

Guide to Focus Groups

INTRODUCTION TO FOCUS GROUPS

What is a Focus Group?

- A group of people assembled to participate in a guided discussion
 - Typically, 6-8 participants with a facilitator to moderate the discussion and a notetaker to take notes and co-facilitate as necessary

Why Conduct a Focus Group?

- To understand why
 - Other methods, such as surveys, can help you understand what is happening or how frequently. Focus groups allow you to dig deeper by creating a space for participants to answer questions with detail and nuance.
- To get closer to understanding what people are really thinking and feeling
 - Open ended questions allow for depth, nuance, and variety.
 - Respondents can build off each other's ideas, producing thoughts and opinions that may not come up in a one-on-one interview.
 - Nonverbal communications and group interactions can also be observed.

HOW TO CONDUCT A FOCUS GROUP: SAMPLE SCHEDULE

Breakdown of total time estimated

<i>Plan:</i>	2.5 hours
<i>Do (Conduct Focus Group:</i>	2.5 hours
<i>Study (Debrief):</i>	1.5 hours
<i>Act (Follow Up):</i>	Case by case basis
<i>Total Time:</i>	~ One-full school day

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PLAN

Initial Planning Day (One hour, Week 1)

- With your team, decide on a learning goal for the focus group. This will inform which students you reach out to and the questions you develop for your protocol.
 - Example: Student experiences: I want to better understand the challenges experienced by our Latino male students.
- Determine when and where you will host the focus group
 - Plan 2-2.5 hours for the day of the focus group: 30 minutes to arrive early and set up, 1-1.5 hours for the focus group, and 30 minutes for a debrief after the focus group with just the facilitator and the notetaker
 - Choose a location that is comfortable, easily accessible, and does not have the potential to drastically bias the information gathered
- Identify potential participants and send invitations
 - Given your learning goal, determine which students fall into the population you are targeting.
 - Include the following in your invitation to both the student and their parent/guardian:
 - Purpose for conducting a focus group
 - Why their participation would be valuable
 - How their confidentiality and privacy will be secured
 - Date and time
 - An appealing incentive, such as dinner and/or a gift card
 - Offer an option to opt out (for example, include language like “If you do not want your student to participate, please sign and have them return this form to us.”)
- Select notetaker and facilitator and send invitations, as needed
 - Decide whether you will record the focus group and/or go off of notes
 - Recording can ease the labor-intensive task of writing detailed notes. However, it is also time-consuming to re-listen to or transcribe the recordings.
 - If you choose to record, be aware that you should obtain additional consent forms from parents and students explicitly stating that the session will be recorded.
 - Notetaker is encouraged to co-facilitate, keep track of time, and handle recording equipment

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- A second notetaker could be helpful in gathering facial expressions, body language and other information that may not be captured in the notes.
 - Facilitator should have knowledge on the topic and feel comfortable leading a group discussion.
 - Example: A facilitator should be able to keep participants on topic, ensure equity of voice, etc.
 - Facilitator and notetaker should not be authority figures who might limit the openness of participants' responses.
- 💡 **Tip:** Asking teachers which students would be helpful to have in a focus group given your learning goals for the experience can help connect you to students you might not have reached out to otherwise.
- 💡 **Tip:** Recruit non-traditional student leaders for your focus group. This is a good way to get more students engaged with school initiatives, and they are likely to offer new perspectives and insights.
- 💡 **Tip:** Be thoughtful about the power dynamics that will exist during the focus group, whether it be between students or because of who the facilitator and notetaker are. Remember that the goal is to create a safe and open environment for participants.
- 💡 **Tip:** Consider the option of having student-led focus groups.

Follow-Up Planning Day (One hour, Week 1)

- Follow-up with potential participants, interviewer, and notetaker to answer any questions or to reach out to additional people if necessary.
- Develop your protocol which will include:
 - Guidelines to establish group norms
 - These can cover confidentiality, value in everyone's opinion, and equity of voice, etc.
 - Questions
 - Include no more than 10 questions
 - After reviewing guidelines, plan to begin the focus group with group introductions and a light-hearted question to help participants develop a comfort level with speaking in front of the group and sharing their ideas.
 - Example: What is your favorite class and why?

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- Keep questions concise to ensure participants understand and remember what is asked. Remember, simple questions do not yield simple answers.
 - Avoid yes or no questions
 - Example: Do you like gym class?
 - Avoid leading questions by keeping questions open-ended. This allows participants to determine the direction of the response and share what is on their mind, as opposed to sharing what they believe the facilitator is implying
 - Example: “How much do you enjoy school?” (leading) vs. “Share with us your experience in school.” (open-ended).
 - Incorporate follow-up questions, as needed, to build on a topic or to get a more specific response.
 - Example: What are the needs within our community?
THEN Which of these is the most important?
 - Probes you might want to use when you want to hear from more participants or get clarification on a response
 - Example: “Tell me more about...” “Can you say more about...”
“What experiences have you had that make you feel that way?”
- 💡 **Tip:** When creating your guidelines, consider the type of environment you want to create for participants (i.e. I don’t want this to feel like another class) and what guidelines you can include to cultivate this environment.
- 💡 **Tip:** Take advantage of the focus group format by ensuring you ask questions that can’t be easily asked or answered on a written survey. The fewer the questions, the better.
- 💡 **Tip:** Consider the option of having students help create questions for your protocol. At the very least, make sure to vet your questions with a few students so that you know students are understanding the questions the way you think they are.
- 💡 **Tip:** Review The Equity Focus Group Protocol on the last page for more help on how to create your protocol.

Final Prep Day (30 minutes, Week 2)

- Consider what supplies you will need and make sure your calendar is cleared to be able to fully participate during the focus group.
 - Commonly needed supplies: Voice recorder, notebook or laptop for notetaker, protocol, nametags, incentives (i.e. gift cards, dinner, etc.).

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- Review and practice protocol
 - The better you know your protocol, the more time you can spend focusing on other factors during the focus group, such as body language and equity of voice.

 **Tip:** Check that your recording equipment works ahead of time.

DO

Day of Focus Group (2.5 hours, Week 2)

- Arrive early to set up room (30 minutes)
 - Facilitator and note taker are encouraged to not sit next to each other to break up the space.
- Conduct focus group (1-1.5 hours)
 - Facilitator should:
 - Begin by restating the purpose of the focus group, thanking members for their participation, and sharing the guidelines you prepared.
 - Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested
 - Use the protocol effectively to ensure all topics are covered
 - Use prompts and probes to stimulate discussion
 - Strike a balance between keeping the conversation moving and allowing participants time to share and process what has been shared.
 - Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable
 - Encourage one person to speak at a time
 - Notetaker should:
 - Set up recording equipment
 - Take notes of what participants say and any observations, such as verbal or physical cues
 - Monitor time
 - Co-facilitate as necessary
- Debrief (30 minutes)
 - The facilitator and notetaker should debrief after the focus group. This includes reviewing notes, filling in any details that were not

captured in the notes, and discussing areas that seemed particularly important or salient. Even though you will have a larger, more formal debrief on another day, it is important to still immediately debrief while your memory is fresh.

- 💡 **Tip:** It is helpful to probe early in the discussion to underscore the impression that more detailed answers are needed and wanted.
- 💡 **Tip:** Embrace silence. Allowing silence can encourage participation because it gives participants a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information.
- 💡 **Tip:** Refrain from showing your opinion on a topic or response. Comments such as “I can’t believe it!” or “You really think that?!” infer your opinion and impose judgment on the participant, which can shut down discussion. Instead, use phrases such as “Thank you for sharing.”
- 💡 **Tip:** Also record your debrief conversation if you do not have as much energy to take detailed notes of your reflections after the focus group.
- 💡 **Tip:** More tips on how to effectively facilitate a focus group can be found in the “Quick Tips for Facilitating Focus Groups” and “Longer Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups” on the last page.

STUDY

Debrief Day (1.5 hours, Week 2)

- Identify the most interesting thoughts and observations from the experience, and how they will inform future decisions and initiatives.
 - One helpful way to make meaning of the focus group is to identify common themes that came up throughout the conversation. You can color-code/highlight similar themes within your notes to help you as you pull out these different ideas.
- Decide how and when you will share reflections with students, staff, and families. Send out emails or handwritten notes to thank participants for the experience and details on when the follow up will take place.
 - 💡 **Tip:** Consider the following: What are common themes that came up? What was unexpected? What can we learn from what was said? From what wasn’t said? How can we incorporate ideas from the focus group into our equity work?

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ACT

Follow Up (Case by case basis)

- Create long and short term action plans based on the information that you learned.
 - This process may raise more questions that you would want to study further as part of your long term action plan.
 - Implement at least one small change that is influenced by your focus group experience soon after Debrief Day. Even though this change might not be long-term or fully address the issue, it builds credibility among students, staff, and families and allows you to gain more insight on the issue you are trying to address.
- Share reflections with students, staff, and families, including the short-term and long-term action plans that you and your team would like to implement after conducting this focus group.
- **Tip:** Continue the relationship with the participants involved. If they have now become more interested in your efforts and would like to get more involved, consider offering them an opportunity to do so.

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **How and Why Focus Groups are Used**
 - <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>
- **The Equity Focus Group Protocol: Includes how to select participants, create questions, conduct focus group, and preconditions for success**
 - <https://equitablelearning.org/books/fxysrWu3/ZBwTcSx3/ErvIpoRP>
- **Quick Tips for Facilitating Focus Groups**
 - https://www.uml.edu/docs/FG%20Tips%20sheet_RK_tcm18-167588.pdf
- **Longer Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups: Includes how to handle difficult situations and the qualities of an effective focus group facilitator**
 - https://www.nyla.org/max/userfiles/Documents/D_Focus_Group_Toolkit.pdf