Qualitative Data Collection Guide for Student Affairs Professionals

UNDERSTANDING QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data refers to non-numeric information that captures the complexity of human experiences. It allows us to dig into the reasons behind student behaviors and perceptions in ways that quantitative data alone cannot fully explain. Ideally, you would use both qualitative and quantitative data, such as surveys, demographic data, and/or institutional records, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what students are experiencing. These are the types of qualitative data you may encounter:

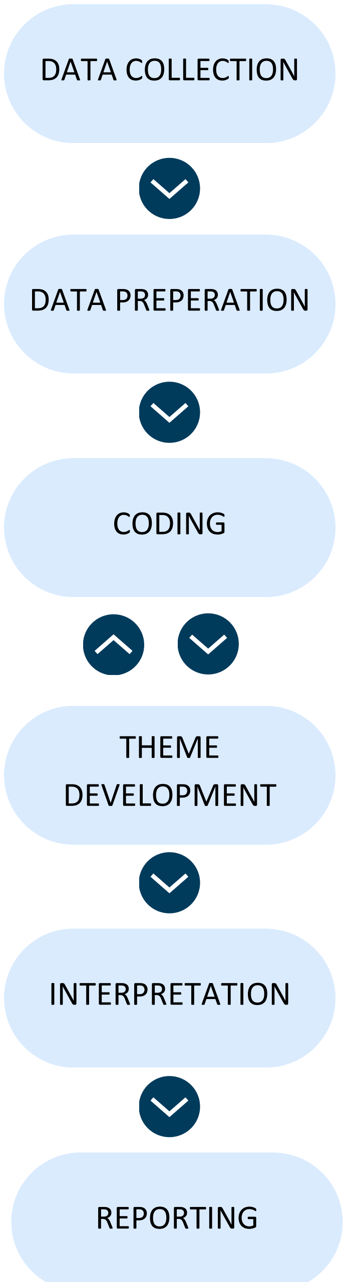
- **Open-Ended Questions on Surveys**
  Written answers to questions in surveys that allow students to express thoughts in their own words (see 'Tips for Writing Open-Ended Survey Questions' section below)

- **Observation**
  Notes that capture the ongoing behavior of a person, group, or phenomenon are often taken during events/programs and can have quantitative elements, like count and time

- **Interviews**
  One-on-one conversations with students, often used to explore individual perspectives on a topic. Generally used when covering more sensitive topics or collecting information from harder-to-reach populations. *Note: This method is less common within student affairs work because it requires many resources and longer-term planning*

- **Focus Groups**
  Group conversations where a facilitator helps guide the discussion. It gives insight into shared student experiences and different points of view on a topic(s) (see the 'Tips for Conducting Focus Groups' section below)

STEPS OF DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS



1. **Data collection:** Gather qualitative data (can be via interviews, focus groups, or open-ended survey questions)
2. **Data preparation:** Depending on the method selected, you would transcribe, organize the information, and clean the data, also looking for any identifying information (e.g., names of people, etc.)
3. **Coding**: Identify key ideas or patterns in data. Coding informs theme development. As more data is coded, related codes are grouped together to inform the basis of themes
4. **Theme development:** Group codes into broader themes that capture the essence of the data. As themes take shape, you should revisit the codes to ensure consistency/relevancy
5. **Interpretation:** Analyze themes in context to draw meaningful insights
6. **Reporting:** Share findings in a clear and actionable way

KEY TERMS IN QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

- **Coding:** Labeling chunks of data with concepts that represent them
- **Themes:** Patterns or overarching ideas that emerge from coded data
- **Reflexivity:** Being aware of one's own bias and how one's background, beliefs, and role may influence how one processes data. It is good practice to write down notes of any feelings that arise and step back when reviewing the data. In general, examining qualitative data can sometimes be emotionally taxing and may be tied to one's own feelings and experiences.
  - E.g., if you are analyzing feedback from first-gen students and you're a first-gen grad yourself, be mindful of how that shapes your interpretation.

COMMON METHODS OF ANALYSIS

- **Thematic Analysis:** Identifying and analyzing patterns (or themes) that arise in the data
- **Narrative Analysis:** Examining stories people tell to understand their experiences
- **Content Analysis:** Systematically categorizing textual information to identify the frequency of themes

TOOLS & SOFTWARE

- **Manual Coding** (using spreadsheets or printed transcripts)
- **Qualitative analysis software** (e.g., Dedoose): Qualitative analysis software typically incurs additional costs. While not necessary, it does make the coding process easier. However, it is very likely you will not need it for the types of assessments conducted within Student Affairs

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed Consent
Participants should be fully aware of the purpose of data collection and how information will be used. They also must know that they have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences

- Best practice: Use a jargon-free consent form that thoroughly explains the voluntary nature of the partition and clarifies how confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained.

Confidentiality
Keep participants' identities and responses private and safe

- Best practice: Remove identifying information from transcripts or reports, use pseudonyms or participant codes, and store data securely behind password-protected folders.

Minimize Harm
Avoid emotional, psychological, or reputational harm to participants

- Best practice: Be sensitive to vulnerable populations, avoid leading or intrusive questions, and provide resources or referrals if sensitive topics come up

If unsure, consult with the Student Affairs Information and Research Office at SAIRO@saonet.ucla.edu

Bias Mitigation
Keep reflexive notes of feelings that arise as you analyze the data

Positionality
Acknowledge your relationship to participants and the power dynamics that are involved

Ethical Reporting
Ensure that findings are presented in a way that respects participants and avoids any misinterpretations

- Best practice: Contextualize quotes and themes, avoid overgeneralizing, and be transparent about data limitations

TIPS FOR WRITING OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS

- **Use clear and plain language that students can easily understand**
- **Ask one question at a time (avoid double-barreled questions)**
  - Example of a double-barreled question: “What motivated you to get involved in student organizations or events?”
  - Why does this question not work? A student may have participated in one but not the other, which may cause some confusion
  - Tip: Split these questions into two distinct questions
- **Use neutral wording**
- **Encourage reflection**
  - Use prompts such as “Describe” or “Explain”
- **Limit the number of open-ended questions to two to four key questions**
- **Examples of open-ended questions:**
  - How would you describe your experiences living in campus housing?
  - What improvements would you suggest to [department] programs?

For more tips, see the Survey Best Practices tip sheet

Do you have additional questions about survey design?
Contact the Student Affairs Information and Research Office at sairo@saonet.ucla.edu.

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are structured, small group discussions focused on a topic, in which ideas can flow easily and allow for both verbal and nonverbal responses to be recorded. Focus groups tend to be conversational and are usually held in a comfortable, neutral, and/or familiar setting.

Using focus groups for assessment

- Qualitative data can help inform direct practices for a specific group of students
- Allows you to test any assumptions that are made during the analysis of quantitative data
- Allows you to test recommendations

Advantages

- Data can be rich and in-depth since a focus group setting allows participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words
- Group settings often reveal shared experiences. Participants often build on each other's responses
- Focus groups allow for immediate clarification because moderators can ask follow-up questions
- You can also observe non-verbal cues, such as body language, tone, and group dynamics
- Allow for diverse perspectives if the group is composed well

Limitations

- Limited generalizability that is not representative of the broader population
- There are often logistical challenges, like recruiting and scheduling a mix of participants
- Group settings can influence individual opinions and responses, and some individuals may dominate conversations
- Analyzing qualitative data from focus groups is often time-intensive

STEPS INVOLVED IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Plan Stage

Step 1: Define your purpose

- What do you want to learn?

Step 2: Identify your target group

- Choose participants who can provide relevant insights
- Ensure the group is diverse. Consider: diversity in year, major, demographic background, etc.

Step 3: Plan logistics

- Recommend group size: 6-10 participants
- Generally, lasts 1 hour to 1 hour and 30 minutes
- The location should be quiet, comfortable, and accessible. Focus groups can also be held virtually.
- Think about potential incentives to encourage participation

Step 4: Develop a discussion guide

- Begin with a warm-up question
- Develop 5 to 7 open-ended questions
- Ensure that the language is neutral
- When brainstorming questions, also include neutral follow-up prompts you can ask (e.g., “Why is that?”, “Can you tell me more?”, “Can you describe what that was like?”, “How do you feel about that?”, etc.)
- Include exit questions to check if anything was missed in the discussion

Step 5: Recruit participants

- Be clear about purpose, time commitment, confidentiality, and incentives
- Send a reminder out before the session

STEPS INVOLVED IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS CONT.

Conduct Stage

Step 6: Conduct focus groups

- The moderator's role is to stay neutral throughout the process, encourage all voices, and manage time
- Managing group dynamics
  - Set and maintain the tone, probe for further information by picking up on non-verbal cues and drawing out details, or follow up on unclear points, and get the group back on track if the conversation strays from the main topic being explored.
- There should also be a note-taker or recorder present
- Create a welcoming and respectful environment

Analyze Stage

Step 7: Analyze data

- Transcribe key points from the focus group session
- Look for any patterns, themes, and stand-out quotes that arise
- Group responses by question or topic

Step 8: Report and share findings

- Create a summary report with key insights and recommendations
- Share with stakeholders (including students) and use findings to inform decisions

Step 9: Follow up

- Thank participants and let them know how their feedback will be used
- Share the summary with them and open up the opportunity for them to provide feedback

FURTHER READING

These resources helped inform this guide and serve as starting points for those who would like to take a deeper dive into qualitative data collection and analysis.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. Qualitative Research, 15(2), 219–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Milner, H. R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. Educational Researcher, 36(7), 388–400. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07309471

Don't know where to start?

Contact the Student Affairs Information and Research Office at sairo@saonet.ucla.edu.