

# Conducting Focus Groups in Student Affairs

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# Steps Involved in Conducting a Focus Group

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1. Develop purpose/objectives of the study

2. Design question protocol & recruitment strategy

3. Obtain necessary approvals/permissions

4. Recruit participants & manage logistics (e.g. date/location)

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5. Prepare space

6. Complete participant arrival/welcome process

7. Conduct focus group using protocol

8. Complete wrap-up process

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9. Debrief with fellow researchers

10. Transcribe audio tapes and/or notes

11. Analyze transcripts into themes and patterns

12. Report findings with implications for practice

# Session Outcomes:

As a result of attending in this training, session participants will be able to:

- ✓ Explain what a focus group is, how it can be used for assessment, and what its advantages and limitations are as a methodological approach.
- ✓ Recognize the key steps involved in a study design involving focus groups.
- ✓ Understand logistics involved in facilitating a focus group.
- ✓ Utilize best practices for facilitating a focus group.

# What is a Focus Group?

A discussion among a small group where the facilitator supplies a specific (or focused) topic and encourages a free flow of ideas in a setting where verbal and non-verbal responses can be recorded.

- Qualitative
- Structured
- Conversational
- Non-judgmental
- Confidential
- Safe
- Private
- Comfortable
- Neutral and/or Familiar Space



# Using Focus Groups for Assessment

- **Qualitative information on its own** to inform direct practices for a small, specific group
- As a **pre-study**, ensuring more accurate questions and phrasing to collect the desired data
- As a **post-study** activity, gathering more information about unanswered questions
- **Test assumptions of data analysis** and results
- **Test recommendations**

# Advantages

- Members respond to one another resulting in potentially rich data
- Flexible and dynamic
- Relatively low cost as compared with technology driven methods
- Participants may feel more comfortable in a group setting with others who are sharing similar opinions

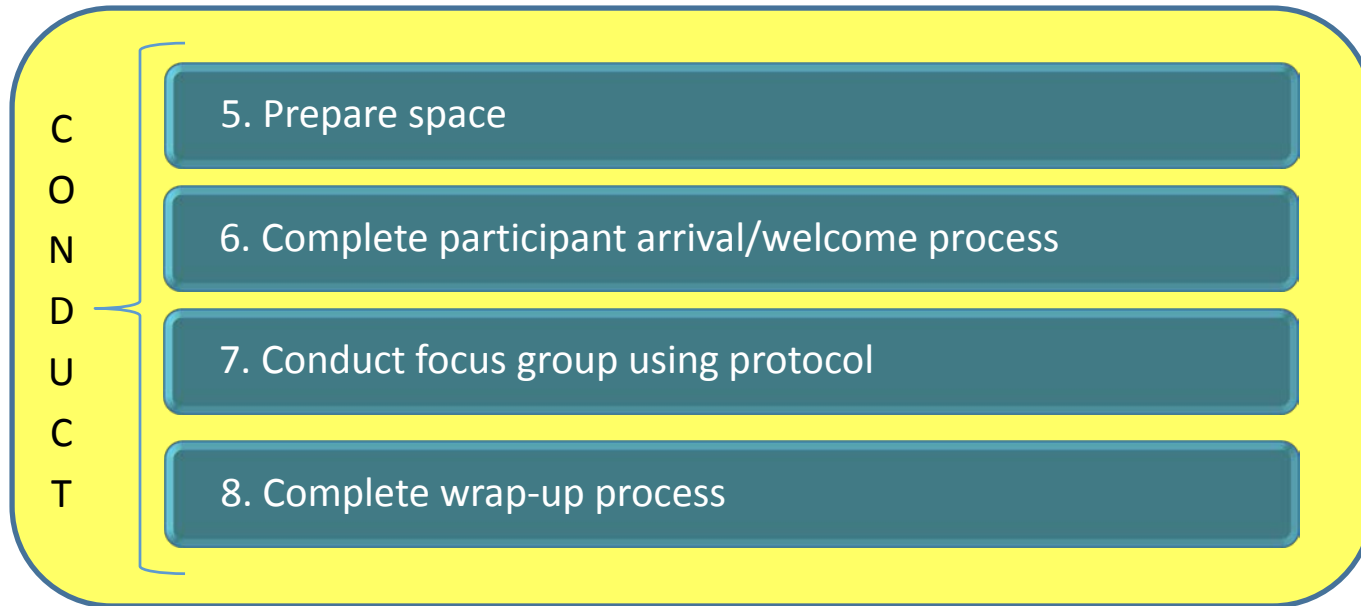


# Limitations

- Difficult to assemble
- Groups can influence individual opinions
- Strength of data drawn from focus group is largely dependent on the strength of the facilitator(s)
- Lack of control over discussion

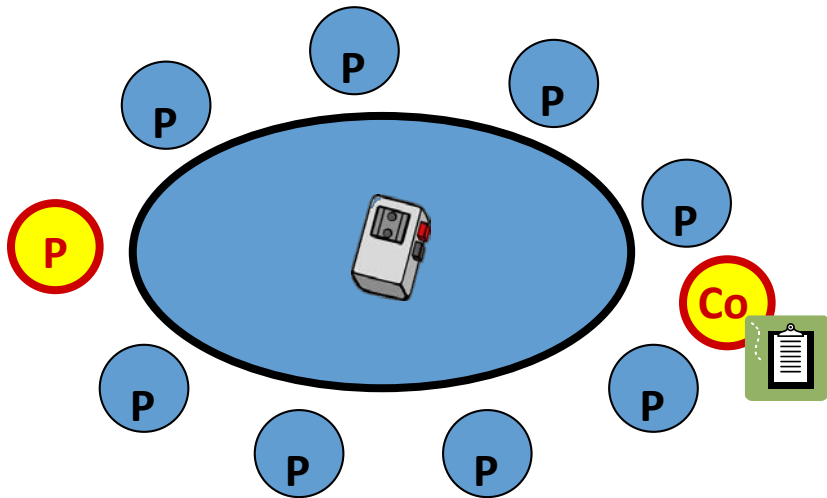


# Conducting a Focus Group





# Prepare Your Space



## What?

- Protocol
- Consent documents
- Note-taking materials
- Recording device
- Comfortable seating arrangement
- Refreshments

## Who?

- 6-10 participants
- Primary facilitator
- Co-facilitator

## Where?

- Quiet, private location
- Convenient for participants
- Available and accessible

# The Participant Arrival Process

As participants arrive...

- Greet guests
- Ask participants to complete a demographic questionnaire (as needed)
- Encourage conversation as it feels appropriate (unrelated to focus group content)
- Determine cut-off point for start time
  - Typical no-show rate is 20-50%



# Getting Into the Protocol

## Main sections

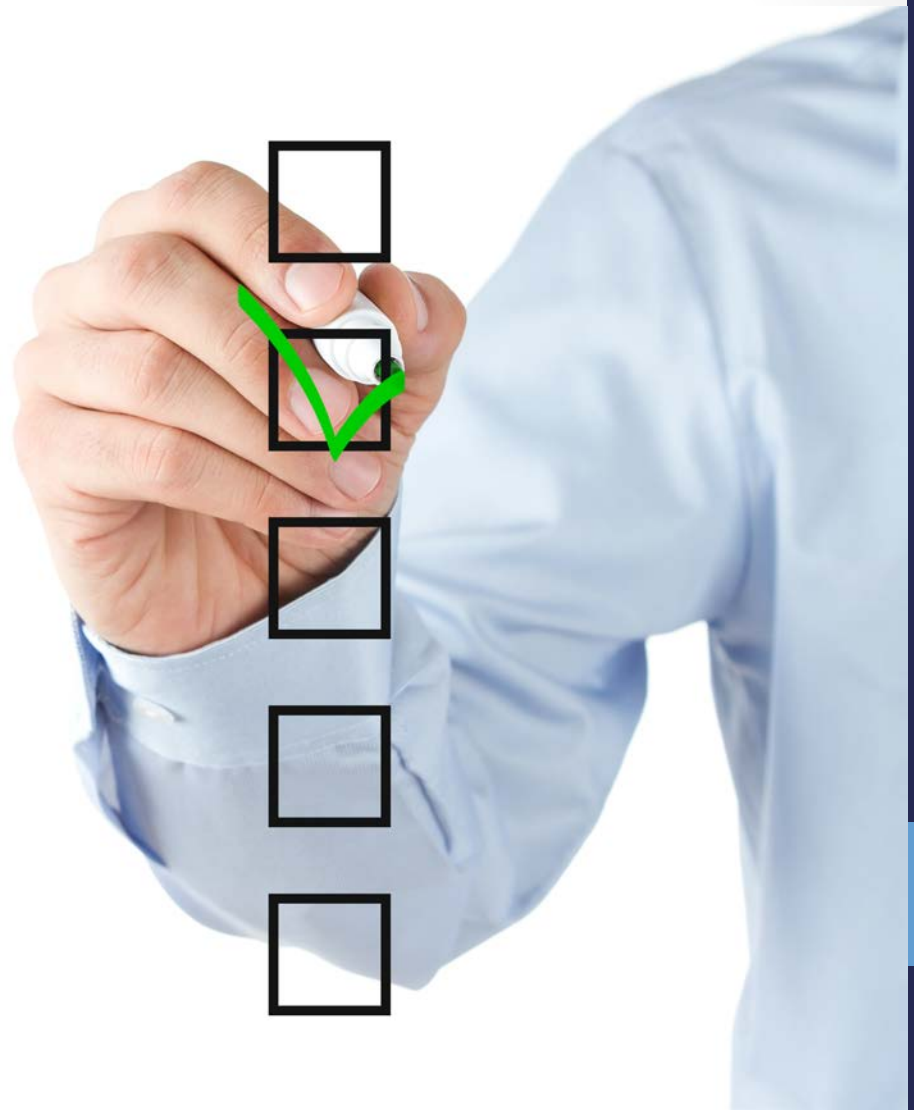
- I) Introduction
- II) Questions
- III) Wrap-up

## General characteristics

- Exhaustive of entire process
  - Verbatim script (for certain parts)
  - Basic instructions/checklists for required actions
  - Expected timing noted
- Easy to read
  - Alternate text aspects (e.g., color, font, bolding, italics)
- Prioritized
  - Know what content/questions MUST be covered in case of time constraints

# I) Introduction

- Facilitator introductions
- Purpose of the discussion
- Informed consent
  - Permission to record
  - Confidentiality
  - Purpose of study
- Ground rules
- Guidelines for speaking
- Questions?
- Introduction to recording



# II) Questions: Overview



- Limit to 2-3 main topics (60 minutes for 2 topics; 90 minutes for 3 topics)
- Three types of focus group questions:
  1. Engagement questions: introduce participants to and make them comfortable with the topic of discussion
  2. Exploration questions: get to the meat of the discussion
  3. Exit questions: check to see if anything was missed in the discussion

# II) Questions: Using Neutral Probes

Neutral probes allow us to gather more information without influencing what participants say.

- Why is that?
- Can you tell me more?
- Can you give an example of that?
- Please explain what you mean.
- Can you describe what that is/was like?
- How did that happen?
- How do you feel about that?
- **Sometimes silence is the best probe of all.**

## II) Questions: Managing Participants

- **Self-appointed experts:** “Thank you. What do other people think?”
- **The dominator:** “Let’s have some other comments.”
- **The rambler:** Stop eye contact; look at your watch; jump in at their inhale.
- **The shy participant:** Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.
- **The participant who talks very quietly:** Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.

# II) Questions: Managing Dynamics

- Set and maintain the tone
- Listening- active listening
- Time management
- Probe for further information
  - Pick up nonverbal clues and draw out information
  - Follow up with unclear statements
- Be prepared to bring get group back on track if they stray from the chosen topic



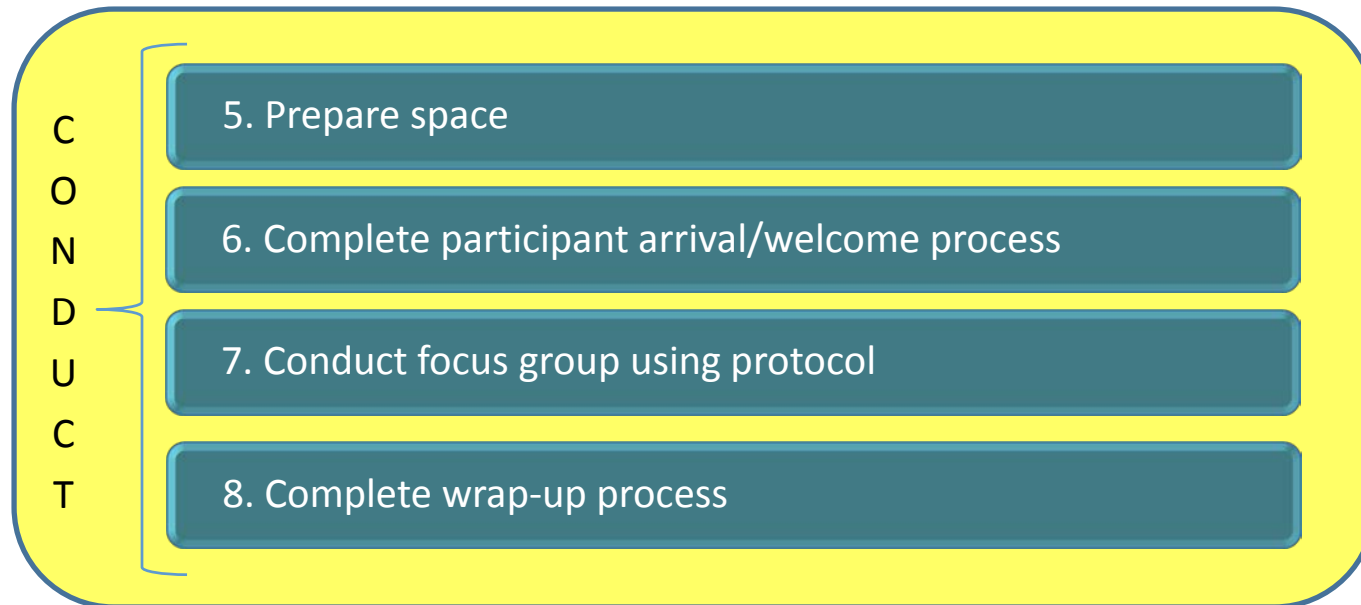
# III) Wrap-up

- Remind participants about confidentiality
  - What happened here, stays here.
- Provide contact information
  - Invite participants to follow-up via e-mail if they didn't get to say something
- Confer/debrief with co-facilitator
- Review notes
- Memo about any immediate feelings, themes, reactions you are able to identify



# Critique

Based on what we have covered...



...critique the following:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJBRpylC9-Q>

# Practice

- Using a mock protocol (handout), we will practice conducting focus groups to address the following mock study objectives:
  - To learn more about Student Affairs staff's thoughts and feelings about using focus groups for assessment.
  - To understand Student Affairs staff's perceived strengths and areas for improvement related to conducting focus groups, in order to improve SAIRO's programming to support such assessment efforts.



# Recap

## What did you accomplish today?

- ✓ Explain what a focus group is, how it can be used for assessment, and what its advantages and limitations are as a methodological approach.
- ✓ Recognize the key steps involved in a study design involving focus groups.
- ✓ Understand logistics involved in facilitating a focus group.
- ✓ Utilize best practices for facilitating a focus group.

## • What's can you expect next?

- An email from SAIRO containing:
  - Today's ppt. presentation
  - A guide to the complete focus group process (planning, conducting, analyzing)
- Ongoing support from SAIRO staff in the following ways...

# You Can Use SAIRO as a Resource to:

- ✓ Consult on your focus group idea
- ✓ Review your question protocol
- ✓ Provide templates for forms and documents
- ✓ Help to develop your recruitment strategy/timeline

- ✓ Assist in facilitating your focus group(s)
- ✓ Identify helpful technology and/or processes for recording your focus group

- ✓ Develop an analysis plan
- ✓ Suggest ways to transcribe audio tapes
- ✓ Identify themes in your data
- ✓ Format useful reports
- ✓ Articulate implications for practice

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