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 Student Success Course] perceive are critical to their success in the community college, as well as the kinds of challenges they face. What [Name of the Institution] learns can be very helpful the college works to serve its students more effectively.

Focus Group Outcomes
Outcome 1: Learn more about students' transition to college and how their earliest college experiences impact that transition.

Outcome 2: Learn about students’ experiences in the student success course as compared to the experiences of students who did not enroll in and/or complete the student success course.

Outcome 3: Understand if, how, and to what extent the student success course impacted students’ continuing academic career.

Outcome 4: Understand what it is it about this practice that works (or doesn’t work).

Outcome 5: 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, persistence, and completion.

Focus Group Outline & Timeline
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 Institution] 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 Student Success Course] 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:
   c. a. 90 minutes maximum
   d. b. Arrangements for water and restroom break
   e. 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: Learn more about students’ transition to college and how their earliest college experiences impact that transition.

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 words in subsequent questions.] If so, how did you choose that direction?

Q4: What kind of classes did you expect you were going to take? Why did you think that? Think about what you had to do to get admitted to college. Think about the steps you had to take before you ever ended up in a classroom, before the first day of school.

Q5: Think back to the first time you came to the campus to sign up for classes. When was that? Summer before you started? Right before classes started? While you were in high school? Other? You’re sitting in the parking lot getting ready to walk in the front door of the college, what are you thinking? What are you feeling? [If they say they were excited, ask what they were excited about. If they say they were nervous or scared, ask what made them nervous or scared, etc.]

Q6: Before you walked in the door to get started on your college experience, did you think you were ready for college? If so, why? If you weren’t sure you were ready, why not? [If they don’t bring up academic areas, ask the following specifically.] Thinking about the classes you were going to be taking, did you feel ready for college-level work?

Q7: What did you see when you first walked into the college? Did you meet anyone? If so, who was it? Did the person approach you or did you walk up to the person?

Q8: Did you know what to do when you first came into the college? If so, how did you learn what to do? Did you learn before you came? On your first visit? Describe the steps you needed to take to get started at this college.

Q9: Did you participate in any activity before classes started that you were told would give you the information you needed to start successfully at the college? If so, what was it? Required or recommended? Did you participate? Why or why not? If yes, what were some of the things you learned about during that activity? On a scale of 1 to 5—1 being not useful, 5 being extremely helpful—how would you rate the value of that experience? Explain your answer.

Q10: 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.
Q11: 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?

Q12: 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. At any time, were you told that you were assigned to a particular person who would be your go-to person at the college?

Q13: When you were signing up for classes, did anyone talk with you about experiences that they said would be particularly helpful to new students? If so, what did the person tell you? [Look for the sequence of mandatory experiences—advising, student success classes, and whatever else is included. If not mentioned in the list of experiences/activities, ask the following.] Did the individual talk with you about taking a class or classes or that they said would be particularly helpful to new students? If so, what did the person tell you about the class(es)? Did the individual recommend that you take the class(es)? Did the person say you were required to take the classes? If so, what did you understand about why the person recommended the class (es) or why you were required to take the class(es)? Did you enroll in the class(es)? If so, why? If not, why not? What did you understand, if anything, about how this class(es) would fit with your other courses? Was it an extra class? Would you earn college credit for it? Would you meet some of your course requirements by taking the class(es)?

Q14: Did you sign up for everything you were told would be helpful for new students? If not, why not? If so, why? If you enrolled in the student success class(es), did you stay in the class for the entire term? If not, why not? If you did not stay in the class for the entire term, did you simply stop attending or did you formally drop out of the class? If you stopped attending, did anyone talk to you about that? If so, what was the nature of that conversation? If you formally dropped out, did you meet with anyone before dropping out? If so, who? What was the nature of that conversation?

Q15: Complete this sentence: “This college is like …..” Explain your answer.

Outcome 2: Learn about students’ experiences in the student success course as compared to the experiences of students who did not enroll in and/or complete the student success course.

Prompt: Now think about your experiences in college from the moment you entered college and up to now.

Q1: Think back to the first few sessions of your student success course [or whatever the students name it]. Think about what you did in those classes during the first week or two. Was it the same as other classes on the first day? In the first week or two? Or was it different? If so, how was it different?

Q2: [The following might be redundant following the question above, but if needed, probe whether there was a continuing orientation in the student success course.] For those who participated in an activity before classes started that you were told would help you start successfully at the
college, did any of the things you did during that activity continue in the first class meetings of your student success class? If so, what specific things did you do during those classes?

Q3: If you remember that the first few class meetings of your student success class were different from your other classes, describe what was different. The types of activities or assignments? How you worked with your instructor and with other students during your first few student success class meetings? Other?

Q4: [If the following doesn’t come up in responses to previous questions.] In any of your classes, did you have any activities to help you get to know others in your class? Was the student success class(es) different from the others in terms of having activities to help you get to know other students?

Q5: Thinking about all your classes, in general, do you know what the expectations are in your classes? Do you have a pretty clear idea of what will be happening in the class throughout the term? What the instructor expects of you? If so, how do you know? Were the expectations in your student success class different in any way from the expectations in other classes? Describe what your student success course instructor told you the class would be like and what you’d be doing in the class. Describe what that instructor said about his/her expectations for your performance in the class.

Q6: When you think about all the classes you have taken at this college, in general, do you get to know other students in your classes? Did that happen more in your student success class, less, or about the same? Do you still have classes with some of the students you met in your student success class? Is that just a coincidence or did you decide to take certain classes together? If not, do you still stay in touch with any of those students? To a greater degree than with students you’ve met in other classes? The same as with students in other classes? Less than with students you’ve met in other classes?

Q7: Think about the way you spend your time in your classes. In general, do you spend more time listening to your instructor? Participating in class discussions? Working independently? Working with other students? Specifically, in your student success class, how did you spend your time? Listening to your instructor? Participating in class discussions? Working independently? Working with other students on assignments or projects? Studying with other students while in class?

Q8: Think about the assignments you’ve had in your classes at this college. Were your assignments in the student success class similar to assignments in other classes or different in some ways? If different, how were they different? [For the following questions, keep checking to see if these experiences differ between Student Success classes and other classes.] Do any of your assignments require you to work with other students outside of class? Do any of your assignments require you to do other things on campus, such as meet with other staff members or participate in any campus activities? Do any of your assignments require you to participate in any activities outside the college?

Q9: In addition to your class instructor, did any other college staff members participate in your student success class(es) during the term? If so, what was his/her role? Did these others participate throughout the term in several class sessions or one time only?
Q10: In any of your classes, did anyone work with you and the other students in the classes on skills they said would help you be more successful in your classes? Specifically, what were some of the skills they worked on with you? Describe how that took place. If you’ve had this experience in both your student success class and in other classes, in your student success class, was the experience of having someone work with you on skills that would help you be more successful the same or different from the experience in other classes? Have you used any of what you learned in the student success class in other classes? If yes, give an example. If not, why not?

Q11: In any of the classes you have taken or are now taking, think about your take-away? What’s your biggest take-away from the discussions about study skills, time management, career planning, learning styles, test taking, etc.?

Q12: Since you’ve been at the college, have you created some kind of a plan for your time at the college and beyond? If so, describe your plan. Did you develop this plan while in one of your classes or did you do this outside of class? Did someone work with you in person on the plan or did you do this on your own? If you did this on your own, what caused you to do it? Were you working with materials or technology provided by the college? If you worked with someone, how did you decide who to work with? Did the person come to your class or did someone refer you to this individual? If someone came to a class to work with you, which class?

Q13: In any of your classes, have you ever hit a snag—fallen behind in your classwork, 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? Did you go to the person or did the person contact you? Was the person your instructor or someone else who was part of one of your classes? If the person contacted you, in what way(s)? Phone? E-mail? Texting? Facebook? Other? How early in the term did the contact occur? What happened after you talked with that person? Did the person suggest anything you could do? If so, did you follow up on those suggestions? If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not? If you didn’t follow up on the suggestions, why not? [If they don’t mention talking to someone who works at the college -- instructor, advisor, tutor, etc. -- then ask, Did you consider talking with anyone at the college? If not, why not?]

Q14: In any of your classes, is there anyone other than the instructor who meets with your class and is available to work with students one-on-one or in groups either during class or outside of class? If yes, which classes? [If several classes are mentioned, ask the following.] Thinking about those classes in which an additional person is available to help students, is your student success class different in any way or the same as other classes?

Q15: Do you know how you’re doing in your classes? If so, is this true in all your classes or some of your classes? Any difference in your student success class compared to other classes? How do you learn how you’re doing?

Outcome 3: Understand if, how, and to what extent the student success course impacted students’ continuing academic career.

Outcome 4: Understand what it is it about this practice that works (or doesn’t work).
Q1: When you think about your student success course experience, on a scale of 1 to 5, how helpful has the experience been for you? 5 being extremely helpful, 1 being not helpful at all. Explain your answer.

Q2: We talked a little about this earlier, but now that we’ve talked a lot about your classes, think again about the classes and other college experiences you’ve had since you completed the student success course experience [or classes—however the students talk about it]. Is there a time you can remember when an experience you had in a student success class that helped you deal with a challenge that came up in another class? [This might not yield anything, but it’s worth exploring and is a different take on Q1 above.]

Q3: Think about instructors and other staff members you worked with during your student success course experience. Have you stayed in contact with any of them? If so, why? More or less than instructors and staff members who were not connected with those experiences or classes?

Q4: Thinking back on your student success class, is there anything you experienced that you now think was not particularly useful to you when you moved ahead in other classes? Is there anything you wish would have happened that would have been helpful to you in your later classes at the college?

Outcome 5: 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, persistence, and completion.

Q1: When you think about your entire experience in a student success class, what are the features of the experience that you would say have been most beneficial to you? Explain your answer. Least beneficial? Explain your answer.

Q2: Complete this sentence: “The student success classes at this college are like …” [give this a try in your first group. If it doesn’t get you anything, then drop it.]

Q3: In general, has the student success course experience made a difference for you as a student? If yes, in what ways? Would you recommend this class to other students? If yes, why? If not, why not?

Q4: Since you started at this college, did any of you leave college for a while? If so, why did you leave? Did you talk to anyone here before you made the choice to stop attending? If so, what was the person’s role at the college? If you didn’t talk with anyone before you left, did anyone contact you after you left? If so, what was the person’s role at the college? Why did you decide to come back to the college?

Q5: For those of you who have stayed in school since you started at this college, did you ever think about dropping out or stopping for a while? If so, what was the reason? Why did you decide to keep going?

Q6: If you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important changes the college could make to improve students’ experience, what are the changes you would recommend? Why do you believe those are the most important changes?
Q7: Thinking about the student success class in particular, if you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important changes the college could make to make the class more valuable to students, what are the changes you would recommend?

Summary and Close

Q1: Right now, what's the single most important factor that is keeping you moving toward meeting your goals at this college?

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