

Focus Groups

Thank you for joining the Student Life Studies assessment podcast. Our goal is to educate people about assessment resources and topics, so they can more easily incorporate assessment into their daily lives. Feel free to contact Student Life Studies by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or coming by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Let's get on with today's podcast.

Thanks for being interested in setting up a focus group for data collection. People are over-surveyed at this point, and focus groups can yield really interesting information that you might not get from a survey.

Basically, a focus group is a structured discussion about a particular topic that allows participants to qualitatively share their ideas, perceptions, and experiences. A focus group is not about decision-making, problem solving, or consensus building in the moment. It really is about collecting individual and group feedback as the facilitator asks reflective questions.

The advantages of a focus group are that they can collect deeper data by asking open-ended questions with the ability to ask follow up or clarifying questions. Because it is in a group setting, participants can build upon other participants' comments so the data collection can be very conversational. Participants can agree or disagree with others, creating more energy and data.

There are also disadvantages to using a focus group. Logistically, you have to work to get a group of people in a quiet space at the same time. Because you are working with people, there might be really talkative ones, really shy ones, really agreeable or disagreeable ones, so you need to have skill moderating groups. And because the data is in words, the analysis and interpretation may be more challenging.

In terms of logistics, you want to have about six to ten people attend, but you may need to invite more people than that to account for no-shows. The timeframe should be about an hour, and

should be in a place where you can have privacy and where participants can see each other. A conference room usually works well, especially if you are planning to audio record the focus group.

The facilitator usually has a set script so that the questions are fairly standard, but the facilitator can ask follow up questions for clarification. The role of the facilitator is to ask the questions, but not provide their opinions or ideas. They build rapport with the group before beginning the questions, maintain impartiality while asking questions, and keep the process moving. They should be making eye contact with the respondents, as well as being sure others feel included and gently dealing with dominate members.

If possible, a co-facilitator is nice to have so that person can jot some important notes and run the recorder if you are using it. They may or may not sit with the group. This person should also know the questions being asked and what the main points are.

Before participants arrive, be sure the room and equipment are set up correctly. When participants arrive, the facilitators should introduce themselves and welcome participants. They should explain the purpose of the focus group, and if necessary, seek permission for recording the responses. The facilitator may also set some ground rules and have participants introduce themselves to each other. When questions are asked, the facilitator should let the conversation flow, rather than doing a lot of the talking. Toward the end of the focus group, the facilitator should assess whether the group needs to get back on track and/or which questions need to be addressed. At the end, the co-facilitator may review some of the big take-aways from the conversation, but that is not always necessary. The facilitators should thank the participants and talk about any next steps in the process.

When asking the actual focus groups questions, they should begin with something easy, but still engaging to get respondents warmed up. The questions should be clear and on one topic, although they will be open-ended. If no one responds quickly, the facilitator can rephrase the question, or maintain silence until someone speaks. The questions should be unbiased and not leading. It is better to ask,

“What is your opinion of X?” rather than “Do you like X?” The facilitator can also use clarifying or transition questions such as, “Can you elaborate on that?” or “That’s interesting. Does anyone else want to address that?”

Hopefully, this has given you some basic ideas about how to put together a focus group. There are multiple sources to help you with the finer points, and you can always contact Student Life Studies to help you with the process.

Thanks for listening to today’s podcast. Please let us know if this was helpful or if you have additional questions. You can contact us by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or come by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Check out our website at studentlifestudies.tamu.edu for more resources and information. We hope to hear from you.