Focus Group Training

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Introductions

What would you like to get out of this session?

Outcomes for our time together

- Understand the appropriate uses of focus groups as a methodology for assessment data collection.

- Obtain the skills needed to successfully plan for a focus group.

- Feel confident in your ability to facilitate focus groups.

- Understand how to collect and analyze focus group data.

- Know how to share findings from a focus group.

"I'm embarrassed that I'm a senior and I would be going up to people that I should know, but I don't know."

"there's a protocol, but I don't know what the protocol is."

Students from a focus group about mentoring

"College is a norm, not a luxury anymore, internships and externships are the norm and if you haven't completed it then it is a disadvantage."

Student in a focus group about changing the name of career services

"If a student comes in and shares something you think is reportable, how do you actually handle this? How do you go about sharing resources but also telling a student you have to report and not make them feel bad about telling you?"

Faculty member in a Title IX focus group

"A friend of mine from another university told me something happened to her; she said that she was fine and thought it was normal and not a big deal and so you don't have to tell someone; she broke down the next morning because she saw the reaction of her friends.."

Student in a Title IX focus group

Assessment Cycle
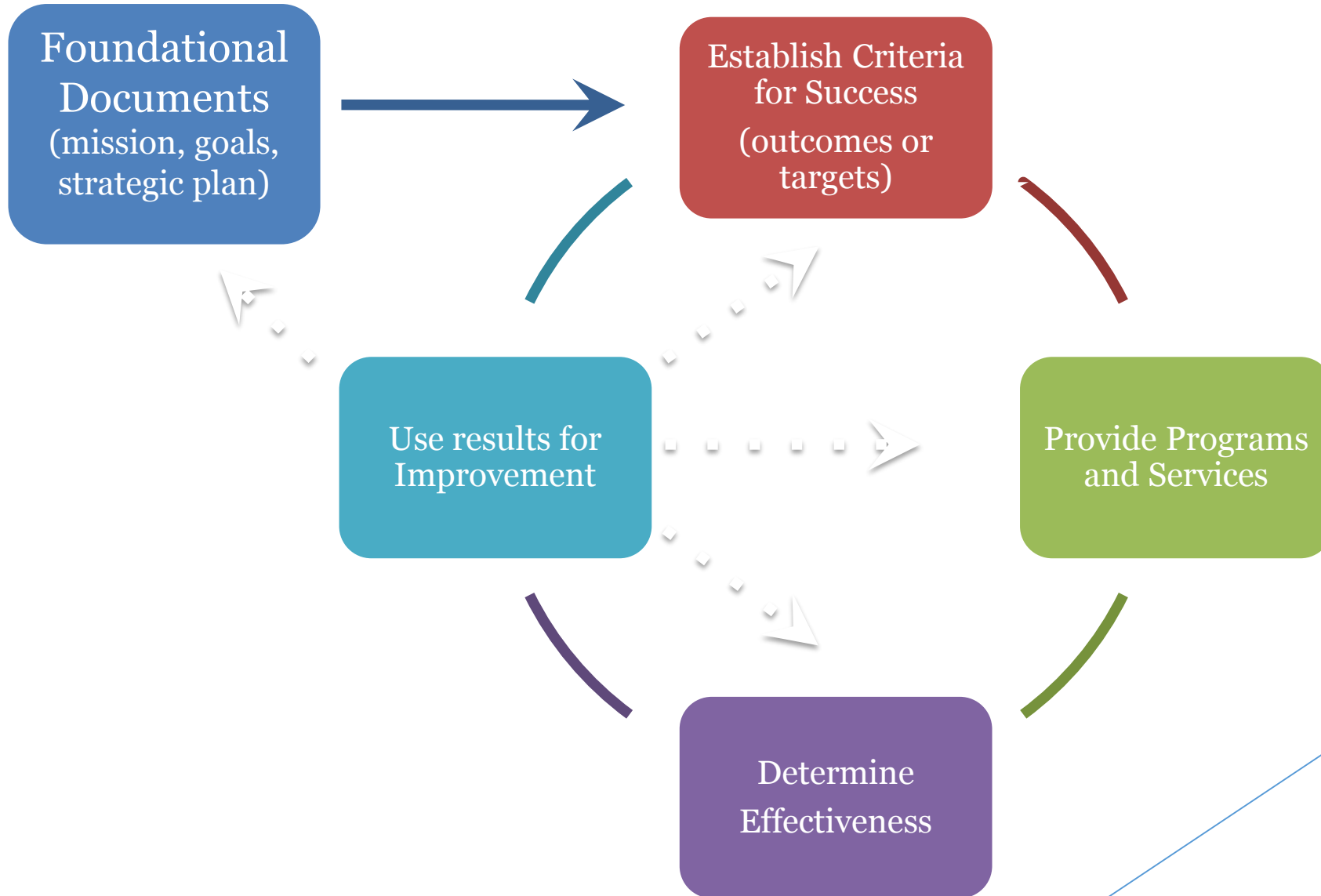
Research vs. Assessment

RESEARCH

▸ The collection and analysis of data to build or confirm theory (Erwin, 1991)

ASSESSMENT

▸ Assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996)

- Assessment guides good practice while research guides theory development and test concepts

- Assessment has implications for a single institution, while research typically has broader implications for student affairs and higher education

Choosing a method for data collection

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

What do you want/need to know?

What method will help you find the answer?

Who is your audience?

What resources do you have?

Questions to Consider

- What do you want to assess?
- How do you plan to use findings?
- What resources are available?
- What kind(s) of evidence is needed?
- Does data already exist?
- Do you have a data collection plan?

When numbers matter (quantitative)

▸ Need to know how many

▸ Show change over time

▸ Requested by constituents

▸ Usage

▸ Recruitment, retention, graduation

▸ Dashboards and Scorecard

▸ Others?

When stories matter (qualitative)

- Curious about why
- Essence of experiences
- Seeking to understand
- Don't know your variables
- Others?

What's Your Story?

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

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology is the detailed description of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors, the use of direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996)

Assumptions

▸ Qualitative research has the natural setting as the source of data

▸ Researcher is the key instrument

▸ Qualitative research is descriptive

▸ Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products

▸ Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively

▸ "Meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative approach

Selecting focus groups

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Selecting focus groups as a method

Pros

- Understand perceptions, beliefs, or opinions of participants
- Direct and indirect method
- More data in a shorter period of time
- Members build off of each other's ideas
- Increased understanding of specific topic
- Less expensive
- Larger number of participants

Cons

- Less useful when statistical data/reports are needed
- Group dynamics/mix can be difficult to manage
- Not generalizable
- Time needed for training and analysis
- Facilitation requires skill
- Lack of control over discussion

Benefits of Focus Groups

▸ Provides detailed descriptions to help understand the why and how

▸ Perceptions, beliefs, and opinions

▸ Connection with participants

▸ Flexibility and intentionality

▸ Allows for follow up questions

▸ Exposes ideas, experiences, concerns

Benefits of Focus Groups

▸ Allows us to ask different types of questions that surveys alone might not be appropriate for

▸ Can be just as "good" as quantitative data, just another kind of information

▸ Using this method might allow you to expand your thinking and more deeply understand the student experience

Benefits of Focus Groups

For example…

- A survey question might present a statement such as "Attending the leadership seminar increased my understanding of leadership." (with Likert scale response)

However, a qualitative question might ask:

- "How has your understanding of leadership been shaped by attending the seminar?"

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

Focus groups: Planning

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Steps in the planning process

- ❑ Clear in your purpose
- ❑ Ethical and political considerations
- ❑ Logistics
- ❑ Question development
- ❑ Documents
- ❑ Identify your facilitator
- ❑ Recruiting participants
- ❑ Plan for data collection and analysis

Planning: Clear purpose

Research your topic

Be clear about the end goal

Outcomes and goals

Talk to stakeholders

Don't get distracted

Planning: Ethical & Political Considerations

- Protect subjects
- Do no harm
- Benefit others
- Respect autonomy
- Be just
- Be faithful
- Data access
- Data ownership
- Negotiating an agreement
- Role conflicts
- Data collection

  (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996)

- Bias of the moderator
- Insider vs. outsider
- Hidden agendas

Planning: Logistics
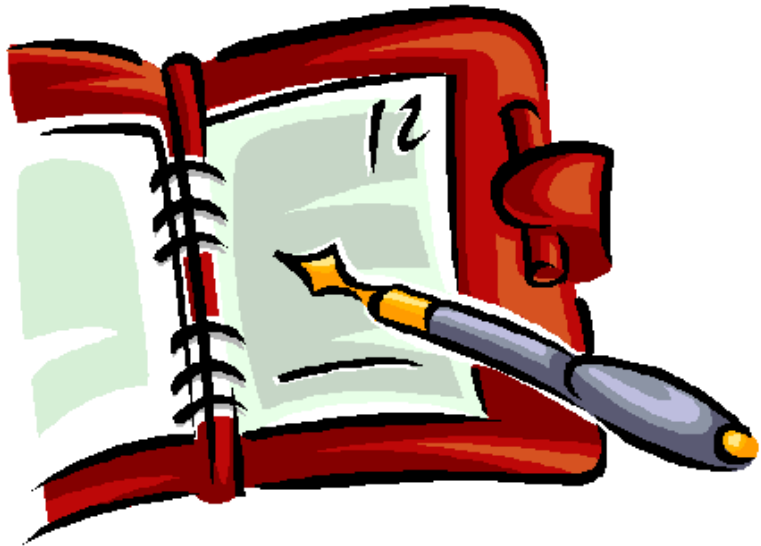
- Set the date
- Book a room
- Gather/purchase materials
- Food
- Incentives
- Participants
- Facilitator(s)
- Notetaker (s)
- Notes/pens

Planning: Developing Questions

- What's your why? Stay focused
- Sequences of questions
- Types of questions

Sequence of questions

Trust focus

1. Ice breakers
2. "Safe" questions
3. Opinions, interpretations, feelings
4. Knowledge questions

Logic focus

1. Introductory
2. Transition questions
3. Key questions
4. Summary questions

Planning: Types of Questions

Experience and Behavior

- Gets at things a person does or did, his/her behaviors, actions, and activities
- Ex: Tell me about a typical day at work? What are you likely to do first thing in the morning?

Opinion and Values

- Interested in person's beliefs or opinions, what he/she thinks about something
- Ex: What is your opinion on student affairs professionals advancing to college or university presidency roles?

Types of Questions

Feeling

- The interviewer is looking for adjective responses – anxious, happy, afraid, intimidated, confident, etc.
- Ex: How do you feel about that?

Knowledge

- Elicit a participant's factual knowledge about a situation
- Ex: What leadership resources are you aware of?

Types of Questions

Sensory

- Similar to experience and behavior questions but try to elicit more specific data about what is seen, heard, touched, etc.
- Ex: What did you see when you entered the student center?

Background/Demographic Questions

- Examples include age, year in school, involvement, number of years in a position, etc.
- Information collected should be relevant to the purpose of the study

Developing questions

- Be clear.
- Avoid biased, loaded or leading questions.
- Avoid making significant memory demands.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Keep the question short.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Define terms and concepts.
- Consider whether they will feel comfortable answering honestly.
- Let participants admit they don't know or can't remember.
- No closed-ended.

Neutral Follow-up Questions & Probes

- Why is that?

- Can you tell me more?

- Can you give an example of that?

- Please explain what you mean.

- Can you describe what that is/was like?

- How did that happen?

- How do you feel about that?

- **Sometimes silence is the best probe of all**

Questions to Avoid

- Multiple Questions
  - How do you feel about the instructors, the assignments, and the schedule of classes?
- Leading Questions
  - What emotional problems have you had since losing your job?
- Yes-or-No Questions
  - Do you like the program? Has returning to school been difficult?

Planning: Creating documents

- Recruitment materials
- Invitation
- Confirmation
- Consent Forms
- Facilitator's guide
- Interview protocol
- Member checks

Planning: Selecting Participants

1. Purposeful sampling:

▶ Demographics (representative of population, or targeted population)

▶ Experience and knowledge (ability to provide rich data)

2. Convenience (who will show up?)

Want to have commonalities among participants but be aware of existing relationships

Planning: Tips for Recruiting Participants

- Pre-existing groups
- Advisory boards
- Incentives
- Invitation
- How many participants
- How many focus groups

Example: Mentoring protocol

- Introductions
- When you have a big life decision, who do you go to?
  - When you have to make a decision about career?
  - When you have to make a decision about academic?
  - What about personal decisions?
- When you hear the words mentor and mentoring… what do you think? What is a mentor?
- Do you have a mentor?
  - How would you describe that relationship?
  - How did you find that person?
  - How did that relationship develop?
  - How often do you connect?
- If you could ask anyone to be your mentor, who would you ask? Who would be your dream mentor?
  - What has stopped you from approaching that person?
- President Sands has said that he wants every students to have mentor….what would work?
  - Should it be formal/informal
  - Matching
  - Group opportunities
- Can you think about/describe a friend whose had challenges or struggled since they've been at VT?
  - Do you believe they'd be open to having a mentor?
  - How could a mentor have helped them?

Case Studies: practice planning

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Mentoring

During the installation of the new university president, he shares that he wants every student to have the opportunity to have a mentor. He references research that students who have mentors will be more successful while they are in college and after they graduate. A few months later, a committee is established to explore options to develop mentoring opportunities. The members of the committee begin to review literature, study other university's mentoring programs, and map out the mentoring opportunities on campus. The committee members also recognize that we don't have an understanding of how our students experience mentoring, what they think about having a mentor, what their needs are from new programs we might develop.

How might focus groups provide information to help the committee?

Title IX

As part of an agreement with the Office of Civil Rights, the university is required to conduct a campus-wide climate survey about sexual assault on campus. The survey will focus on students' knowledge of sexual assault, their rights and responsibilities, and their perceptions of how university officials respond. In addition to the survey, we must also hold focus groups with faculty and with students to explore the same topics. The Title IX educators would also like to collect data that will assist them in developing educational programs for the campus community.

Division of Student Affairs Communication

A newly hired Vice President notices that that there are issues with communication in the large division of student affairs. The division includes 3,600 employees, everyone from housekeeping staff, dining staff, AP faculty, student employees, staff, and graduate students. The VP wants to create an environment that where communication is not just one-directional, everyone has a responsibility to engage in the communication process. She hopes that we can create an environment where people trust the information they receive, there is transparency, and everyone feels that they are part of the transfer of information. A committee is established to better understand the culture of communication and develop recommendations to create a positive culture of communication. The group decides that following a survey of DSA employees, that focus groups will shed more light on some of the issues brought forward in the quantitative data.

Graduate Student Climate

The Graduate School conducted a climate survey to understand the issues and concerns facing graduate students at a large research university. The survey brought to light four areas of greatest concern: relationships with advisors, building a sense of community for graduate students, child care, and financial concerns. To further explore these areas, the researchers decide to conduct focus groups. Pick one of these topics to explore as your case study.

Focus groups: facilitating

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Facilitating: Resources Needed

Staff: One facilitator, one note taker (minimum)

Facilities: Eye contact, privacy, no interruptions

Materials:

▸ Audio or video recorder (recommended)

▸ Note-taking materials (e.g., paper/pen, laptop)

▸ Nametags

▸ Consent form

▸ Incentives

Time: 60-90 minutes for each session

Participants: 6 – 12 per group

Rounds: 2 – 5 (until redundancy is reached)

Facilitating: Choosing a Facilitator

- Facilitation/Interview skills

- Experience with focus groups/interviews

- Appropriateness for the topic

- Appropriateness for the participants

- Connection to the topic and/or participants
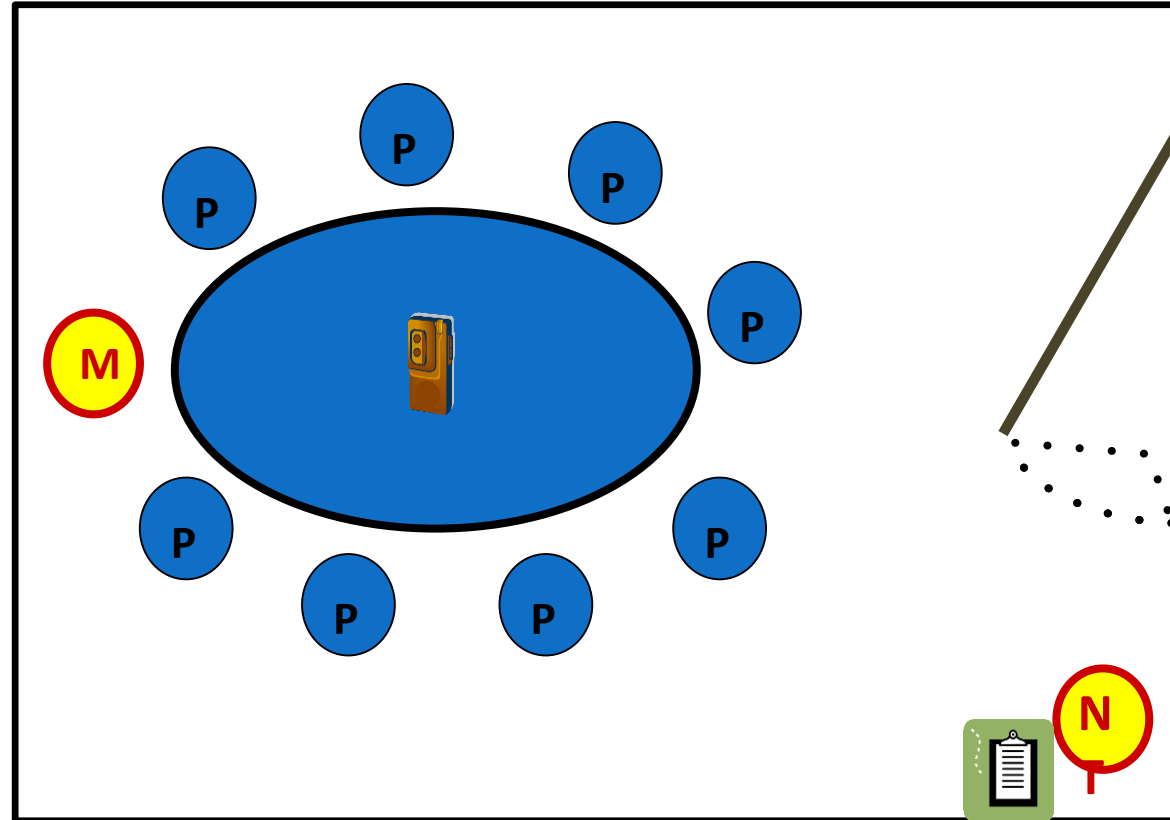
Expectations of Facilitators

Moderator should typically be a neutral party

Before the focus group:
- Practice introduction and questions
- Familiarize yourself with the project/topic
- Coordinate with other facilitators and staff
- Arrive early
- Determine seating around table
- Check recording equipment
- Make sure room setup is appropriate

Anatomy of a Focus Group

- 1 moderator
- 1 note taker
- 6-8 participants
- Recording device
- Script
- Questions
- Consent

- Quiet, private location
- Comfortable setting
- Refreshments

Expectations of Facilitators

During the focus group:

- Welcome people and make small talk
- Explain confidentiality and consent
- Explain ground rules
- Begin and end on-time
- Make sure everyone gets to participate
- Rephrasing questions is okay

- Hold back your opinions and reactions
- Avoid answering questions
- Use pauses and probes to get information
- Summarize key points
- "Have we missed anything?"

Use good and active listening skills!

Facilitating: Rules for the Group

- There are no right or wrong answers
- Different points of view are okay
- You may respond to one another
- Be respectful of one another
- Give everyone an opportunity to talk
- First names only
- Honor the confidentiality of the group
- Silence all mobile phones

Facilitating: Rules for the Group

- Confidentiality
  - Results will not be linked to individuals
  - Individuals will not be identified
  - "What happens here, stays here."

- Limits to confidentiality
  - No guarantee that other participants will honor confidentiality
  - If someone threatens to harm self or others, it must be reported
  - Neglect or abuse of children must be reported

Guidelines on Questions
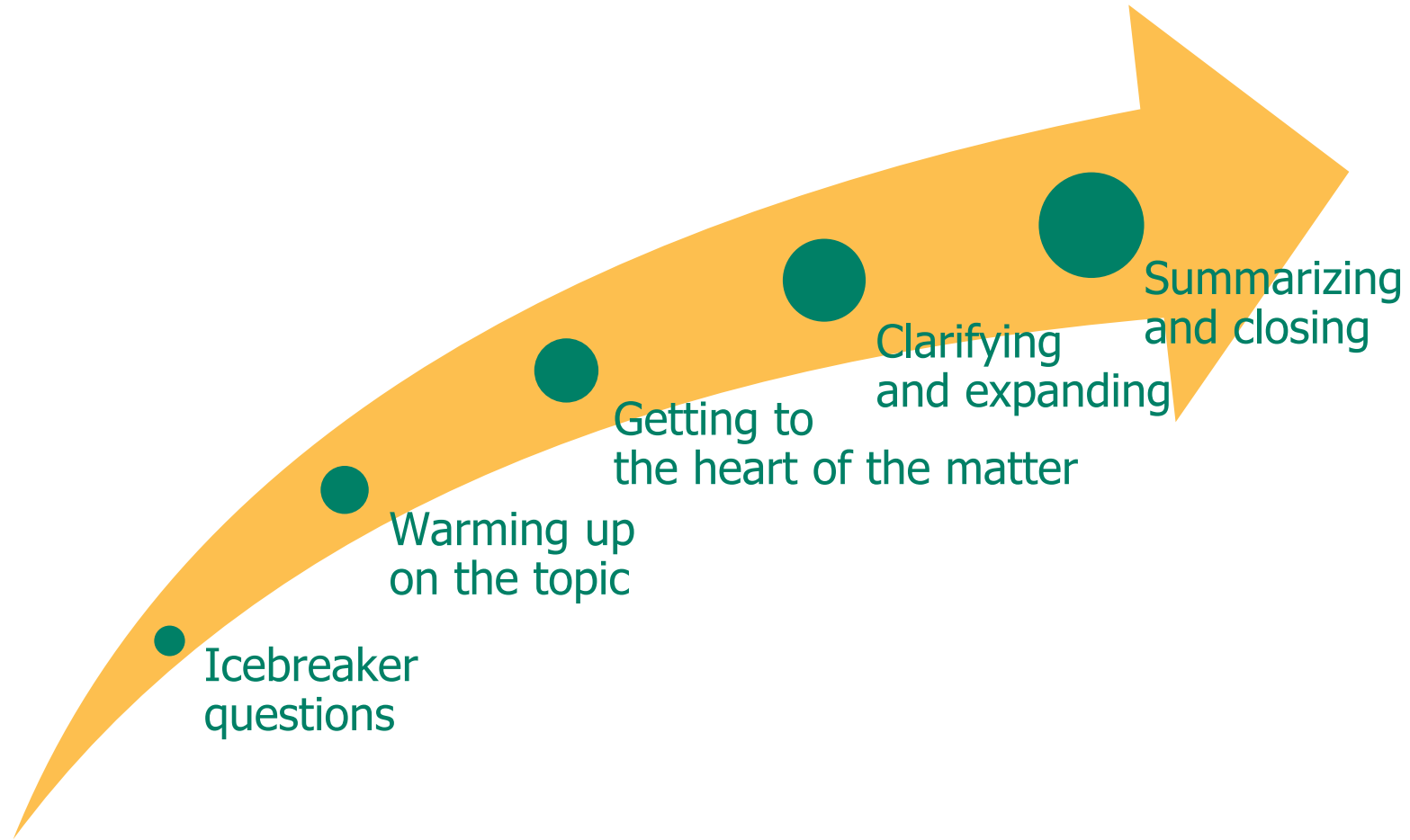
Note Taking

- Why?
  - A tape recording is not reliable – things happen!
- What?
  - Content of conversations
  - Body language
  - Facial expressions
  - Apparent moods
- For focus groups, bring a person whose only responsibility is note taking

Expectations of Facilitators

After the focus group:

- Thank your participants
- Offer incentives (if applicable)
- Debrief with the note taker(s)
  - High points?
  - Most important concepts discussed?
  - Quotes to remember?
  - Unexpected statements?
  - How might this group might be different or similar to other groups?

Potential Pitfalls with Focus Groups

- Varied participation

- Dominant talker, shy, rambler, disruptive

- Too many questions

- Linear or rigid facilitator

- Questions not of interest/concern to participants

- Group doesn't want to talk

- Questions either too short (Y/N) or too abstract/rational (Why?)

Managing the Conversation

- Practice

- Be prepared

- Be willing to let silence work for you

- Be willing to direct the conversation

Focus Group: data analysis

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Debrief

- What themes or issues were discussed?
- How did these differ from what we expected?
- How did these differ from what occurred in earlier focus groups?
- What points need to be included in the report?
- What quotes should be remembered and possibly included in the report?
- Should we do anything differently for the next focus group?

Analysis process

Step 1: Get to know your data

Step 2: Focus on the analysis

Step 3: Categorize information

Step 4: Identify patterns and connections within and between categories

Step 5: Interpretation – Bringing it all together

Step 1: Get to know your data

▸ Consider the quality of your data - clean and organize

▸ Understand your data

▸ Read and re-read

▸ Listen to recordings and listen again

Step 2: Focus the analysis

- Review your purpose
  - Identify a few key questions and write them down, refer back to often
- Focus by question or topic, time period or event
- Focus by case, individual or group

Step 3: Categorize information

- AKA: Coding or indexing

- Identify themes or patterns

- Organize them into coherent categories

Step 3 cont.
Two Ways to Categorize

- Preset Categories
  - Start with a list of themes or categories in advance and then search for these within the data

- Emergent Categories
  - You read the text and themes or issues that reoccur

Criteria for Categories Constructed During Data Analysis

▸ Must be *responsive* to (i.e. answer) the purpose/research question(s) and . . .

▸ Be as *sensitive* as possible

▸ Be *exhaustive* (enough categories to encompass all relevant data)

▸ Be *mutually exclusive* (a relevant unit of data can be placed in only one category)

Coding Examples

50

51 J: What would those other conversations be about?

52

53 R: I guess just like whatever is going on at the moment, I mean, I don't know, it's kind of like a *catch up*
54 relaxing thing. I mean, you kind of catch up with people, I guess, while you're playing or whatever. *on lives*

55

56 J: What do you feel like when you're playing video games as compared to doing others things?

57

58 R: Lazy, worthless. Uh, especially on a nice day like today. I guess when you only have, I have a class
59 at 2pm, so an hour is not much time to do other things. So, I don't know, I don't like to stay inside and
60 play video games often. I don't play much. If it's a rainy day, it's a good way to pass time. *pass time*

61

62 J: What does it feel like to win or lose?   *"bragging rights"*

63

64 R: It feels good. It feels good. It's uh, bragging rights, I guess or I mean, I play this game the majority
65 of the time, so I guess like we keep a running record I guess or like I beat you 3-2 today. I guess
66 bragging rights is just the extent of it.

67

68 J: Do you, the people you play video games with, do you hang out with them outside of playing?

69

70 R: Yeah, yeah, uh I mean, normally it's something I do with, I mean, just friends. Uh, kid across the
71 hall is in my fraternity and uh so is his roommate, so I mean it's just one thing that we do. We have a
72 couple of old systems at our uh frat house, like a 64 where we'll play like Super Smash Bros. or
73 something stupid, waste of time, I guess, but yeah, they're friends that I hang out with outside of video
74 games.   *interaction with fraternity brothers*   *something to do*

75

76 J: So, you prefer to play video games with others rather than alone?

77

78 R: Yeah, I don't like, I mean, I'm not a, I much rather play with others than by myself. I don't play
79 video games I guess at all really by myself.

80   *always play*
81 J: Okay, and uh, you talked a little bit about that, but why with others as compared to alone?   *with others*

82

83 R: Um, I mean, I don't really see like, especially with these sports games, I guess it's fun to play
84 against the computer, but it's a lot more fun to play with other people, uh, I don't know, I think it's just *for*
85 kind of a waste of time and a little, a little sad I guess if you just sit inside and play video games by *playing alone*
86 yourself all day. I don't know, it's just not something I like to do.   *stereotype*

87   *playing*

88 J: And do the people you know tend to, do you mostly see people playing games with others?

89

90 R: Yeah, uh, the guy I was playing with, his roommate plays by himself a lot. But, he's into video
91 games like that. I guess, I mean it depends on the game. There a lot of games that I mean, really
92 require another person for it to be I guess fun and then other games, you can play campaign mode or I

Transcript 1 - Dave	Transcript 2 - Jessica	Transcript 3 - Melissa
Convenience	Impersonal	lack of changes
readability	Lack of relevance	required
relevance	pervasive	time consuming
Improvement	overwhelming	harassing
feedback	attitude	benefits
voice being heard	reasons for not being interested	time consuming
feedback coming to fruition	types of surveys	lack of implementation
Convenience		peer influence
invasive nature		university persistence
		underlying apathy
		questioning follow through
Themes		
Negativity		
No follow-up		
How is it being used		

Example written response

- "I would say the benefit of a mentoring program is actually getting connected with a mentor. That is the most challenging part. I am not sure how to even start a mentoring relationship. I mean, do I just go ask someone ? Do they have to be in my field? Can it be a friend? To have a program that could educate me on the importance of a mentor and how to start that relationship would be very beneficial."

Pre-set Categories

For the above excerpt, you may analyze it using the following categories you found from the literature that are pre-determined to be important.

- Benefit to mentee (B-ME)
- Benefits to mentor (B-MR)
- Benefits to family (B-F)
- Benefits to community (B-C)
- Challenges (C)

Example written response

- "I would say the benefit of a mentoring program is actually getting connected with a mentor. That is the most challenging part. I am not sure how to even start a mentoring relationship. I mean, do I just go ask someone ? Do they have to be in my field? Can it be a friend? To have a program that could educate me on the importance of a mentor and how to start that relationship would be very beneficial."

C

Emergent

"I would say the benefit of a mentoring program is actually getting connected with a mentor. That is the most challenging part. I am not sure how to even start a mentoring relationship. I mean, do I just go ask someone? Do they have to be in my field? Can it be a friend? To have a program that could educate me on the importance of a mentor and how to start that relationship would be very beneficial."

.

Comment [JT1]: Connection

Comment [JT2]: Challenges

Comment [JT3]: Uncertainty

Comment [JT4]: Who to ask

Comment [JT5]: Education

Comment [JT6]: Starting the relationship

From the codes developed in the previous slide, you could group them into two categories, *building relationships* (connection, starting the relationship) and *acquiring knowledge* (education, uncertainty, who to ask). These may not have appeared in the literature as benefits to a mentoring program, but from the data we see this person is looking for a tangible connection or relationship with a person, and also acquiring the knowledge to initiate a mentor connection separate from the program.

Sorting

- Once the coding process has been completed, organize all of the data units into the selected theme

- Think of this as putting together in one place the evidence for each theme

- For example, you could create a file folder for each theme. Then place each unit of data (quotation, document, etc.) coded with its respective theme(s)

Step 4: Identify patterns

- Within category description
- Larger categories
- Relative importance
- Relations

Top 2,500 Feelings
Each circle is a feeling, scaled to show how many times it was felt from 2006-2009

Tips for Analyzing and Reporting Data

- Conduct the analysis as soon as possible following the focus group
- Collect all notes and recordings
- Organize questions/answers
- Focus on responses to the key questions
- Look for patterns

Step 5: Interpretation

▸ Use your themes and connections to explain your findings.

▸ What does it all mean? What is really important?

▸ Start with a list of key points or important findings

▸ Take a step back

Duck or Rabbit?
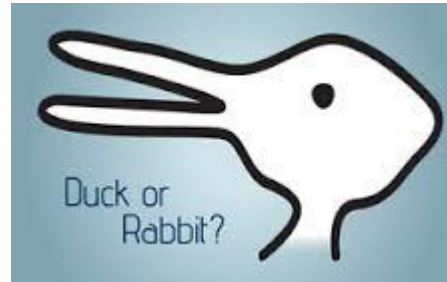
Strategies for Promoting Rigor

- Prolonged engagement
- Triangulation
- Peer review
- Negative case analysis
- Member checks
- Researcher's position or reflexivity
- Audit trail

Additional Considerations

- Is it better than quantitative?
- What about my lens?
- When is enough, enough?
- What about generalizability?

Focus Group: Reporting findings

Martha Glass, Ph.D.

Tips for Reporting

▸ Brief explanation of how data were processed and coded, how you chose examples

▸ Tell a story, what's the meaning behind all the data and then use a quote that exemplifies the meaning

▸ Provide a visual for how data was categorized, subcategorized and so on

▸ Be careful not to quantify beyond the first level

▸ Use the actual words that reflect the concept being coded

Pitfalls to avoid

- ▶ Avoid generalizing

- ▶ Choose quotes carefully

- ▶ Address limitations and alternatives

Reporting

A summary report lists the key themes under each topic, along with a verbatim quote or two that illustrates the theme and some indicators of frequency, extensiveness, and intensity.

▸ Frequency -- how often was the theme (or comment) heard?

▸ Extensiveness -- how many different students expressed the same theme?

▸ Intensity -- how strongly was the opinion expressed?

Remember to acknowledge limitations and possible bias!

Questions??

Martha Glass, Ph.D.
mglass@vt.edu

References

Bresciani, M. J., Gardner, M. M., & Hickmott, J. (2009). *Demonstrating student success: A practical guide to outcomes-based assessment of learning and development in student affairs.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Henning, G. W., & Roberts, D. (2016) Student affairs assessment: Theory to practice. Stylus, Sterling, VA.

Manning, K. (1992). A rationale for using qualitative research in student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development, 33,* 132-136.

Perl, E. J. & Noldon, D. F. (2001). Overview of student affairs research methods: Qualitative and quantitative. In J. W. Pickering & G. R. Hanson (Eds.), *Collaboration between student affairs and institutional researchers to improve institutional effectiveness: New directions for institutional research* (pp. 37-48). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schuh, J. H. (2009). *Assessment methods for student affairs.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schuh, J. H. & Upcraft, M. L. (2001). *Assessment practice in student affairs: A manual.* San

Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Taylor-Powell, E. & Renner, M. (2003). *Analyzing qualitative data* [Booklet]. Madison, WI:

University of Wisconsin-Extension.