



Students Speak- Are We Listening?

A Focus Group Toolkit

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Initiative on Student Success

Center for Community College Student Engagement

<http://www.ccsse.org/center/iss/focusgrouptoolkit.cfm>

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FOCUS GROUP TOOLKIT

COORDINATOR CHECKLIST

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Activity	Coordinator	Facilitator
Arrange times for focus groups	X	
Arrange for meeting room (<i>see Room Set-up sheet</i>)	X	
Identify note taker for focus groups	X or	X
Identify students for focus groups	X	
Contact students (<i>text, email and telephone</i>)	X	
Provide refreshments	X	
Provide digital audio tape recorder. If videotaping, work with AV department to arrange for adequate sound via table microphones or boom microphone	X	
Provide extra batteries for audio tape recorder	X	
Provide CD with audio files of focus group discussions for facilitator use; if videotaping, copy of audio files from video system can be copied onto CD for facilitator (or copy of video)	X	
Make reminder phone call/text to students	X	
Provide incentives for student participation (<i>stipend, gift card, etc.</i>)	X	
Provide laptop for note taker	X or	X
Name tents for participants (<i>with several markers</i>)	X	
Pens for students	X	
Two legal pads for note taker & facilitator	X	
Provide consent/human subjects forms for students. If videotaping, provide a copy of signed consent form to each student. (If the college requires approval of focus group research by Human Subjects Committee, any required language should be part of the consent form students are asked to sign.)	X	
Student Profile Sheet and Response Sheets – copies for focus group participants to be provided by coordinator upon request		X
Facilitator's Discussion Guide		X
Note taker's template		X

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General overview of the facilitator role:

- **The facilitator's role** is to guide a discussion around specific, predetermined subjects, in an objective, respectful manner.
- **The facilitator's greatest challenge** is to be seen by participants as an objective and effective conversation leader.
- Though the focus group discussion should be recorded to ensure an accurate record of the conversation, and the facilitator will be accompanied by a note taker, the *facilitator will also be taking notes* during the discussion, noting participants' comments and keeping track of the results of "show of hands" votes taken on specific questions.

The facilitator should be:

- A skilled, objective listener.
- Comfortable and familiar with group process.
- Able to create and maintain the group's enthusiasm and interest.
- Informed about the college's objectives and desired outcomes from the focus groups.
- Familiar with how to draw information from people to meet focus group objectives and expected outcomes.
- Able to listen without showing reaction to statements made by participants.

General guidelines for effective focus group facilitation:

- ***Ideally, a facilitator should be an objective person from outside the college or, at the very least, someone who is not known to the participants.*** If two colleges are reasonably close together, it's sometimes helpful to trade facilitators, so each facilitator is not working with students or staff members from their own college.
- Even if the facilitator is familiar with information at the college or recognizes that focus group participants are making inaccurate statements about the college, **the facilitator cannot react to those inaccuracies during the focus group, nor respond to the inaccuracies.** (Accurate information can be *volunteered* by the facilitator after the conversation ends, if the facilitator feels it is in the best interest of the participants—not the college!—to do so.)
- The facilitator should be able to avoid becoming defensive if a participant criticizes the college. It's actually best if the facilitator is not overly knowledgeable about the issues being discussed. Then the facilitator can truthfully tell participants that s/he doesn't know the answer to questions participants have or have information about an issue they are discussing.

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- The facilitator should **never** be someone who is a senior administrator or someone who is viewed by students or staff as being in a position of power in the organization.
 - Regardless of an individual's prior experience as a group facilitator, the individual asked to facilitate focus groups should receive training in how to be an effective *focus group* facilitator. Facilitating focus groups requires an approach that is different from that of simply guiding the conversations.

Criteria for selecting a note taker:

- A skilled, objective listener
- Can write or type FAST (Note takers will either type notes on their laptops/tablets or write notes by hand, whichever they prefer.)
- Can pull main points from what they hear (They are not writing a transcript.)
- Can identify good quotes and jot them down quickly, then check the recording later for accuracy

The note taker will also insure that participants fill out all forms and response sheets and will compile all the data from those sheets for the final report.

Following the focus group, the note taker will write up the notes into a report, work with the facilitator to check the accuracy of the report, and finalize it for submission to the college. The note taker will have the benefit of an audio taped record to check accuracy of quotes and listen again to any sections of the conversation that s/he has questions about.

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Goal: To gain as accurate a picture as possible of student experiences at the college.

Through the focus group discussions you will discover information that will help you identify steps you can take to improve programs and services. You will also uncover information that will merit further investigation. You want to hear from a broad cross-section of students, some of whom have had positive experiences and some of whom have had negative experiences at the college. Most students will have had both. **You want the good, the bad, and the ugly!**

1. **Avoid recruiting participants from one or two classes or programs.** Do not ask just one or two instructors or programs (*such as advising or the nursing program*) to supply student names. Including too many students from one area of the college will limit the discussion and skew the results of your groups.
2. **Identify a mix of students who will reflect your college demographics.** To learn whether student experiences at the college differ depending on students' age or ethnicity, time and format of classes taken (day vs. evening vs. online), it is best to hold a separate focus group for each major category you want to learn about or to include students who have varied experiences in the same focus group. (*Sometimes you will hear concerns expressed about perceived discrimination based on age or ethnicity. If you hear this, you should consider following up with a couple of focus groups that include students of a particular age or ethnic group. Often students will be more forthcoming on these kinds of issues when they are in a group of "like" students.*)
3. **Look for students with varying levels of involvement with the college.** You are not looking for students who will all be enthusiastic about the college or who are all student leaders. You are looking for a representative group. Generally, most community college students are coming to the college just to attend classes and use whatever services they need. While you might include a student leader or two, you want to hear from those whose connection to the college best reflects the bulk of the student population. If most of your students attend part-time and only come to campus to attend class, this type of student should make up the majority of the focus group.
4. **Include students who *need* various support services, whether or not they are using the services.** You want to hear from those who *need* support services, such as financial aid, tutoring, academic advising, childcare, counseling, other services you offer (or are willing to consider offering). This should include those who have used some of those services and those who haven't. You want to learn about the experiences of those who use the services you offer, as well as the reasons why others don't use available services.

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5. **If there is a particular program or service you want more in-depth information about, hold a separate focus group for those involved in that program.** For example, if you are concerned about the success rate of students in developmental classes, hold a separate focus group for students who are currently enrolled in or have completed those classes. *(Another example: If you are concerned about retention, hold a focus group with students who have left the college and are not currently enrolled. It is more difficult to recruit these students, but their perspective is critical.)*
 6. **The ideal size for each focus group is from 7 to 10 students.** This insures a sufficient number for a good discussion, but not so many that it is difficult for the facilitator to involve everyone.
 7. **Provide a stipend or gift card for participants.** Determine the amount based on what you think will be a sufficient incentive for your students. In many places, \$25 or \$30 is adequate. However, if you are holding a focus group of non-enrolled students, you should consider a larger stipend of \$40 or \$50 to encourage them to come to the campus. *(For students who are already on campus, you might also consider a gift card to the college bookstore, Starbucks, or other popular locations in lieu of cash.)*
 8. **Be flexible in determining focus group locations.** If you hold classes at various locations, hold focus groups in places that will be as convenient as possible for attendees. *(Colleges with several campuses will benefit from holding focus groups on each of those campuses. You will find that the experiences differ for students depending upon the campus where they attend classes.)*
 9. **Provide childcare if needed.** If you are hoping to hear about the needs and experiences of parents with young children who attend classes at your college, offer childcare and invite participants to bring their children with them if necessary.

Tips for Encouraging People to Attend the Focus Groups:

1. Establish meeting times for the focus groups that don't conflict with existing community or college events or activities.
2. Contact potential participants via phone and e-mail approximately 10 –14 days before the meeting. *(If possible, send an invitation directly from your college president. This will emphasize the importance of participation and encourage invitees to participate.)*
3. **Send a text message** (we find this to be the best way to reach students!), call, and e-mail each person the day before the focus group, reminding her/him of the session, providing directions to the location, and confirming attendance. It's also a good idea to send another message *the day of the focus group.* *(Always be prepared to collar students in the halls at the last minute if some participants don't show up!)*

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Facilitator Do's

- Follow the discussion outline and activities, as designed, in a consistent manner from group to group; use the same key questions in each session.
- Use a neutral yet comfortable and inviting tone of voice and facial expressions.
- Ask questions to clarify participants' points and increase understanding of each point made by participants.
- Ensure that each participant contributes throughout the conversation.
- Give people time to think by using pauses whenever needed. Be comfortable with silences.
- Be respectful of all points of view and instruct those in the group to do the same. *(Reminder: this is neither a debate nor an attempt to reach consensus on any issue.)*
- Use plain language! Avoid the jargon used by the college within the "inner circle."
- Keep the discussion moving to stay within the specified timeframe.
- **End the focus group discussion on time!**

Facilitator Don'ts

- Don't try to guide the participants to your own conclusions.
- Don't share your own opinions or experiences.
- Don't dominate the conversation.
- Don't criticize or ridicule anyone's comments or allow anyone in the group to do so.
- Don't challenge the accuracy of participants' knowledge or views.
- Don't translate jargon or slang terms. *(If someone asks what a term means, ask the individual using the term to explain what he or she means.)*
- Don't interpret participants' comments for the group.
- Don't give answers to participants' questions.

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[Name of College]

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/GED Bachelor's Degree
 Associate Degree Master's/Doctoral/Professional 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. How many TOTAL credit hours are you enrolled in this term?
 3 hours or fewer 7-14 hours
 4-6 hours 15 or more hours
9. What is your enrollment status?
 Full-time Part-time
10. While in high school, which courses did you take? (Check all that apply.)
 College classes Advanced Placement (AP) classes
 College Prep classes Honors classes
11. Are you eligible for financial assistance?
 Yes No Don't know
12. 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

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 childcare center at this college.
 I currently have childcare arrangements for my children outside of this college.
 Finding childcare is a major issue for me.
 My children do not require childcare.
17. What is your racial identification? (Mark only one.)
 American Indian or Native American White, Non-Hispanic
 Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander Hispanic, Latino, Spanish
 Native Hawaiian Other (Please specify) _____
 Black or African-American, Non-Hispanic
18. Are you an international or foreign national student?
 Yes No

Please complete the following questions about your use of technology:

19. What technologies are you currently using? (Check all that apply.)
 Text Message E-mail
 iPad/Tablet Computer/Laptop
 Video games Cell phone
 Blog Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.
 Instant Message (IM) iPod
 YouTube Other (Please specify) _____
20. What is your **most likely** or **preferred way** to stay in contact with others? (Check all that apply.)
 Text Message Instant Message (IM)
 Cell phone Face-to-face (in person)
 E-mail Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.
 Blog Other (Please specify) _____
21. What is your preferred source for getting information about something you're interested in or need to learn about?
 Internet Ask someone you know
 Library Other (Please specify) _____
 Newspapers
22. How much time during the week do you spend on the following?
 Listening to music on your iPod: _____ hrs/week
 What do you listen to other than music on your iPod? _____
 Surfing the Internet: _____ hrs/week
 What are your favorite websites? _____
 Playing video games: _____ hrs/week
 E-mailing: _____ hrs/week
 Texting: _____ hrs/week
 Blogging: _____ hrs/week
23. Which of the following do you use? (Check all that apply.)
 Desktop computer
 Laptop computer
 Handheld mobile device (iPad, iPhone, Android, Blackberry, etc.)

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[Name of College]

1. I registered for classes:
 - More than one week before classes began
 - During the week before classes began

2. My placement test scores indicated that I needed the following courses: (Check all that apply.)
 - Developmental/Remedial/College prep Reading
 - Developmental/Remedial/College prep Writing
 - Developmental/Remedial/College prep Math
 - None of the above
 - I did not take placement tests

3. I enrolled in the following course(s) during my first academic term at this college: (Check all that apply.)
 - Developmental/Remedial/College prep Reading
 - Developmental/Remedial/College prep Writing
 - Developmental/Remedial/College prep Math
 - None of the above

4. I participated in the following orientation: (Check all that apply.)
 - Online orientation prior to the beginning of classes
 - On-campus orientation prior to the beginning of classes
 - I enrolled in an orientation program or course as part of my course schedule.
 - I am not aware of a college orientation program or course.
 - I was unable to participate in orientation due to scheduling conflicts or other issues.
 - I have been told that I am not required to participate in orientation.

5. I have experienced the following since enrolling in the college: (Check all that apply.)

- An academic advisor helped me to set academic goals and to create a plan for achieving them.
- An academic advisor helped me select a course of study/program or major.
- An academic advisor helped me choose my classes.
- A financial aid staff member helped me analyze my financial aid needs related to college attendance.
- I am participating in a First Year Experience program.
- I am enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) course.
- I am enrolled in a College Success Class to help me strengthen skills needed to succeed in college.
- I am enrolled in an organized learning community (linked courses for a group of students).
- I have received information about academic resources and services available to me at this college.
- I have received information about college clubs and other activities.

6. During the coming school year, how difficult do you expect the following to be?
(1=Not at all difficult, 5=Very difficult)

Learning course materials:

- 1 2 3 4 5

Managing your time:

- 1 2 3 4 5

Paying college expenses:

- 1 2 3 4 5

Getting help with school work:

- 1 2 3 4 5

Making new friends:

- 1 2 3 4 5

Interacting with instructors:

- 1 2 3 4 5

7. During the coming school year, my college expenses (tuition, fees, books, etc.) will be paid by:
(Check all that apply)

My own income or savings:

- Major source Minor source Not a source

Parent or spouse/significant other's income/savings

- Major source Minor source Not a source

Employer contributions

- Major source Minor source Not a source

Grants and scholarships

- Major source Minor source Not a source

Student loans (bank, etc.)

- Major source Minor source Not a source

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EXAMPLE: Focus Group Discussion Questions for Enrolled Community College Students

Outcomes for the Focus Group Discussion:

1. *To learn more about students' educational goals when they begin college (related to degree or certificate completion or transfer to a four-year institution) and how they arrived at those goals*
2. *To better understand students' earliest college experiences compared with their expectations*
3. *To better understand the impact of students' high school academic experiences on their transition to college and students' perspectives on what steps high schools can take to help students to better prepare for college*
4. *To understand students' experience with and perception of the impact of various community college academic practices on their success – specifically in developmental and gateway classes*
5. *To understand how students' earliest experiences with the college – inside and outside of the classroom – either motivate or discourage, help or hinder them in their efforts to succeed in college*
6. *To understand what factors might remove or ease potential barriers to early student success*

Outcome 1: To learn more about students' educational goals when they begin college (related to degree or certificate completion or transfer to a four-year institution) and how they arrived at those goals

Questions will cover:

- Students' processes for establishing educational/career goals
- Students' level of commitment to achieving those goals and perceived challenges facing students in achieving those goals
- Students' experience with college academic and career advising
- Impact of work, caring for dependents and other outside commitments
- Impact of cost of college

Outcomes 2 and 3: To better understand students' earliest college experiences compared with their expectations; to better understand the impact of students' high school academic experiences on their transition to college and students' perspectives on what steps high schools can take to help students to better prepare for college

Questions will cover:

- What students expected when they first came to college and where those expectations came from
- Students' perceived level of academic preparedness and their perceived ability to master course material

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- How college classroom experiences compared to high school classroom experiences
 - Whether college courses are easier or harder than students expected them to be (students' perceptions regarding level of academic rigor)

Outcome 4: To understand students' experience with and perception of the impact of various community college academic practices on their success – specifically in developmental and gateway classes

Questions will cover:

- Students' perceptions about placement testing and enrollment in developmental and gateway courses
- Students' experiences in developmental and gateway courses
- Student engagement with faculty and other students inside and outside of the classroom
- Depth and frequency of instructor feedback regarding students' academic performance
- Students' use of academic support services

Outcome 5: To understand how students' earliest experiences with the college – inside and outside of the classroom – either motivate or discourage, help or hinder them in their efforts to succeed in college

Questions will cover:

- Students' experiences with academic advising, financial aid advising, orientation, and student success classes
- Instructor expectations and teaching practices in developmental and gateway classes
- Students' connections with faculty, staff, and other students
- Experiences that students believe either helped or hindered them when they registered for classes and during the first few weeks of class
- What "mistakes" students believe they made when they started college and what they wish they had done differently during the first few weeks of college
- What students wish they had done differently in high school
- Advice students would offer to a new student

Outcome 6: To understand what factors might remove or ease potential barriers to early student success

Questions will cover:

- What students can do to help themselves be more successful in college
- What students believe college leaders can do – both inside and outside of the classroom – that would help more students succeed

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EXAMPLE: Community College Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

Focus Group Outline and Timeline

- Meeting Overview
- Sign consent/human subjects' forms
- Participant Introductions
- Complete the Participant Profile and First Experiences response sheet
- Discussion
- Summary
- Thanks and give stipends/gift cards

Approximate Total Time: 75-90 minutes

Outcomes for the Focus Group Discussion:

- *To better understand what students expect from higher education and how their earliest experiences compare with their expectations*
- *To understand what potential barriers to student success might lead to new students dropping out during the first college term*
- *To understand students' earliest experiences with the college and how those either motivate or discourage them in their efforts to succeed in college*
- *To understand what factors might remove or ease potential barriers to early student success.*
- *To understand how new students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs.*

The Focus Group Discussion:

A. Introduction

1. Introduce facilitator
2. Explain purpose of focus group
3. Explain desired outcomes and how information gathered will be used
4. Explain and sign consent/human subjects' forms
5. Introduce participants, course of study (if determined), academic goal, ensure that all participants are in their **FIRST ACADEMIC TERM AT THIS COLLEGE**
6. Describe facilitator role:
 - To ask questions and keep the group on track
 - Explain that we'll be moving through the material fairly quickly, even though people might have more to say about a topic
7. Describe participants' role:
 - Share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
 - No right or wrong answers
 - Everyone to participate in discussion and fill out response forms as requested
 - Describe "design the college entering student process" component

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8. Logistics:
 - 90 minutes maximum
 - Arrangements for water and restroom break
 - Other?
 9. 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 your experiences at this college. What we learn will help not only this college, but other colleges as well to improve their work with students
 10. Audio taping/videotaping/note taking
 - For the purposes of gathering information to complement SENSE survey administration and Initiative on Student Success; writing a report to disseminate nationally and share with college leaders; writing a report to the college; gathering video clips for presentations at conferences and workshops and to appear on the CCCSE website
 - No names will be used in the report or in the video
 - Thanks from CCCSE and college for taking time to share your insights
 11. Questions?

Background of, and general information about, participants

1. **Fill out Student Profile Sheet.** Discuss specific elements if desired to better understand characteristics of participants.
2. Introduce participants, including: a) name, b) academic goals, and c) other colleges attended, if any. Ensure that all participants are over 18 and that all are in their first academic term at this college.

B. Outcome 1: To understand what students expect from higher education

1. Why did you decide to go to college? Did anyone *urge* you to go to college? Parents? Friends? High school teachers or counselors? Anyone else?
2. Did anyone *discourage* you from considering college? If so, who was that person? What reason(s) did they give?
3. Before you decided to come to this college, how did you get information about colleges? In high school? In your job? From family? From friends? Other?
4. Why did you choose this college? Location? Cost? Academic reputation? A particular program? A family member or friend went to this college? Other?
5. At this time, do you feel supported in your decision to go to college? From family members? Friends? Others?
6. Before you came to this college, what did you expect college to be like? Where did those expectations come from? High school counselors or teachers? Employer? Friends? Family? Information you read? Other?
7. Think back to the first time you came to this campus (could be today!). You're sitting in the parking lot or getting off the bus or subway, preparing to walk into the building to register for your classes. What's going through your mind? What are you worried about? What are you excited about?
8. Based on your first impressions of this college, think to yourself and complete the sentence: ***"This college is like a _____."*** (Give them silent time here.) Tell us about your response.

C. Outcome 2: To understand students' earliest experiences with the college

1. Admissions Process
2. Advising and Planning
3. Financial Aid
4. Academic Experiences
5. Support Services and Other College Services

D. Outcome 3: To understand what factors students believe would help them start right in college — Advice to the college