Focus Group Purpose
[Name of Institution] is conducting a series of focus groups with students and employees on our campus(es). Our objective is to build understanding of the kinds of experiences that students in [Name of Orientation Program] perceive are critical to their success in the community college, as well as the kinds of challenges they face. What [Name of Institution] learns can be very helpful as the college works to serve its students more effectively.

Focus Group Outcomes

**Outcome 1:** Understand students’ earliest and continuing experiences with orientation.

**Outcome 2:** Understand how and to what extent orientation impacted critical junctures during the students’ academic career.

- Understand what it is about this practice (orientation) that works (or doesn’t work).
- Understand why this practice works (or why it doesn’t).
- Differentiate whether this practice in and of itself is important for students to experience, or if certain features within this practice—yet common across promising practices—are most significant to student engagement.

Focus Group Outline
Each focus group will comprise the following activities:

- Meeting overview
- Consent forms
- Participant introductions
- Questionnaires (e.g. demographics, forms/survey items, etc.)
- Discussion
- Summary
- Thanks (and stipends, if used as incentives)

Approximate Total Time 75-90 minutes

Focus Group Prompts (Pre-Discussion)

1. **Introduce facilitator:** Hello, my name is [Name of Facilitator]. I work for [Name of Institution].

2. **Explain purpose of focus group:** [Name of Orientation Program] is conducting a series of focus groups on our campus(es). Our objective is to build understanding of the kinds of experiences that students in [Name of Orientation Program] perceive are critical to their success in the community college, as well as the kinds of challenges they face. What we learn from you can be very helpful as [Name of Institution] works to serve its students more effectively.

3. **Explain desired outcomes and how gathered information will be used:** [Name of Institution] will prepare a report that captures your voices and major themes of this conversation. *Your voice counts!* However, you will not be identified by name.

**NOTE:** At this time, the facilitator can read aloud the outcomes provided in this protocol.
4. **Explain consent form and request signatures:** Because we will be recording (and videotaping, if applicable) the focus group conversation, we are required to ask that you sign a form that stipulates your consent. Participation is absolutely voluntary.

5. **Audio taping/videotaping/note-taking:**
   a. Video and audio recording is for the purposes of gathering information to complement [Name of Institution]’s work on student success using video clips for presentations at conferences and workshops, and posting to the [Name of Institution] website.
   b. No names will be used in the report or in the video. If you are wearing a name tag, or any college identifiers, please remove them.

6. **Describe facilitator role:** My role as facilitator is to ask questions and keep the group on track. We will be moving through the material fairly quickly, so I may have to cut conversations short even when there is much to say about a topic.

7. **Describe participants’ role:** Each participant is expected to do the following:
   a. share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative;
   b. understand that there are no right or wrong answers;
   c. respect the request that everyone is to participate in the discussion; and
   d. fill out all paperwork.

8. **Logistics:**
   a. 90 minutes maximum
   b. Arrangements for water and restroom break
   c. Other?

9. **Ground rules:**
   a. One person speaks at a time; no side conversations.
   b. No one person dominates; everyone will have a chance to be heard.
   c. There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about your experiences at this college and what we learn will help the college improve upon its work with students.

10. **Questions:** Now, are there any questions before we get started?

11. **Introduction of participants:** As we go around the room, I want each participant to state their name; number of credit hours earned; course of study, if determined; primary academic goal; and organizational affiliations, if any.

12. **Questionnaires:** Administer surveys, questionnaires, or participant profile documents for collecting quantitative data on participants.

**Focus Group Discussion Questions**

**Outcome 1: Understand students’ earliest and continuing experiences with orientation.**

**Q1:** Before you came to college, what did you expect college to be like?
Q2: Did anyone tell you what college was like or what you should expect? If so, who was it? Family members? Friends? Teachers or others at your high school? People at work? Anyone who worked at the college?

Q3: Did you know what you wanted to come to college for—a particular program? A degree? A job or career? Something else? [Let students name these areas and use their own words in subsequent questions.] If so, how did you choose that direction?

Q4: Did you have any idea what classes you were going to take in college? If so, what kind of classes did you expect you were going to take? Why did you think that?

Q5: When was the first time you stepped foot on this college campus? What was the reason for your first visit to the college? To gather info? To apply (“sign up”)? Other?

Q6: How would you summarize what the process of getting started in this college was like for you? Think about the experiences you had up to the first time you actually went to a class. [Give them a Likert scale here—1 = really easy, 5 = really difficult.] Explain your answer. What made it easy? What made it difficult? Describe your best experience as you went through the steps needed to start college. Describe your worst experience.

Q7: When you walked in for the first time, did you feel welcome at this college? [Give them a Likert scale here—1 = really easy, 5 = really difficult.] Tell us more about your response. If you didn’t feel welcome, was there anything in particular you can point to that made you feel that way? If you did feel welcome, is there anything in particular that made you feel welcome? What did you see/who did you see first when you walked in for the first time?

Q8: Did you talk to anyone here at this college during the process of getting started here? More than one person? If so, did you know what the individuals’ jobs were at the college? Describe the conversations you had with that person(s)—the questions the person(s) asked you, the questions you asked the person(s).

Q9: During the process of getting started here did you participate in anything that helped you learn about the college and the steps for starting college (and first few weeks or how to be successful in college)? What was it called? How long was it (hours, days, weeks)? Where did the meeting take place? Were you required to participate? Was it suggested that you do this? Did you earn college credit for participating?

Q10: Before you signed up for classes at this college, did anyone talk with you about finding your way around campus? Did you take a tour? If you did take a tour, were you able to talk with people in various offices (financial aid, advising, counseling)? Looking back, was there any place you didn’t visit or learn about that you wish you had?

Q11: At any time, prior to registering for classes, did anybody talk with you about creating a plan for your time in college? Did anyone ask about your individual goals—what you wanted to go to college for? If so, how did that take place? In a group setting, one-on one? At that time were you assigned to work with a particular person? What was the experience like? If he or she were told to work with a particular person, was it a one-time meeting, or were you told that would be your go-to person at the college? If you were assigned to an individual, do you still meet with that person? If yes, how often? What leads to those meetings? If you were not assigned to a
specific person, have you been back to see the person you originally met with at the college? If
not, why not? If you were assigned to work with someone and have not been back to see that
person, why not?

Q12: How did you learn about the steps you needed to go through to sign up for classes? Did
someone talk with you about how to register? Did someone talk with you about how to pick
classes? Were there any classes you were told you needed to take? Who told you about those
classes? How did you receive the advice (individual or group setting)? Did you have to do
anything prior to picking classes (placement tests)?

Q13: Did anyone talk to you about what’s going on in your life outside of school (work, children)? If
so, did that conversation involve planning how you would balance those commitments with your
college work? Did it affect your thinking about how many classes you would take?

Q14: Prior to your first day of class, did you feel like you had people to go to if you had a question
about college? If so, how did you know the individuals prior to class starting? Family members?
Friends? Other? A person at the college? [Try to determine if the student had a network of
support.]

Q15: Did anyone talk to you about the skills you’d need in order to succeed as a college student? If
so, when? Who talked with you about this? What was the experience like? What type of skills
did they discuss? Have you implemented any of these skills? [Look for time management,
study skills, note-taking skills, basic technology skills, and learning style assessment.]

Q16: Did anyone tell you ways the college could help you if you needed assistance—if you hit a snag
in a class? Or someone you could talk to about personal issues that come up that might have
an impact on your success as student? [Try to get to personal/social support services or
academic service.] If so, what did they tell you? Have you used any of the college resources?
What college resources or offices have you used? If so, describe your experience. Will you use
the resource again? If you didn’t use the resource you were told about, why not?

Q17: Did anyone talk with you, prior to school, about participation in campus activities/events outside
of class? If so, when and how did you find out about these activities? Who told you about these
activities? Since you started school, has anyone talked with you about activities or events
outside of class? If so, who and when? Have you participated in any? If so, what was your
experience?

Q18: When you think about your first experiences at the college, how would you rate the quality and
usefulness of the orientation [use whatever language the student uses to describe] you’ve
received? Excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? Explain your response. Is there anything you’d
suggest to the college that would make this experience (even) better and more useful to new
students?

Q19: During the process of registering for classes, did you ever consider walking out the door and
not attending this college? If so, why? What made you stay?

Q20: Is there anything you wish you had known before you came to campus to get admitted and
register?
Q21: At this time, who in this college do you think knows your name? How do they know you? Where did you meet?

Outcome 2: Understand how and to what extent orientation impacted critical junctures during the students’ academic career.

Q1: Think back to your first day and week of class? What was it like finding your way around campus? How did you know where to go? Was it easy or difficult to find where you needed to go?

Q2: Since you started at the college, have you ever met again with any individual who helped you create a plan for your time at the college (classes to take, etc.)? If so, how did this experience go? Will you continue to meet with this person? What would cause you to set up a meeting with this person again?

Q3: In planning your subsequent semesters at the college, how do you know what to take? Is there anyone you plan to meet with to help you decide what courses to take? Will it be or was it someone who worked at the college or a friend? If it was someone at the college, how did you meet (or know of) this person?

Q4: In any of the experiences you’ve had so far at the college, is there any discussion about your career plans? If so, where are these conversations taking place? Orientation? Meeting with someone? With your instructors in your classes? Other? How does that discussion take place? What’s the result of these conversations?

Q5: In any of your classes, have you ever hit a snag—fallen behind in your class work, not done well on assignments or tests, etc? If that has happened, did you talk to anyone about it? If so, who did you talk to? Your instructor? Someone else? If so, how did you know who to talk to? Was the conversation helpful? Describe the conversation. Would you seek out this person again? Did you get help beyond just having a conversation with someone? Tutoring? Labs? Other? How did you learn about where to go? Was it helpful? Not helpful? Explain.

Q6: Have you ever had an issue come up in your life making it difficult for you to stay on track in your classes? If so, did you talk to someone about it? If so, how did you know who to talk to? Was the conversation helpful? In what ways? Not helpful? Why not? What happened after you met with that person?

Q7: Have you participated in anything on campus outside of class? If so, what? Events? Clubs or other organizations? Other activities? How did you know about it? Was the experience good? Fair? Poor? Explain your answer. Would you do it again? Why or why not?

Q8: Has anyone in the group ever thought about dropping out of college? If so, did you talk to someone at the college about that? How did you know who to go to? What was the person’s role at the college? What happened then? Was the conversation helpful? Not helpful? Why or why not? If you’ve considered dropping out of college, what caused you to stay?

Q9: Prior to starting your classes, is there anything you wish someone at the college had told you about how to be successful in college? (e.g., time management, study skills, etc.)
Q10: Think about your overall experience with orientation [or whatever the students call it] at this college. Has that experience made an important difference for you as a student? Positive or negative? In what ways?

Q11: Complete this sentence: “Orientation at this college is like ….” [Give this a try in your first group. If it doesn’t get you anything, then drop it.]

Q12: Think about the one experience you’ve had at this college that you would say was most helpful in your efforts to be a successful student. What was that experience? Who was involved, and what did that person or persons do?

Q13: If you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important changes the college could make to improve new students’ experience, what are the changes you would recommend? Why do you believe those are the most important changes?

Summary and Close

Q1: Right now, what’s the single most important factor that is keeping you moving toward success at this college?

Q2: How confident are you that you can stay and complete your academic goals? 1 being not very, 5 being extremely confident. Explain your answer.

Q3: If you were giving advice to a friend who was planning to attend this college about what the student could do to be successful here, what advice would you give?

Thank you. Hand out stipends (if applicable) and collect the students’ completed forms.