Focus Groups

The purpose of focus groups in an Advising Program evaluation is to develop a deep understanding of student experience of the program. Through loosely structured group conversations, focus group members are able to interact with each other around thematic questions moderated by a facilitator. Participants listen to and interact with each other and the facilitator, which yields different information than if people were interviewed individually. Because of the group dynamic, this group interaction can bring about broad perceptions of and insights into the Advising Program.

Focus groups are employed when:
- the program wants to explore specific topics of interest through conversation among diverse constituents.
- the program is interested in reflections that emerge from structured participant discussions.

How do students use the services offered by the Advising Program?

What are the ways in which peer advising can be improved?

What do you want to learn from using a focus group?

In what ways do advisors facilitate student learning and development?

How do students find out about advising services?
Establishing and Conducting Focus Groups

- Plan on 6-10 participants per focus group to encourage comfortable discussion and to keep transcription manageable, if using.
  - Participants can reflect the diversity of the student population OR be homogenous per limited focus of the group (e.g., all 1st-year students; gender breakdown that echoes UCB’s statistics; students from the same college)
- Participants can be recruited from a variety of sources, especially through collaboration with other institution-sponsored student groups (e.g., student government organizations, transfer student groups, international student groups, academic departments)
- The moderator(s) could be someone NOT from Advising, but someone from another unit or non-advising professional in order to encourage student candor about the advising experience. The notetaker(s) could be a researcher from Advising or a related unit (e.g., a GSR or consultant). Both the moderator and notetaker will make it clear that they are not evaluating students’ participation and comments but rather guiding and recording the conversation.
- The moderator(s) should consider group dynamics throughout the session, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to speak.
  - This can be ensured through the use of checklists of participants’ names, directed follow-up questions, and/or repeated invitations to respond.
- Keep the length of session to 1-1.5 hours.
- Immediately after focus group, the moderator and notetakers meet to compare their reflections and observations. [Debriefing session]

Question Types

Example questions for Experience, Behavior, Opinions (NO why questions)

- All questions should be bracketed by a welcoming tone and with the reminder that the moderator(s) is not evaluating participants’ responses but providing relevant questions and follow up.
- The script of questions should be prepared ahead of time, and the moderator(s) should be aware if they are allowed to adapt questions or deviate from the script.
- Questions should emerge from the student learning objectives of the advising program and how participants’ experiences reflected (or not) the objectives.
- Questions should be based on behaviors and not just opinions.
- Questions should invite participants to reflect on the advising process as well as their own experiences.
- Questions can be of mixed types (e.g., open-ended, closed structured, yes/no, descriptive).
- The order of questions should follow a general (and possibly repeating) pattern of:
  - Introductory questions (seeking general or evaluative information from participants)
  - Transition questions (linking themes and patterns in the discussion in order to move among topics)
  - 3 key questions (the most essential ones which the use of a focus session intends to highlight)

Data Analysis

- If you choose to do a rigorous analysis, transcription can be used
The research team creates a transcript of the focus group.

By coding the **qualitative data** (i.e., the participants’ responses), the data can then be used for **quantitative purposes** (e.g., response frequencies; response type classified by student demographics) and/or **qualitative purposes** (ex., simple summary of focus group discussion).

Three possible ways to use collected data
- (simplest) Debriefing between facilitator and notetaker and comparison of session notes
- (moderately complex) Cleaned up copy of notes compiled
- (most complex) Transcription of session and tagging and coding of data

Multiple codings of the data and then comparisons by different researchers reveal the **convergence** of shared analysis and the **divergence** of possibly unrelated trends or lack of agreement.

**Caveats**
- Account for any bias due to “groupthink” or “social desirability” (to fit in with other members).
- Minimize any undue influence by the careful selection of a particular facilitator and notetaker.
- Train moderators as needed.
- Ensure that moderators encourage all participants to participate.
- Select a physical setting for the interview that reduces any negative effect on the candor/depth of responses.
- Plan accordingly for time necessary for planning, execution, and analysis of group.
- Allow enough time and possible training for the complex process of coding data (depending on intended use of results).
- Due to the group design, be aware that there cannot be any guarantee of confidentiality.

**Resources and Examples**


Focus Group Interviews: [http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Focus.pdf](http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Focus.pdf)
