

Part-Time Students

Focus Group Discussion Guide



Part-Time Students: SAMPLE Focus Group Discussion Guide

What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from part-time students.

For supporting focus group materials such as recruitment tips, invitation e-mail templates, consent forms, profile sheets, and a comprehensive planning guide that outlines focus group staff roles and order of operations, visit <http://www.ccsse.org/focusgrouptoolkit>

Outcomes for the Part-Time Enrollment Focus Group Discussion:

- 1. To better understand students' perspectives about attending community college part-time, including participation patterns inside and outside of class and factors influencing their part-time status.*
- 2. To understand students' academic goals and how long they think it will take to accomplish their academic goals.*
- 3. To understand how and when students communicate with instructors outside of class, and whether these interactions are influenced by the instructors' part-time/full-time status and/or by students' part-time status.*
- 4. To understand the experience of part-time students at the college, their perspectives regarding the challenges they face, and how effectively they believe the college supports them.*

The Focus Group Session

A. Preparation

As participants enter, the coordinator should

- a. Ensure students are part-time
- b. Ask participants to sign in
- c. Ask participants to sign consent form (if applicable)
- d. Ask participants to fill out profile sheet/response sheet
- e. Provide stipends (if applicable)

B. Overview of Focus Group Discussion

As focus discussion begins, the facilitator should

- a. Introduce him/herself
- b. Explain purpose of focus group
- c. Confirm that participants have signed the consent forms (if applicable) and reiterate that participants can stop participating at any point

- d. Describe his/her role:
 - To ask questions and keep the group on track
 - Explains that discussion will move fairly quickly, even though people might have more to say about a particular topic
- e. Describe participants' role:
 - To share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
 - Explains that there are no right or wrong answers
 - Explains that everyone should participate in discussion
- f. Explain logistics of discussion:
 - 90 minutes maximum
 - Arrangements for water and restroom break
 - Cell phones turned off
- g. Explain ground rules:
 - One person speaks at a time; no side conversations
 - No one person dominates; everyone will have a chance to be heard
 - There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about participants' experiences.
- h. Introduce notetaker and if applicable, audio/video operators. Explain purpose of audiotaping/video recording/notetaking:
 - For the purposes of highlighting "part-time student voices" at the college
 - Explains that no names will be used in reporting
 - Gives thanks from the college
- i. Take questions from participants

C. Focus Group Discussion

Facilitator Tips:

- Remind participants of the value of differing points of view:
 - Does anyone see it differently?
 - Are there any other points of view?
- Probes (questions to elicit more detailed responses):
 - Would you explain further? Tell me more about that.
 - Can you give me an example of what you mean?
 - Would you say more?
 - Is there anything else?
 - Please describe what you mean.
 - Does someone have a similar/different experience?

[Provided below is a bank of example outcomes and questions which can be used to form your discussion guide.]

Background of, and general information about, participants

1. Participant introduction, including: a) name, b) major, and c) other colleges you've attended.
2. What is your educational goal? Degree? Certificate? Transfer? Upgrade skills for a promotion? Learn new skills to prepare for career change? Other?
3. If earning a degree or certificate is not your goal, why not?

Outcomes 1 & 2: To better understand students' perspectives about attending community college part-time, including participation patterns inside and outside of class and factors influencing their part-time status; to understand students' academic goals and their perceptions of how long they think it will take to accomplish their academic goals.

Expectations and Experiences

1. Thinking about your future, what are your personal goals? Your professional goals?
2. How long do you expect to be attending this college in order to achieve your academic goals (degree, certificate, transfer, etc.)?
 - a. Since you've been attending college, has anyone who works at the college talked with you about how long it would take to accomplish your academic goals? If so, what was the title of this individual?
 - b. Has your understanding about how long it will take to complete changed? If yes, what has led to this change?
 - c. Have you considered the difference in how long it will take to reach your goals if you attend part-time or full-time?
3. What's going on in your life outside of school (work, children, other family responsibilities, extracurricular activities, etc.)?
 - a. Before you signed up for classes at this college, did anyone talk with you about balancing those commitments with your college work? If yes, what was the title of this person?
 - i. If someone talked to you about this, did it affect your thinking about how many classes you could take? If yes, in what way? If no, why not?
4. Prior to registering for classes, did you talk with anyone at this college about the process of getting started here? More than one person? If so, did you know what the individuals' jobs were at the college?
 - a. Describe the conversations you had with that person(s), the questions the person(s) asked you, the questions you asked the person(s).

5. How did you learn about the steps you needed to go through to sign up for classes?
 - a. Did someone talk with you about the process for registering?
 - b. Did someone talk with you about how to pick classes?
 - c. Were there any classes you were told you needed to take? Who told you about those classes?
 - i. How did you receive the advice (individual or group setting)? Did you have to do anything prior to picking classes (placement tests)?

6. During the process of getting started here, did you participate in any activity that helped you understand support services available to you? What was it called? How long was it (hours, days, weeks)? Where did it take place? Were you required to participate? Or was it suggested that you do this? Did you earn college credit for participating?

7. Have you taken a class that focuses on the skills you'd need in order to succeed as a college student? If so, what was this class called?
 - a. What was the experience like? What type of skills did they discuss? Have you implemented any of these skills? [Look for student success course.]

8. At any time prior to registering for classes, did anybody talk with you about creating an academic plan for your time in college?
 - a. Did anyone ask about your individual goals, what you wanted to go to college for? If so, how did that discussion take place? In a group setting, one on one?
 - b. Have you created a plan that lays out how many classes you will take each semester to reach your goals?
 - c. In planning your subsequent semesters at the college, how do you know what to take?
 - d. At that time of the initial discussion, were you assigned to work with a particular person? What was the experience like?
 - i. If you 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 led to those meetings?
 - ii. 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?

9. In any of the experiences you've had so far at the college, has anyone spoken with you about transferring to a university to pursue a bachelor's degree?
 - a. What have those discussions been like?
 - b. What are the factors that go into selecting a university?
 - c. How do you know which courses at this college will transfer to the university?

10. In any of the experiences you've had so far at the college, has there been any discussion about your career plans?
 - a. If so, where did these conversations taking place? Orientation? Meeting with someone? With your instructors in your classes? Other?
 - b. How did that discussion take place?
 - c. What were the results of these conversations?

11. When you started at this college, did you start as a full-time student or a part-time student?
 - a. If you started as a full-time student and then became a part-time student, what factors caused you to switch to part-time?
 - b. Why are you a part-time student?
 - c. If you have ever been a full-time student, does it feel different to be a full-time student than a part-time student? In what ways? Which do you like better—being a full-time or a part-time student? Why?
12. Tell us what it's like when you visit the campus.
 - a. What time of day are you typically on campus? In addition to your classes, where do you go on campus?
 - b. Is anything closed when you are on campus that you wish was open – offices, services, other?
13. How does the college help/support you as a part-time student?

Outcomes 3 & 4: To understand how and when students communicate with instructors outside of class, and whether these interactions are influenced by the instructors' part-time/full-time status and/or by students' part-time status; to understand the experience of part-time students at the college, their perspectives regarding the challenges they face, and how effectively they believe the college supports them.

1. As a student at this college, what are the greatest challenges you face?
 - a. (If they don't mention attending part-time as a challenge, prompt by asking something like the following) "Are there things that you think would be less challenging for you if you attended full-time?"
2. Thinking about all your instructors, when you want to get in contact with one, is it easy or difficult to reach them?
 - a. Describe how easy or difficult it is to get in contact with an instructor. Scale of 1-5, with 1 being easy, 5 being difficult. Explain your answer. What makes it easy? What makes it difficult? Can you give an example?
 - b. How do you typically try to reach/communicate with an instructor?
3. (Same as above – ask only if not already answered in response to question 2.) Have you visited with your instructors outside of class?
 - a. Did you meet during office hours? If no, why not?
 - i. If you have met with your instructors outside of class, were you able to arrange a time and place to meet that was convenient for you? Explain your answer.
4. Do you know which of your instructors work at the college full-time or part-time?
 - a. If yes, among the classes you are currently enrolled in, do you know how many of your instructors work at the college full-time? Part-time?
 - b. In general, do you know if there is any difference in your experience with those instructors who work at the college full-time vs. part-time? If yes, explain the differences you experience.

5. Do you know if some or all of your instructors know that you are a part-time student? If so, how do you know this?
6. In your experience at this college, do instructors take steps to meet needs of part-time students? If yes, in what ways?
7. Think of a time when the college (a college program or office) took steps that were particularly helpful for part-time students? Describe what happened that benefited part-time students.

Summary & Close

1. Right now, what is the single most important factor that is keeping you as a part-time student?
 - a. If you could change this factor (i.e. not have to work to pay for your classes, get childcare for your child, etc.), would you attend part-time? If yes, why? If not, why not?
2. How confident are you that you can stay in college and complete your academic goals? 1 being not very, 5 being extremely confident. Explain your answer.
3. If you were giving advice to the college on how the college can better support part-time students, what advice would you give? Now answer that question in regard to all students, both full-time and part-time.

Facilitator asks participants if they have any final questions or comments. Facilitator thanks them for their participation once more.