

Engaging Latino Students for Transfer and College Completion

Focus Group Manual



This manual was produced as part of the Center initiative Engaging Latino Student for Transfer and College Completion, supported by The Kresge Foundation and Greater Texas Foundation

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Introduction

For more than a decade, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center) have collaborated in bringing a strong focus on educational quality, equity, and high-impact practices to higher education institutions and the national discourse. With support from [The Kresge Foundation](#) and [Greater Texas Foundation](#), NSSE and the Center have joined with [Excelencia in Education](#) in a special project focused on helping institutions strengthen Latino student engagement, transfer, and college completion: Engaging Latino Students for Transfer and College Completion.

The [Community College Survey of Student Engagement \(CCSSE\)](#) and the [National Survey of Student Engagement \(NSSE\)](#) for four-year institutions provided the data that were used in the analyses for this project. Accompanying the survey item analyses, a series of focus groups were conducted with students and with faculty and staff to provide authentic voices and video documentation that help enrich understanding of the quantitative data.

In continuing efforts to increase student retention and success, colleges are regularly collecting and analyzing data to identify strengths and areas in need of improvement. Generally, data (such as retention statistics, graduation rates,

course success rates, and CCSSE or NSSE survey results) will point to specific areas for focus. Before improvement strategies are considered; however, colleges may want to learn more about student experiences.

This manual was designed as part of the initiative to conduct focus group sessions at ten participating partner institutions—five two-year and five four-year—and has been adapted for wider use. An [Appendix](#) contains all of the materials necessary to successfully plan, schedule, and facilitate focus groups with students, faculty, and staff.

These structured discussions will help the college better understand students' experiences as well as uncover possible strategies to consider for improvement. They will provide qualitative information to enhance other data. To complement the findings from the focus group discussions, student participants should be asked to fill out student profile sheets, which collect demographic and other information.

In addition to gathering information from students, it is recommended that the college also conduct focus groups with both full- and part-time faculty and staff who serve these students to learn their perspectives on factors that support or hinder the success of students.

Planning Focus Groups

Preparation and planning for conducting effective focus groups consists of four key components: proper scheduling of focus groups; targeted recruitment of student, faculty, and staff participants; effective communication with these participant groups; and attention to the logistics of each focus group session. The college should identify a campus employee to serve as the Focus Group Coordinator.

Step 1: Schedule Focus Group Sessions

Four focus group sessions will be scheduled—three for students and one for faculty and staff—at each institution. Each focus group session will last approximately 75–90 minutes. A cushion time of no less than 30 minutes between sessions will be necessary so that participants can comfortably arrive before and leave after other scheduled groups, and have a few minutes to enjoy the refreshments that have been provided for them. Additionally, the college should anticipate a minimum of one hour to set up the AV equipment before the first focus group session.

Student Focus Groups

The scheduling of the student focus group sessions should reflect the times that are best for students. In order to attract a representative cross-section of students, the college may want to consider conducting one of the student focus groups in the evening. If the college does not expect evening registration to yield a different mix of students from daytime registration, the focus groups can be scheduled during the day only.

Faculty and Staff Focus Groups

The college should consider conducting at least one focus group with faculty and staff who teach or work with the target student population.

Step 2: Recruit Focus Group Participants

Student Focus Groups

The Center recommends that each focus group involve no more than seven to ten students.

► Student Participant Specifications

During the initiative, the Center used the following guidelines in identifying student focus group participants. The college may use other criteria; however, this is a suggested model.

- To the extent possible, student focus groups should have good male and female representation.
- **Two-year institutions:** Three student focus groups comprised solely of Latina/o students who are attending the community college, are at least a second semester student, and have expressed a goal to transfer.
- **Four-year institutions:** Three student focus groups comprised solely of Latina/o students who have transferred from any two-year institution.

► Student Recruitment

Recruitment should begin at least two to three weeks in advance of the focus group, based on the outlined student participant specifications. A sample [Invitation E-mail to Students](#) is provided in the [Appendix](#) section of this manual. If the college is able to utilize other technology like posting a message on the college's website, texting students, or using Facebook, these methods have also proven effective recruitment strategies. One week prior to the scheduled focus group, the Focus Group Coordinator should finalize participant details in spreadsheet form.

Faculty and Staff Focus Groups

The Center recommends that each focus group involve no more than seven to ten faculty and staff.

► Faculty and Staff Participant Specifications

In considering who to include, the Center recommends inviting full- and part-time faculty, academic advisors, tutors, financial aid administrators and/or frontline staff, transfer staff, and academic and workforce deans. It may also be beneficial to ensure that invited participants represent faculty and staff assigned to a college transfer initiative or program, or faculty, administrators, or staff from a diversity/equity initiative or program.

► Faculty and Staff Recruitment

The Focus Group Coordinator should invite both faculty and staff to participate several weeks prior to the scheduled focus group. As with the student participants, one week prior to the scheduled focus group, the Focus Group Coordinator should finalize the participant details in spreadsheet form.

The Focus Group Coordinator should prepare a spreadsheet for each focus group containing the following information.

Student Participant Details: name, e-mail address, phone number, and major

Faculty Participant Details: name, e-mail address, phone number, course(s) taught, and employment status (full-time/ part-time)

Staff Participant Details: name, e-mail address, phone number, title, and department

Step 3: Communicate With Focus Group Participants

Communicating With Students

Following up with students to encourage participation is the most important thing to do in order to ensure students feel a commitment to the project and show up for scheduled focus groups.

The Focus Group Coordinator will be responsible for communicating with recruited students prior to each focus group.

Prior to the focus group, the Coordinator should:

- send an e-mail and/or make a phone call to each participant following the initial recruitment and one week before the focus group;
- have the college president's office e-mail or phone each participant prior to the focus group, thanking them for agreeing to participate, emphasizing the purpose of the focus group and its importance in helping the college provide the best experience and support for students; and
- call or text each student that agreed to participate the day before the focus group, reminding him or her of the session, providing directions to the location, and confirming attendance.

Communicating With Faculty and Staff

The Focus Group Coordinator is responsible for communicating with recruited faculty and staff prior to each focus group.

Prior to the focus group, the Coordinator should:

- send an e-mail and/or make a phone call to each participant following the initial recruitment and one week before the focus group;
- have the college president's office e-mail or phone each participant prior to the focus group, thanking them for agreeing to participate, emphasizing the purpose of the focus group and its importance in helping the college provide the best experience and support for students; and
- call each faculty and staff member who agreed to participate the day before the focus group, reminding him or her of the session, providing directions to the location, and confirming attendance.

Step 4: Focus Group Logistics

The Focus Group Coordinator is responsible for the following logistical arrangements:

- arrange for and set-up the meeting room as outlined in the [Room Set-Up for Video](#) diagram;
- provide refreshments/snacks that will be attractive to participants and reflect genuine hospitality and appreciation (e.g., boxed lunches, pizza and soft drinks, brownies/cookies and soft drinks, etc.); and
- be available before and throughout each focus group session to make sure everything is in place, and to text and/or make phone calls to participants as necessary.

The Center traditionally videotapes all focus groups for research and reports, and to share with its stakeholders. The institution will need to decide if this is something it wants to do. If so, the Focus Group coordinator will oversee this.

Additional Coordinator Responsibilities:

The Focus Group Coordinator is responsible for providing and/or arranging the following: all technical equipment, including the digital audio recorder, video camera, table microphone(s), and boom microphone(s); participant name cards; and all necessary participant materials, including consent forms, pens, and profile sheets. The Focus Group Coordinator will also identify a note-taker, and provide the note-taker with necessary materials.

Finally, the Coordinator is responsible for facilitating focus group sessions. During each session, the Coordinator will follow the outline below:

1. Meeting overview
2. Consent forms
3. Participant introductions

4. Questionnaires (e.g. demographics forms/survey items, etc.)
5. Discussion
6. Summary
7. Thanks (and stipends, if used as incentives)

Appendix

The Appendix that follows contains materials to assist the Focus Group Coordinator in scheduling focus groups, recruiting participants, communicating with participants, and preparing focus group logistics.

These templates were designed to help Coordinators facilitate the focus groups and may be modified to best meet the needs of the institution.

- a. Invitation E-mail to Students
- b. Student Consent Form
- c. Student Participant Profile Sheet
- d. Faculty and Staff Consent Form
- e. Faculty Participant Profile Sheet
- f. Staff Participant Profile Sheet
- g. Room Set-Up for Video

a. Invitation E-mail to Students

Invitation E-mail to Students

[Tailor e-mail to meet your student target population.]

To: [Student e-mail address]

Cc: [If applicable]

Subject: Student Focus Group Discussion at [Name of Institution]

Dear [Student Name]:

Your success as a student at [Name of Institution] is very important to us. We know that many students face significant challenges in their efforts to achieve their educational goals. Therefore, our faculty and staff are very interested in learning what we can do to help students stay enrolled in school and have a successful and satisfying experience.

To help us determine what programs and services the college already has in place that are particularly helpful to you, and also to help us identify ways to improve programs and services, we need to hear from you. To learn about your experiences at [Name of Institution] and hear your opinions, we invite you to participate in a 90-minute videotaped group discussion with up to nine other students. As a token of our appreciation, you will receive [insert amount or type of stipend, if applicable].

Details on the group discussion are as follows:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

Directions: _____

Refreshments will be provided!

Since we are talking with a limited number of students, the success and quality of our discussion will depend on the full participation of the students who attend. Please contact [Name] at [phone number] or [e-mail address] to confirm your attendance.

We look forward to seeing you on [date].

Sincerely,
[Focus Group Coordinator Name]

b. Student Consent Form

[Name of Institution] Student Consent Form

[Name of Institution] is conducting focus groups and interviews with students in order to gain insights into students' experiences at this college. Information gathered through focus groups and interviews is used alongside other data to help college leaders identify institutional policies and practices that will help community college students succeed.

Your participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary. You can choose not to participate at any time, and your refusal will not influence current or future relationships with [Name of Institution].

Students who volunteer will essentially participate in a group conversation and will receive a small stipend for their participation. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in one 90-minute videotaped and audiotaped focus group.

This focus group will be audio recorded and videotaped, and excerpts from focus groups may be used in workshops or national conference presentations and may be posted on the [Name of Institution's] website.

I, _____, a student at [Name of Institution], have read and understand
Name (please print)

this consent form and agree to voluntarily participate in this project.

Signature

Date

c. Student Participant Profile Sheet

**[Name of Institution]
Student Participant Profile Sheet**

ALL RESPONSES WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

2. How old are you?

Under 18

18-19

20-21

22-24

25-29

30-39

40-49

50-64

65+

3. Did you enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school?

Yes

No

4. Is this the first college you have attended or did you begin college elsewhere?

Started here

Started elsewhere

5. Is this your first academic term at this college?

Yes

No

6. What is the highest academic credential you have earned?

None

Vocational/Technical

High School Diploma

Bachelor's Degree

GED

Master's/Doctoral/Professional Degree

Associate Degree

7. Who in your family has attended at least some college? (Check all that apply.)

Mother

Spouse/Partner

Father

Legal Guardian

Brother/Sister

None of the Above

8. What is your enrollment status?

Full-time

Less than full-time

c. Student Participant Profile Sheet

9. Are you eligible for financial assistance?

- Yes No Don't know

10. If you **are eligible** for financial assistance, please indicate which of the following describes your current situation?

- I have received financial assistance
 I applied, but have not received it
 I have not applied for financial assistance

11. If you **are not eligible** or receiving financial assistance (school grants, scholarships or loans), how are you paying for tuition at this college?

- My own income/savings
 Parent or spouse/significant other's income/savings
 Employer contributions
 Loans
 Public assistance

12. Are you married?

- Yes No

13. Are you employed?

- Yes No

14. If yes, how many hours do you work each week?

- 1-5 hours 6-10 hours 11-20 hours
 21-30 hours More than 30 hours

15. Do you have children or other dependents living at home with you?

- Yes No

16. If you have children living with you, which of the following best describes your child care situation?

- My children are enrolled in a child care center at this college.
 I currently have child care arrangements for my children outside of this college.
 Finding child care is a major issue for me.
 My children do not require child care.

c. Student Participant Profile Sheet

17. What is your racial identification?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Native American | <input type="checkbox"/> White, Non-Hispanic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander | <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic, Latino |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black or African-American | |

18. Are you an international or foreign national student?

- Yes No

19. What campus activities are you involved in outside of class?

- Student organizations and clubs (If so, please specify the name of the organization) _____
- Student government
- Participated in cultural activities
- College newspaper
- Community organizations
- Church
- Community based project as part of a regular class

20. What has been the most challenging or difficult parts of your college experiences?

- Learning course materials
- Advising
- Academic support
- Paying for college
- Balancing work and school
- Other

d. Faculty and Staff Consent Form

[Name of Institution] Faculty and Staff Consent Form

[Name of Institution] is conducting focus groups and interviews with faculty and staff in order to gain insights into students' experiences at this college. Information gathered through focus groups and interviews is used alongside other data to help college leaders identify institutional policies and practices that will help community college students succeed.

Your participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary. You can choose not to participate at any time, and your refusal will not influence current or future relationships with [Name of Institution].

Faculty and staff who volunteer will essentially participate in a group conversation. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in one 90-minute videotaped and audiotaped focus group.

This focus group will be audio recorded and videotaped, and excerpts from focus groups may be used in workshops or national conference presentations and may be posted on the [Name of Institution's] website.

I, _____, an employee at [Name of Institution], have read and
Name (please print)

understand this consent form and agree to voluntarily participate in this project.

Signature

Date

e. Faculty Participant Profile Sheet

**[Name of Institution]
Faculty Participant Profile Sheet**

ALL RESPONSES WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

1. What is your gender?

- Male Female

2. For how many years have you taught at the college level (full- or part-time, any college)?

- Less than 1 year 10–19 years
 1–4 years 20+ years
 5–9 years

3. Please indicate your teaching field: _____

4. What is your employment status at this college?

- Full-time faculty Adjunct faculty

5. At this college, what is your teaching load this term (not counting overload)?

- 1-3 credits 10-12 credits
 4-6 credits 13-15 credits
 7-9 credits 16+ credits

6. At this college, what classes are you currently teaching?

f. Staff Participant Profile Sheet

[Name of Institution] Staff Participant Profile Sheet

ALL RESPONSES WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

1. What is your gender?

- Male Female

2. For how many years have you worked in college student services (any college)?

- Less than 1 year 10–19 years
 1–4 years 20+ years
 5–9 years

3. Please indicate your area of responsibility (mark all that apply):

- Academic Advising and Planning Admissions and/or Registration
 Financial Aid Counseling
 Student Activities Academic Support
 College Orientation or Student Success Course
 Other (please describe) _____

4. What is your employment status at this college?

- Full-time Part-time

5. What technologies is the college currently using to communicate with and disseminate information to your students (mark all that apply)?

- College website Text message
 E-mail Instant messaging
 YouTube Podcast
 Facebook or other social network
 Other (please list) _____

g. Room Set-Up for Video

Room Set-Up for Video

Characteristics of a Suitable Focus Group Space:

Large space	The space must be large enough to accommodate the focus group, the video camera, lights, and video crew, with a separate small table for the note-taker.
Quiet	Noise cannot be heard through the walls from other rooms or the outside.
Equipped with controllable window light	If there are windows, they should have shades. Sun pouring in presents a problem.
Devoid of identifiers	The video from the focus groups should protect identities as much as possible.

Table Set-Up:

Approximately three classroom style tables in a U-shape is the best arrangement, allowing focus group participants to face the moderator and the camera and also to see each other. The long rectangular classroom tables, end to end, but somewhat wrapped into a semi-circle, make it easiest for the moderating team to reach the participants with a boom microphone from the front. Set-ups using a big conference table with everyone sitting around it obstructs audio and camera angles. The note-taker's table must be near an electrical outlet.

