uncover factors
• Understand differences in perspectives
• Seeking new ideas
• Pilot-testing
• Inform a large-scale quantitative study
• Explain results from a large-scale quantitative study
• Want to hear in-depth comments
When to Not Use Focus Groups

- Aiming for consensus
- Testing knowledge
- Asking for overly sensitive information
- Require statistical projections and data
- Environment is emotionally charged
- Researcher does not have full ability to control
- Other methodologies can produce higher-quality results
# Focus Group vs. Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Survey*</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To understand what, how often, to what extent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand how or why</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>To get information from many people (100+)</td>
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<tr>
<td>To test a new idea</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get feedback on a new idea</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>To contextualize survey findings</td>
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*With closed-ended questions*
Best Practice Approach: Triangulation

Focus

Groups

Inform Questionnaire

Survey

Inform Results

Focus

Groups
Myths about Focus Groups

- They are low-cost and quick
- They require professional moderators
- They require special facilities
- They must consist of strangers
- They will not work for sensitive topics
Criticalms of Focus Groups

- Participants tend to intellectualize
- Don’t tap into emotions
- Participants may make up answers
- Produce trivial results
- Dominant individuals can influence results
- Can’t depend on results
Focus Group Logistics

Facilitation
Location
Time
Size
Incentives
Recruiting Participants
Communicating with Students
Facilitation

• Who could?
• Who should?
• Who definitely shouldn’t?
• Moderator, listener, observer, and analyst
• Where makes sense?
• Where doesn’t?
• When should we?
• When shouldn’t we?
Size

• How big is too big?
• How small is too small?
• Should we offer?
• What should we offer?
• What is too much?
Recruiting Participants

- Who should we look for?
- How do we achieve a balance?
Communicating with Students

- Invitations
- Confirmation Emails
- Reminders
# Flow of Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Category</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>To get participants acquainted and feeling connected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>To introduce the topic of discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>To facilitate the transition to key questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>To obtain insight on areas of central concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td>To bring closure to the discussion</td>
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</table>
Tips for Writing Questions

- Assume nothing
- Be neutral
- One question at a time
- Avoid slang
Probing Questions

• “Please tell me (more) about that...”?
• “Could you explain what you mean by...”?
• “Can you tell me something else about...”?
• “Could you give me an example of ...”?
Immediately following the focus group session

- Begin data analysis
- Organize the data
- Identify patterns and connections
- Synthesize and combine related pieces of data
- Interpret the data
- Write the report
THE PROCESS

1. Prepare for analysis
2. Get to know the data
3. Categorize data
4. Identify patterns, themes, and connections
5. Synthesize and report findings

BE VERIFIABLE
THE KEY TO FOCUS GROUPS

Flexibility
Designing Focus Groups
Key Determinations in Project Set-Up

- Are Focus Groups Appropriate?
- Who Can Give Me the Information I Want?
- How Many Groups Should I Conduct?
- How Do I Recruit Participants?
Focus Group Designs

- Single-Category Design
- Multiple-Category Design
- Double-Layer Design
- Broad-Involvement Design
- Large-Scale Design
• Goal: Evaluate a leadership development program for freshmen
• Information-Rich: Completers from past three years

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<th>Category of participant</th>
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Goal: Evaluate a leadership development program for freshmen

Information-Rich: Completers from past three years, staff members, faculty, community members

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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
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Goal: Evaluate satisfaction with on-campus housing programing

Information-Rich: Students and Resident Assistants

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Goal: Board of Trustees wants a 360 degree evaluation of recently enacted on-campus policies

Information-Rich: Entire community

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</table>
• Goal: System Board wants to discuss with campuses plans for consolidation

• Information-Rich: Multiple stakeholders on multiple campuses
A KEY TO FOCUS GROUPS
Plan with Analysis in Mind
How to Plan with Analysis in Mind

- Pilot-test questions
- Use oral summaries
- Be wary of software
- Double your estimate of time it takes for analysis
- Determine depth and rigor you will want
Types of Questions to Engage

- Lists
- Ratings
- Alternatives
- Imagination
- Drawing (Pictures or Flow Charts)
- Mind Mapping
- Picture Sorting
- Developing a Campaign
THE PROCESS

1. Brainstorm
2. Sequence questions
3. Phrase questions
4. Estimate time for each
5. Get feedback
6. Revise
7. Test
Avoid Asking Why

• Asking why implies there is a rational answer

• The Principle of Specification
  • Basis of influence
  • Basis of desirable attributes

• Ask questions that hit at the angle you are actually interested in

• Example: “Why did you enroll at Hometown University?”
Intent of a focus group is NOT to infer. It is to understand.

Key Thoughts on Participant Selection

Randomization is not required because we are not generalizing.
Size

- Ideal is between 5 and 8 participants.
- Purpose: understand = fewer; test = more
- Complexity: more = fewer
- Level of expertise: more = fewer
- Level of passion: more = fewer
- Number of questions: more = fewer
Finding Participants

• Lists
• Nominations
• Snowball Sampling
• Piggyback
• On Location
• Ads
Selecting Participants

1. Set Screens
2. Design a Careful Recruiting Process
3. Generate a Pool of Potential Participants
4. Randomize if You Wish
Incentive Strategies
The Right Moderator

- Respects participants and Shows It
- Understands the Purpose of the Study
- Communicates Clearly
- Open and Not Defensive
- Can Get the Most Useful Information
Who to Be Aware Of

- Experts and Influentials
- Dominant Talkers
- Disruptive Participants
- Shy and Quiet
- Ramblers and Wanderers
- Inattentive Participants
THE PROCESS

1. Prepare for analysis
2. Get to know the data
3. Categorize data
4. Identify patterns, themes, and connections
5. Synthesize and report findings
Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study

Patton, 2002
Keys to Strong Analysis

Practical

Systematic

Verifiable
The Analysis Continuum

- Raw Data
- Description
- Interpretation
- Recommendation
Prioritizing Emerged Themes

- Frequency
- Extensiveness
- Intensity
- Specificity
- Internal Consistency
- Perception of Importance
The Classic Analysis Strategy

*Constant Comparative Method* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

**Tips**

1. Number the lines of the transcript
2. Print on different colors of paper per focus group
3. Use marker to identify groups within a type of participant
The Classic Analysis Strategy Steps

1. Re-read each transcript
2. Analyze by question
3. Cut out quotes and work to categorize
4. Summarize each question’s analysis
Categorization Process

Answered the question that was asked?

Yes

No

Does comment say something of importance about the topic?

Yes

No

Is it similar to other quotes?

Yes

Discard

No

Group

New pile

Answered a different question asked?

Yes

No

Discard

Move it

No
Take time for clear, effective writing

Get to the point

Provide enlightenment

Use multiple strategies

Involve end users
Questions to Prepare For

• Is this scientific research?
• How do you know your findings aren’t just your subjective opinions?
• Isn’t this soft research?
• How do you determine validity?
• Can you generalize?
• Why don’t you use random sampling?
• How can you make those statements with such a small sample?
The Right Moderator
Respects participants and Shows It
Understands the Purpose of the Study
Communicates Clearly
Open and Not Defensive
Can Get the Most Useful Information
Student-Led Focus Groups
The Discussion Process on Campus Today

- President
- Provost
- VP of Enrollment Management
- VP of Student Affairs
- VP of Advancement
- CIO
- VP of Business Services
The Discussion Process on Campus Today
Why Student-Led Focus Groups?
Communication is Lacking
The Co-Inquiry Model

- Developing Questions
- Analyzing Data
- Executing Inquiry
- Public Sharing of the Results
Students will talk to students

Understanding student culture

Ability to dig deeper

Knowing when and how to probe
Designing the Group

Application Process

Training

Things to Consider

Continuous Curriculum
Application Process

• How do we design the application?
• How do we reach out to students who may be interested?
• Do we offer incentives for participation in the program?
• How do I strive for a balance of students?
Training

• Need to cover a lot of bases:
  • Focus group basics
  • Moderating
  • Notetaking
  • Analysis
  • Infographic design
  • Report writing
  • Professional presentation skills

• And, we can’t forget the legalities
Topics to Consider

• Balance across academic classes
• Appropriate cross-sections of campus culture
• Ability for oversight
• Importance of informed consent
• Role of IRB
Continuous Curriculum

• Need to keep adding to the toolbox for students
Sample Projects

- Hurricane Matthew Recovery
- Retention Issues
- Curricular Understandings
- College Choice
Accomplishments

- Improved Retention Rates
- Equipped Students with Highly Marketable Skills
- Leveraged Available Data in Effective Manner
- Demonstrated Importance of Student Feedback and Data
Thank You!

Questions?

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