Conducting Focus Groups for Curriculum Review and Improvement

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Western University
Centre for Teaching & Learning

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Best Practices for Focus Groups

Why use focus groups?

Focus groups are one of the recommended data sources for IQAP self-study, along with surveys, meetings, and retreats (Graduate Self-study Template p. 2 and Undergraduate Self-study Template p. 3). Using data for curriculum review can reveal a department's strengths in terms of what is effective and indicate some areas that could be considered as future opportunities for change. As with any form of data collection and analysis, following established best practices helps ensure that decisions are made on reliable information.

Focus groups use open-ended questions as a method to uncover and explore more deeply student, alumni, or employer perspectives on your program offerings. Faculties, departments, and programs have used focus groups for:

- Input on new program design,
- Curriculum planning,
- Program visioning,
- Continuous improvement, and
- Program renewal and IQAP self-study.

Guidelines for planning a focus group

1. What insights are you hoping to gain from participants?

See Sample Questions section, below.

2. Who should be included in your focus groups?

The types of insights you hope to gain will inform who your idea focus group participants are. For example, alumni and recent graduates can help determine how a program prepares graduates for employment. First- and second-year students can help inform how a program supports their transition into the discipline at the post-secondary level.

3. Who will run the focus groups?

We recommend 1-2 facilitators and a dedicated note-taker per focus group.

Focus group participants should feel they can openly share their responses to questions and conversations. This means that the facilitator and note-taker should not be in positions of power relative to the participants (e.g., an instructor in the program or department chair). Options include hiring emeritus faculty, grad students, or alumni, or asking departmental staff (non-faculty) to facilitate.

Best practices for focus group facilitators

1. At the beginning of the focus group session, explain why you have invited participants to provide their feedback.

> *Thank you for coming today. We have invited you to provide feedback about your experience as a student (or other role) in the ______ program (or module). You do not need to censor yourself. The room is a safe space to provide feedback. We value your honest feedback and plan to use the feedback for _____. You are welcome to build on each other's thoughts and ideas*

2. Confidentiality will lead to more open and honest feedback from participants. Consider how you will protect the anonymity of the participants when inviting participants and scheduling sessions.

> *The information that you share today will be kept anonymous. We ask that you help protect anonymity and confidentiality by agreeing not to share what we hear today with people outside the room. Do you agree?*
> *We are taking notes of key ideas and themes during this conversation. Identifying information will not be included in notes that are shared outside of this room. Do you have any questions?*

Further considerations for audio-recording and confidentiality are included in "Best practices for note-takers", below.

3. Make a statement at the beginning of the focus group session to explain what will happen with any transcripts, recording, and notes that result from the focus group. The transcriber should be someone who will not be able to identify participants. If you will be audio-recording, make a statement at the beginning of the session explaining the following:

> *We are audio-recording this session. The recording may be transcribed and will be used to obtain details about our conversation today. The transcripts, and not the direct recordings, may be used to help make decisions about program improvement and may also be used in self-study documents. No identifying information will be included in the transcripts. Does anyone have any questions or concerns about audio recording?*

If students have concerns, you may decide not to record the session.

4. Keep the conversation on track and help participants "dig deeper".

Consider recording key points on the board or flip chart paper to help capture discussion and to compare to transcript and notes later.

Be prepared to help participants move through some common challenges. Common challenges as well as some tips and suggested prompts are listed below:

Common challenges	Tips for addressing common challenges	Suggested prompts
Feedback focuses on a theme not related to the question posed.	Use your judgment to decide whether to allow the conversation to progress. For example, if a theme arises many times that students agree on, the facilitator may want to gather information on the theme before moving the conversation back to the set focus group questions.	*This point has been raised a number of times. Has this been experienced by others in the room?* *What I'm hearing is ____. Does this capture your experience?*
A participant is hijacking the conversation to talk about a specific issue.	State that you have recorded the feedback and want to hear other ideas. Remind the group about the question you are currently addressing and turn to others in the group for their input.	*Thank you for that input. I have recorded that idea. The question we are focused on at this point is _______. Does anyone have additional input that hasn't been expressed yet?*
Some participants are quieter.	Ask directly whether other participants would like to share their input on the question.	*We haven't heard from you yet. Do you have anything you would like to add?*
Participant responses are general or vague.	Ask follow up probes to help draw out concrete examples or ideas. A second facilitator can be helpful for asking follow up questions.	*Tell me more about what you just said* *Please elaborate on that statement* *Can you clarify what you meant?* *Are you willing to provide specific example/ situation/ context?*

Best practices for notetakers

1. Create a notation system for anonymously identifying participants.

For example, the notetaker can assign each focus group participant an index card with a letter on it to anonymously identify participants. During the focus group, the note-taker can quickly jot down the letter associated with the speaker. This notation can be useful for connecting ideas in the conversation when reviewing the notes.

2. At the beginning of the focus group, the capture non-identifying information about the participants.

Once participants are assigned letters, record any other essential details about individuals that would be helpful to interpreting their feedback. For example, write:

Participant D - 4th year, Honors Specialization student who switched into module after 2nd year.

3. Once the conversation begins, record participants as they take turns speaking.

Using a laptop to record participant responses is the most efficient way to keep track of the conversation. Although word-for-word transcripts are not necessary, direct quotes from participants can be powerful. If the focus group is also audio-recorded, the notetaker could mark down when the most meaningful contributions occurred. The notetaker can also jot down themes and summarize ideas as the focus group progresses.

4. Remove identifying information from the finalized notes.

The notetaker may be involved in transcribing the focus group conversation or an external transcriber could be hired to copy out the audio recordings. Ensure that the transcriber removes identifying information from the finalized notes. Identifying information includes any names, gender, age, hometown, or other details that would make it possible to identify individuals (e.g., participation in a small committee, course, or program).

Set-up and logistics

1. Consider serving refreshments or a meal in order to create a collegial atmosphere.

2. Set up the room so that the group is sitting in a circle or around a central table.

3. We suggest focus groups have no more than 5-8 participants.

- Smaller and larger focus groups can also work, but you want to be able to get through your key questions and ensure that voices within the room feel heard.

4. Consider how much time you will need.

- We suggest about 1-3 hours for a small focus group of ~5-8 people.
- Factors that influence how long your focus group should include:
    - Number of participants
    - Number of questions
    - Facilitator experience

5. Plan to ask no more than about ~5-10 questions total.

- We suggest choosing fewer questions (around 5), focusing on key areas of interest.
- Additional questions might be kept as back up, in case there is time. With this approach you will be less inclined to rush through important conversations in order to "get through" your longer list of questions.
- Consider sending questions to participants in advance in order to receive richer, more thoughtful responses.
- Keep careful track of time and keep things moving.

> *There are some additional questions I want to leave time for, are there any new ideas related to this question that haven't been shared yet?*

Best practices for viewing and using focus group data

Generally, students participate in focus groups because they want to have their voice heard and contribute to program improvement. It is likely that their feedback will have both strengths and weaknesses or areas of improvement for the program. Regardless of the nature of the feedback, consider that:

- The feedback is provided to help improve the program
- The feedback represents experiences of a few individuals

General tips for reviewing focus group data

- Acknowledge that students took the time to provide you with feedback by treating their data with respect. Speak about the data with the faculty members in a constructive manner. You can do this by referring to themes in the data rather than individual responses. Another strategy is to speak about the data in a way that would also be appropriate if the focus group participants were listening in the room.
- Set aside some dedicated time when you are in a positive state of mind to review the focus group data.
- Think about how the feedback relates to the context of your program or department when looking over the results. Perhaps the program is relatively new, or has undergone some recent changes that will help you understand student comments.
- Collecting focus group data is meant to prompt reflection on how students are supported in their learning within the department. Try not to be defensive if the focus group data is not as positive as you would like. You do not need to address all student concerns. Consider focusing on one or two key areas that would help to improve the student experience.

Sample focus group questions

Questions for undergraduate and graduate students or alumni

General Questions

- ☐ Describe your most significant learning experience(s) in the program.
- ☐ How did you integrate knowledge from required courses with other courses you took as part of your degree?

Program Purpose

- ☐ Why did you choose the program?
- ☐ What were you expecting of the program?
- ☐ How did you hope it would prepare you for your future?

Program Strengths

- ☐ What is one thing you like about the program?
- ☐ What is a key strength of the program?
- ☐ What makes the program unique?
- ☐ How do the program strengths fit with career opportunities?
- ☐ What current strengths should the program build upon?

Opportunities for Improvement

- ☐ How can we best meet your needs as students in the program?
- ☐ What key improvement could be made to the program and why?
- ☐ What would you remove from the curriculum? What would you add?
- ☐ Drawing on your background and experience, what two key changes would you suggest if you were to redesign the program?
- ☐ What emerging or new areas could the program focus on that would strengthen its value to you as a student?
- ☐ What skills do you need to develop that are not being targeted in your program?

Final Reflection

- ☐ What is the most important thing you would like to tell the curriculum committee as they work to enhance the program?

Questions Specifically for Alumni

- ☐ What aspects of your undergraduate learning experience benefit you in your work the most?
- ☐ What skills have you learned in the first year in your position that you could have learned at university, but did not?

Questions for Academic Counselors or Staff

- ☐ What are the most frequent program/curriculum related questions students ask you?
- ☐ Are there program requirements that students find difficult to complete? Are there bottlenecks where they get stuck?
- ☐ What do you think is the main reason why students drop out of the program?

Questions for Graduate Teaching Assistants

- ☐ What areas of the curriculum are most challenging for first year undergraduates?
- ☐ Of the courses that you have taught, where did you see the greatest improvement in students' writing/numeracy/research skills?
- ☐ If you graduated from the undergraduate program, which learning experiences helped you prepare for graduate school?

Questions for Employers

General

- ☐ What key characteristics, knowledge, or skills do you look for when hiring?
- ☐ What advice would you give to recent graduates or soon to be graduates of the program?

Program Strengths

- ☐ How does the program's structure or outcomes support your expectations of graduates (new employees)?
- ☐ Based on your experience with graduates of the program employed at your organization, what are some key strengths that they possess?
- ☐ How do Western graduates add value to your organization?
- ☐ Describe how the program at Western has helped your organization fulfill its mission or meet its objectives.

Areas for Improvement

- ☐ Based on your experience with Western University graduates employed in your organization, what are some key areas for improvement?
- ☐ What gaps, if any, do you see in the program's structure or outcomes?
- ☐ What two key changes would you propose if you were to improve the program to better prepare Western graduates for employment in your organization.