

Focus Group Guidelines

Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely.

-- Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay. (1800–1859)

A focus group is a tool used to gather information. Like a survey, a focus group provides data for analysis, but because the data are gathered in a less formal format, a focus group can be like a good conversation. The format of the focus group provides an opportunity for participants and the facilitator to exchange information related to the topic or group of topics for which the data are being collected. As with a survey, a focus group conversation is private and confidential, and participants and their ideas are treated with respect and integrity.

Focus groups can be powerful tools for planning and decision-making. The insights and data produced by the interaction of participants in focus groups can provide feedback to initiate change, confirm satisfaction with services, or help generate new hypotheses. Focus groups can be used to assess community needs before planning new offerings, provide inputs on what customers see as “ideal,” or gather feedback on how to improve services. In situations where the questions to be asked are predominantly open-ended, such as “tell me how this service can be improved,” the facilitator of a focus group can elicit a participant’s response and encourage others participants to build on them providing more information from several points of view.

OIE has a solid background in focus group methodology. We have helped others design focus groups, facilitated sessions, analyzed feedback received during focus groups, and provided recommendations based on the information distilled from the sessions.

As you start thinking about using a focus group to gather information, consider these points:

1. **Identify the purpose of the focus group.** What information are you looking for? What general questions are to be answered as a result of conducting the focus group? These could be broad in nature, such as “What are our customers’ requirements?” or narrow as “How did the training improve the work flow?” Identify the overall reasons for conducting the focus group.

- 2. Determine when the results are needed.** The complete focus group process usually takes about three to four months, from the first step to completing an analysis and a report of the results. Knowing this will help determine the start date.

Once you have this information, contact OIE. We will be glad to help plan and facilitate the focus group for you. To request assistance from OIE, submit a request through our online [Data Request Form](#) (**ACC Personnel only**), contact us at oiinfo@austincc.edu, or call Alice Swayze at 223-7601.

Good focus group design requires some thought and effort. For the focus group to be effective, OIE will start with the information you have provided on the purpose of the focus group and the time requirements. Using the overall purpose, OIE will work with you to develop specific questions to use when the focus group is conducted. Points to keep in mind when considering questions:

- Questions should be “open-ended” to provide a wide variety and depth of responses. Simple “yes/no” questions can provide very specific information but, generally, do not help stimulate discussion or exchange of ideas.
- Questions should be clearly stated so that participants are not confused or misled.
- Questions should be neutral to avoid influencing the responses of participants.
- Questions should be ordered from easy, general questions to more difficult ones to help participants develop their ease in answering them.

After questions are developed, the methodology for the focus group is designed. This is the step where the procedures for conducting the focus group are developed: how many people should be included in the focus group; how many sessions will be held – one large focus group or several smaller groups; how participants will be recruited; and how they will be contacted.

An ideal size for a focus group is between six and twelve participants. It is important to have a sufficient number of people to generate ideas and create discussions. It is equally important not to have too large a group. This can preclude participants from being involved in discussions and create frustration.

It is important to identify a target group that can provide the most useful data. Asking students how to improve job placement services, for example, is useful only if the students have used the services of the job placement office. Also, if the purpose of the focus group requires data from people who meet specific characteristics, those characteristics (students completing 0-9 hours, students who are graduating, students majoring in x, etc.) need to be identified.

The next step will be to determine when to conduct the focus group. Frequently, the information to be collected determines the timeframe for the conduct of the focus group. For example, if a key question has to do with information about expectations of a course, then the focus group should be conducted at the beginning of the course.

Once the timeframe is decided, the logistics for conducting the focus group must be completed. This step includes coordinating rooms, dates, and times, as well as contacting the participants so that they can block out their calendars.

When the focus group is conducted, there are several requirements that must be met:

- Participants must feel confident and trust that what they say during the conduct of a focus group will be treated with the same confidentiality as the responses made on a survey questionnaire. Thus,
 - No one besides the facilitator will have access to the participants' names.
 - No one besides the facilitator will have access to the participants' comments.
 - No observers are allowed in a focus group.
- Ground rules are posted and discussed with participants, including:
 - Participate fully
 - Respect comments of all participants
 - What is said here, stays here

The final task of conducting a focus group is to communicate the findings clearly and accurately so that they can be used for making decisions. The facilitator will compile and analyze the comments to determine trends and single comments worthy of inclusion. Conclusions and recommendations will be based on this analysis. Findings with a summary of the focus group process can be prepared in a report or presentation, as best fits your needs.