Using Focus Groups for Assessment

1. Key Points in Developing a Focus Group
   - Knowing your goal is crucial
     - Topic guide vs. Interview guide
     - Most of your projects will be driven by interview guides
     - Answer a specific question not necessarily exploring a general topic
   - Typical group size is six to ten
     - Enough to stimulate discussion without competing for time
     - The smaller the number the more in-depth understanding of the participants perspective
   - Consider randomly selecting participants to eliminate bias (if applicable)
     - Large group of a specific population
     - Nth place sampling easiest
   - Most focus groups use purposive sampling based on the goals of the group
   - Typical number of groups is three to five
     - Assumes groups are moderately complex and moderately diverse
     - Diminishing return from each additional group (Theoretical Saturation)
   - Meeting should take place in public location
   - Prepare for 1 to 2 hour focus groups
   - Ask usually between 5 and 7 questions

2. Guiding Principles for asking Focus Group Questions
   - Conversational
     - Wording of the questions should be direct, forthright, comfortable, and simple
     - Exp. What would it take for this program to get an A?
   - Be Clear
     - Short, one dimensional, jargon-free (ACRONYMS)
     - Exp. What way was the program useful and practical? (Multi-dimensional)
   - Seek Help
     - Test questions with people similar to your target audience
   - Create an Interview Guide
3. Categories of Questions

- Opening – Participants get acquainted and feel connected
- Introductory – Begins discussion topic
- Transition – Moves smoothly and seamlessly to key questions
- Key – Obtains insight on areas of central concern for the study
- Ending – Helps investigators determine where to place emphasis and bring closure to the discussion

4. Sequencing Questions

- Provide background information
- General questions before specifics
- Positive questions before negative questions
- Consistency is important
- Usually questions are not changed

5. Phrasing the Question

- Use open ended questions
  - What did you think of the program?
  - What do you like best about the proposed program?
- Ask Participants to think back
  - “Think back” establishes a context for the response
  - Its good to shift participants from the “here and now” occasionally
  - Think back to the last time you registered for a course at the university. How were you treated?
- Keep questions simple
  - What are the ingredients that are associated with a healthy lifestyle? Or Describe a healthy lifestyle
- Be cautious about giving examples
  - Gives clues to the type of response you want
  - Krueger (1998) “Mental Ruts”
  - Limits the thinking of the participants
- Probing question
  - Would you explain further?, Can you give me an example? I don’t understand.
  - Not everything is worthy of a probe
  - Probe early to set the stage
  - Probe sparingly and consider the usefulness of the information
- Follow-up questions
  - Question links to the proceeding question by logic or reason
  - Generally if/then relationships
Exp. What is the major problem in our community? (Then) What are the causes? (And) What should we do about it?

- Unplanned and serendipitous questions
  - Use with caution unplanned questions can change the course of the discussion
  - Best to save those questions for the end

6. Guiding Principles of Moderating

- Be a moderator not a participant
- Be ready to hear unpleasant views
- Use your unique skills
- Anticipate the flow
- Control your reactions
- Be comfortable with the pause
- Listen
- Probe as needed
- Ask Questions

7. Five Keys to Success

- To listen not talk
- To understand, not persuade
- To soak up, not to teach
- Ensure confidentiality
- Verify key points with participants at the end

8. Tips for selecting a Moderator and Note-Taker

- One staff member should moderate
- One staff member should take notes
- When possible, the moderator and note taker should not be directly affiliated with programs/services being assessed
- Ask for support from other offices

9. Tips for Collecting Data

- Take notes and tape record the session (when possible)
- It is not enough to summarize - high quality notes will give the reader a sense of hearing the conversation
- Try to capture as much of the participant language as possible
- Make note of non-verbal communication
- Tape recordings do not need to be transcribed but allow the note taker to check notes against the words of the participants and also capture important quotes to support analysis