

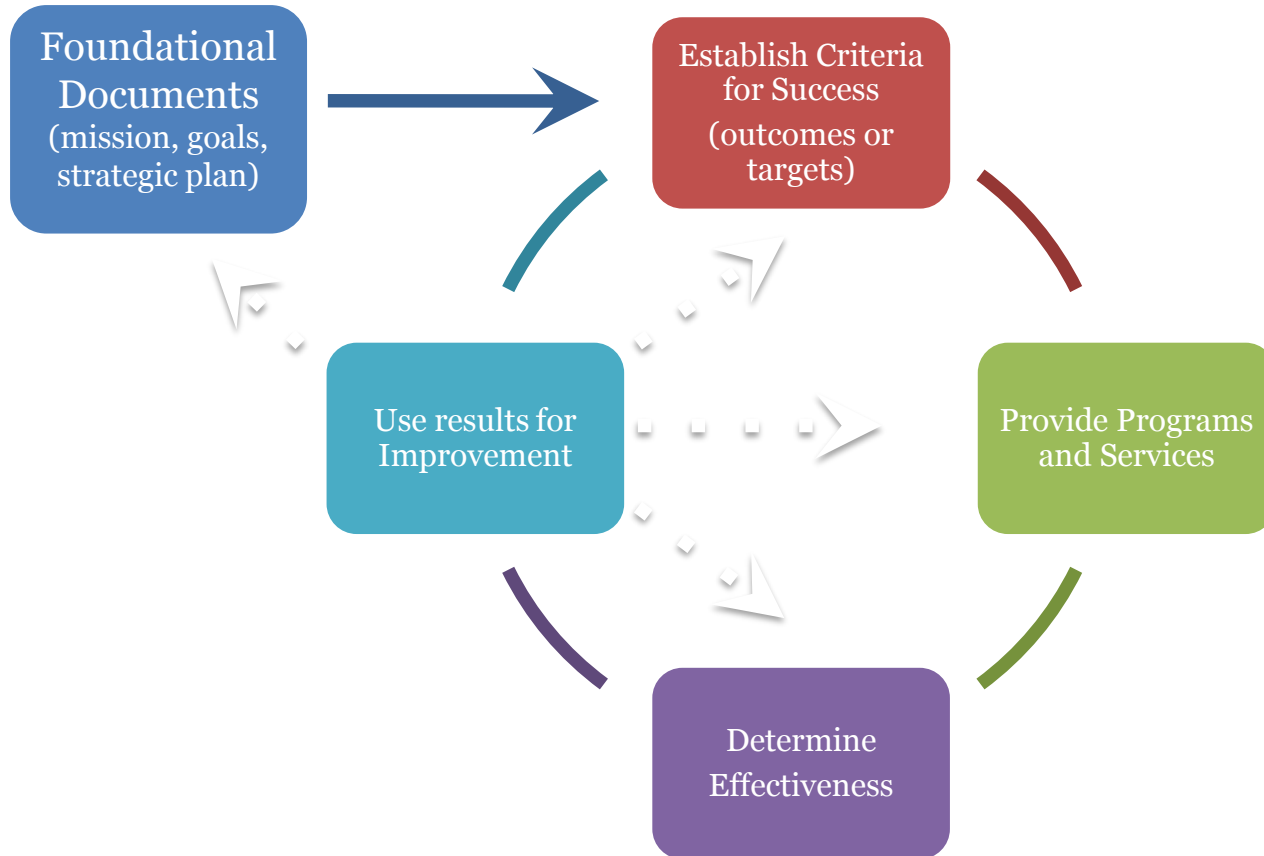
# Focus Groups

MARTHA GLASS, PH.D.

---

# Assessment Cycle

---



What do you want/need to know?

What method will help you find the answer?

Who is your audience?

What resources do you have?

# What type of data do you need?

---

## Quantitative

(When numbers matter)

- ▶ Focus on numbers/numeric value
- ▶ Easier to report and analyze
- ▶ Can generalize to greater populations with larger samples
- ▶ Less influenced by social desirability
- ▶ Can be less of a time commitment and less expensive

## Qualitative

(When stories matter)

- ▶ Focus on text/narrative from respondents
- ▶ More depth/robustness
- ▶ Ability to capture “elusive” evidence of student learning and development
- ▶ Specific example

# A Focus Group Is . . .

---

A controlled, carefully planned discussion

Gathers information about a specific topic

Conducted in a non-threatening environment

Conducted by a moderator/facilitator

Group members influence each other by responding to ideas, comments of others

6 - 10 participants

# Why a Focus Group?

---

To collect qualitative data

To gather feelings and perceptions regarding programs, services, products

To promote self-disclosure among participants, though not appropriate for emotionally charged environments

To stimulate interaction among participants to gather more information

To identify needs



# Examples of Focus Groups

---

## Evaluation programs

- Mentoring programs
- Dining Employee Awards
- Parent and Alumni boards
- Administrative units
- Service trips

## Exploration for developing programs

- Mentoring
- Student leaders experience
- New student programs task force

## Campus Climate

- Graduate Student
- Title IX

## DSA

- internal communications

## Needs assessments

- professional development

## Public health and non-profits



# Uses of Focus Groups

---

Improve existing programs

Improve planning & design of new programs

Recruit new participants

Understand decision-making processes

Generate information for larger studies

# Advantages of Focus Groups

---

Socially oriented research procedure – more interesting to participants than individual interviews

Format allows moderator to probe, clarify

High face validity – easily understood

Can provide diverse opinions and ideas

Can be low cost

Speedy results

# Disadvantages of Focus Groups

---

Researcher has less control

Helpful to have a skilled moderator

- Can introduce biases
- May fail to follow up on crucial information

Groups can vary considerably

Groups may be difficult to assemble

Does not allow generalization of results

# Produces Qualitative Data

---

Can precede quantitative approach

Can be used at the same time as a quantitative approach

Can follow quantitative approach

Can be used alone

# Preparing for the Session

---

Identify the purpose

Develop 5 or 6 questions

Plan session – think of maximum time for session as 1.5 hours

IRB approval?

Materials?

Invite participants

- Be careful of mixing levels of education, authority, income, etc.
- Incentives?

# Moderator Traits

---

Informed about the topic to be discussed

Able to encourage all members to participate

Able to encourage group members to discuss in greater detail

Able to keep the session flowing smoothly – be adaptable

Sensitive to cultural and gender issues

Exhibit empathy, but maintain control

# Beginning the Focus Group

---

Welcome

Introductions – Topic and Participants

Ground Rules

First Question

# The Welcome

---

You are the host - make participants feel welcome and comfortable

Much of the success of a focus group is attributable to the development of an open environment

First few minutes of a focus group are critical



# Introduction

---

Provide your name and who you represent

Explain the purpose of the group and how the data will be collected and used

- Obtain informed consent if applicable

Note that there are no right/wrong answers, but rather differing opinions, so please share your point of view even if different from what others have said

Confirm amount of time allotted

Participant introductions

# Ground Rule Examples

---

One person speaks at a time

We will be on a first-name basis for the discussion

Talk about note takers and/or audio recording if applicable

Confidentiality – assured from your perspective and ask participants to respect confidentiality of others when outside the group

# The Questions

---

Get participants involved as soon as possible

Use open-ended questions – be careful of phrases like “how satisfied” or “to what extent”

Avoid dichotomous, yes/no questions

Avoid “why?” questions – implies cause/effect that might not exist

Use “think back” questions - take people back to an experience, not forward to the future

# Question Order

---

Opening: Get people talking and feeling comfortable

Introductory: Introduce topic, get people thinking and connecting with the topic

Transition: Move conversation into key questions that guide the study

Key questions: Those that drive the study

Ending: Bring to a close. Use “What is the most important thing we talked about?” “Have we missed anything?” “Summarize; Is this an adequate summary?”

# Keeping It Moving

---

May be helpful to think in terms of time blocks

Introduction: 10-15 minutes

Questions & discussion: 60 minutes

Conclusion: 10 minutes

# Moderator Tips: Balancing

---

Use balancing to help the group round out its discussion rather than just follow the lead of a few

“Are there other ways of looking at this?”

“What do others think?”

“So, we’ve heard x and y points of view, are there any others?”

# Moderator Tips: Encouraging

---

Encouraging is about creating an opening for people to participate

“Who else has an idea?”

“Is there a student perspective on this topic?”

“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken in a while.”

# Moderator Tips: Paraphrasing

---

Paraphrasing helps support people in thinking out loud, helps clarify, provides a calming effect

“It sounds like what you’re saying is . . .”

“Let me see if I’m understanding you . . .”

“What I am gathering from your description is . . .”



# Moderator Tips: Tracking

---

Tracking lets the group see that several elements are being discussed

First, “I hear three conversations going on right now; I want to make sure I’m tracking them.”

Second, “It sounds like one conversation is about ...”

Third, “Am I getting it right?”

# Considerations for Analysis

---

Be aware of the actual words used by the participants and the meaning of those words

Participant responses are triggered by a stimulus –examine responses in that light

Look at frequency/extensiveness of comments – some topics may be more important than others

Consider intensity of the comments

Give more weight to specific comments based on experiences rather than vague, impersonal responses

# The Analysis Process

---

Begin while still in the group - listen for inconsistent or cryptic comments and probe further

Immediately after - diagram seating arrangement, debrief moderator and note takers, discuss initial themes

Later - compare/contrast results, look for emerging themes across groups, use quotes to illustrate

Prepare report - narrative style, format question-by-question or by theme, use quotes to illustrate, share report with the team for verification

# Analysis Options

---

Transcript-based analysis

Audio-based analysis

Note-based analysis

Memory-based analysis

# Reporting

---

Purpose is to report views of the group(s), not to generalize to larger groups

Statement of purpose, key questions asked

Participant information

Results/findings

Summary of themes/conclusion

Limitations

Recommendations

# Tips for a Successful Focus Group

---

## WHEN TO USE...

Understanding opinions, attitudes or beliefs from a group of people

Investigate behaviors

Friendly, open and respectful research method

Testing reactions to people, ideas or product

## WHEN NOT TO USE...

You need statistical information

When working with sensitive or emotionally charged topics

Cannot ensure confidentiality

Want a clear consensus (not a debate)

# Implications and Limitations

---

Focus Groups are a more personal way to connect with a sample population

They are effective ways to solicit opinions and foster means for improvement

Flexible atmosphere and can allow for open lines of communication

Several focus groups should be performed on the same topic

- And are best when accompanied with other forms of research to retrieve a “whole picture”

Student Affairs professionals can benefit from this group collaborative style of research

Limitations include

- Small or unreliable sample sizes
- Group think mentality



Retrieved from:

<http://guides.library.duke.edu/content.php?pid=466734&sid=3820865>

# Questions?

---

Martha Glass Ph.D.

[mglass@vt.edu](mailto:mglass@vt.edu)