

Resource: Planning and Conducting Transfer Student Focus Groups

When the goal at hand is to improve outcomes for transfer students, it is important to start by talking with transfer students themselves.¹ As your team plans for your transfer workshop, student focus groups can help provide your planning team with valuable qualitative data, which contains rich detail and clues that are not captured by quantitative data.

Findings from the focus group can help institutional leaders identify the ways in which students' experiences do not map to the intended design of a particular program or intervention. When conducted in advance of a state-wide workshop on transfer, these focus groups can serve as a valuable opportunity to identify areas where there is the greatest need for improvement then incorporate these lessons into the workshop goals and content.

What follows is a resource to help you plan for your transfer student focus groups. We highlight important guidelines to keep in mind before, during, and after a focus group. In addition, we include a sample protocol geared to a conversation about transfer, as well as guiding questions for a facilitator debrief. We encourage you to adapt these protocols to fit your needs. For more on how to develop good focus group questions, please see Krueger's 2005 "Developing questions for focus groups."²

Guidelines for Before, During, and After a Focus groups

Before a focus group:

- Be clear about your goals for the focus group, and develop questions for your protocol accordingly. Likewise, it is important to proactively think about creating a respectful environment when discussing sensitive issues. When developing questions, attempt to minimize the possibility that students might feel stigmatized or uncomfortable during the conversation.
- Recruit a diverse group of participants. Make sure to include as many students who have struggled or failed as who have succeeded. Don't rely on "easy access" students (e.g., student government leaders), and hold focus groups at times when many different students can attend. Always recruit with the expectation that 80% or less of confirmed participants will show up.
- Choose a facilitator who is neutral, credible, and unfamiliar to the students.
- Provide context that helps students feel comfortable sharing their experiences candidly. Be clear about anonymity but also keep opening instructions fairly short and neutral, to avoid creating bias in students.
- Choose a space in which all participants can see and hear each other, and have comfortable conversation.
- Use a digital recorder rather than (or in addition to) a scribe to ensure that there's no bias in the information captured.
- Let the conversation flow, and allow students to ask questions.

¹ This resource has been adapted directly from the 2012 "Student Focus Group Resource Guide" by Public Agenda and West Ed. <http://www.completionbydesign.org/knowledge-center/resource/student-focus-group-resource-guide>

² Krueger, R. A. (2005). *Developing questions for focus groups*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

- Encourage students to provide specific details and examples to support their answers.

During a focus group:

- Avoid all jargon and technical language, and make sure the questions are not leading or loaded.
- Provide incentives for participation, for example food & refreshments and thank students for participating.
- Set norms for the conversation. Students should be told that their comments are anonymous and their names will not be used in any materials developed from the focus group information.
- Understand that students often blame themselves or their peers for failure, even if the challenge they face could have been resolved by actors within or outside the community college. If a student names failure of personal responsibility as the sole reason for a challenge, acknowledge student responsibility and then redirect the conversation by asking what the institution, an advisor, or a faculty member might have done differently.
- Provide context to why you are here today, but keep it brief.
- Create space for questions from students, let the conversation flow.
- Quantify responses when possible. For example, if a student said, "I chose my certificate/degree program because one of my instructors told me I'd do well in that area," the facilitator could say, "From a show of hands, how many others have had a similar experience? Did some people have other reasons for choosing a certificate or degree program?" The facilitator can then state, "Oh, I see that ten people shared that experience" in order to document that number in the transcript/recording.
- Ask follow-up questions and probe for examples. Facilitators can use probes such as: "Can you say more about that?" or "Does anyone have an example of something like that?"
- Capture the information carefully. Record the conversation and have a note taker.

After a focus group:

- Thank students for joining, provide any promised incentives.
- We recommend that facilitators de-brief (either with a team member or on her/his own) immediately after the focus group to capture initial impressions. Additional details on questions to consider during this debrief are included below.
- Transcribe and consolidate notes.
- Analyze the findings of the focus group with your institutional team. Outside of your institutional team, who else might benefit from reviewing the findings? How might your colleagues at partner colleges benefit from reviewing the findings? Colleagues at the state?

Planning Checklist

- Establish focus group goals and create a discussion protocol based on these goals
- Recruit 10-15 transfer students (assume no more than 80% of those confirmed will attend)
- Secure space (round table or chairs; accessible)
- Assign 1-2 focus group facilitator(s)
- Assign one (1) note taker
- Secure recording device for the focus group
 - Have you tested your digital recorder before using it?
 - Is there sufficient space on the recorder to record the whole group?
 - Is the battery life full?

- Is the recorder placed to pick up all the voices (center of the table)?
- Are you in a location with minimal ambient noise?
- Do you have a back-up digital recorder you can use in case the primary one malfunctions?

Sample Transfer Student Focus Group Protocol

The below provides sample text for opening a focus group, as well as a suggested warm-up activity and transfer-specific questions. For a more comprehensive set of questions that could be incorporated into student focus groups, we encourage you to use the aforementioned Public Agenda and West Ed document as a guide.

Opener	<p>Thank you for agreeing to talk with us today. We want you to know that we think everything you have to say is important and we are here to learn from you. We are working on a project to include transfer student voices and experiences in discussions that college leaders, faculty, elected officials and others are having in [name of state] about how colleges can do a better job of helping students succeed. Our discussion should take about [duration of time]. We know you have a lot going on and we really appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts and experiences with us. There are no right or wrong answers—we are interested in knowing more about your perspectives and ideas.</p> <p>We are recording the conversation so that we can be absolutely certain that we are capturing all of your ideas, exactly as you present them. We won't quote you—we just want to make sure we're hearing you accurately.</p> <p>The information you give us today will be shared with people across the state to help improve colleges for transfer students. We will not use your name. We hope that you can feel comfortable to speak freely about your experiences and we ask that everyone be respectful of what everyone else has to say.</p> <p>We want to make sure we agree about the meaning of a few words that we want to use (Are there words you need to define, or are there issues that could be confusing to people that you need to discuss to make sure there is a common understanding? This could be a good time to define developmental education, student success courses, programs of study, etc., but also be sure to use accessible language throughout the development of the questions.)</p> <p>Do you have any questions or concerns before we start?</p>
Warm-Up	<p>Please go around, introduce yourselves, and just tell us a little bit about why you decided to go to college.</p> <p>(Note for Facilitators: This will give you a chance to hear people talk, unprompted, about why they're in school. You'll probably get a sense for those who are more and less goal-oriented. In addition, you will get a sense of whether some students are not part of your group of interest. If, for example, you want to talk with students who went directly from high school to college and someone mentions a different path,</p>

	<p>you know the information you hear from that person will be filtered through a different set of experiences.)</p>
<p>Transfer</p>	<p>As a transfer student, what have been some of the best and worst parts about being a transfer student at this school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To what extent are transfer students valued at your college? How do you know this? ● Where did you get information about your transfer options? ● In your view, what does this school do really well to support you as a transfer student? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What could do they better to help you be more successful as a transfer student? <p><u>Community college:</u> What are the biggest unknowns for you when you think about what it will be like to transfer to a four-year college?</p> <p><u>Four-year institution:</u> What do you wish you would have known about the transfer process back when you were at your previous school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How did you first learn about your potential transfer options? What influenced your decision on transfer schools? ● How did your major/field of interest influence this? <p>How do you know which courses to take? How confident were you that they would transfer?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who at the institution do you most commonly communicate with about the transfer process? ● How often do you visit an advisor to discuss issues related to transfer? ● Are there online or other resources you use to support your transfer and completion progress? <p>Did you or do you plan to earn an associate degree before you transfer? Why or why not?</p> <p><u>Community college:</u> Do you know whether your credits will transfer? If so, how many will? Did that surprise you?</p> <p><u>Four-year institution:</u> Did all of your credits transfer? Did that surprise you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If you could change something about how the school handles transfer issues, what would it be? ● What advice would you give to other transfer students?
<p>Closing</p>	<p>Ok, to close here, let's go around once and hear from everyone on a "final thoughts" question: If there was one (or two) thing that the college could be doing differently or better to help more students achieve their goals, what would that be? (If they seem intimidated by the question, you can recast it like this: "We've talked about a lot of different issues. Of all the things we've talked about, which are the things that seem</p>

	<p>most important when it comes to helping more students hang in there and finish their programs of study or degrees? What are the things that the college could change? What are the things that are in your control?”)</p> <p>Thank you very much for your time. I learned so much from this conversation and will pass on the information to people who can make changes to improve students' experiences. (If there is anything more tangible you could say about how this will affect change, add that here.)</p>
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Sample Facilitator De-Brief Protocol

Following the focus groups, the facilitator should have the opportunity to de-brief – ideally with someone who was not in the room. This de-brief should last no more than 20 minutes and should either be recorded and transcribed, or captured on the spot by another person taking notes. This is a way for you to get some quick information that you can use to inform your plans until the institutional team is able to more comprehensively analyze the focus group transcripts and notes.

Begin with the group itself and what it was like. If the facilitator knows the answers to these questions, it would be very helpful to know:

- Can you characterize this group– who was in it (students in developmental education, students who have been at the college for five years and have not earned a degree or certificate, etc.)?
- How were the students selected?
- How many were in the focus group?
- Do you know if any students were supposed to be there but didn't come? If so, do you know why they weren't there?

Now, reflect on the group dynamics.

- Was it the right group (what the team was looking for in terms of the type of student)?
- Was it gender balanced? Was it racially representative of the student body?
- Did the students know each other (or some subset know each other)? Did the facilitator know any of them personally?
- Were there any dominating voices? Was anyone silent?
- How were they recruited?
- How long did the conversation last? Too short, too long, just right?
- Was anything about the environment problematic (noise, bad seats, too cold/hot, bad timing for some reason, etc.)?
- Did anyone else join the group (such as an instructor or administrator from the college), or was it just the facilitator and students?

How did the conversation go?

- Did it feel like a good conversation? Why or why not?
- Was it hard to get them talking, to get them to open up?
- Was there anything surprising in the conversation?
- What were some of the most interesting themes or ideas that emerged in the conversation? (The person conducting the debrief should focus a majority of the time on this question and

ask light probing questions like, “Can you say more about that?” or “Why do you find that especially interesting?”)

- If you could talk to this same group of students again, what would you want to know more about?
- When the transcripts are ready, are there parts of the conversation that you will be most interested in revisiting?