Applying Focus Groups in Student Affairs Assessment

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The authors describe a focus group application in student affairs assessment and offer suggestions on how to conduct the groups and use their results.

Focus group methodology is a data collection technique traditionally used in market research to solicit in-depth, qualitative feedback. With the increasing demand for assessment in student affairs, it may provide a valuable complement to quantitative approaches such as surveys and evaluation forms. This article describes the use of focus groups in student life assessment at Charleston Southern University (a denominational institution of 2,400 students) and provides information and suggestions for those considering their use.

THE FOCUS GROUP

A focus group is probably most simply and concisely defined by Bers (1989):

> A small (6-12 member), relatively homogeneous group that meets with a trained moderator who facilitates a 90- to 120-minute discussion in a nonthreatening, relaxed environment about a selected topic. The goal of a focus group is to elicit participants' perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas. Focus groups do *not* generate quantitative data, information, or numbers that can be projected to a larger population. (p. 261)

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The topic of a focus group discussion might be a problem, a question, an issue, or the group itself.

While a focus group's aim is generally to obtain perceptions, feelings, attitudes, or ideas from participants, it may serve a variety of purposes. It may, for example, be used to generate ideas for the development of quantitative studies, or to supplement the findings of a quantitative study.

Although the focus group technique dates from the 1950s (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956), until recently its use has been limited largely to marketing (Lederman, 1990) and group therapy (Szybillo & Berger, 1979). Focus group applications for higher education administration began to appear in the professional literature only in the past few years. Bers and Smith (1988), for example, cited applications with nontraditional students in community colleges. Sevier (1989) outlined focus group use in market research related to college admissions. And Russell (1991) described the groups as a tool for assessing the extent of racist attitudes on a particular campus. The current emphasis on student affairs assessment presents a context in which a better understanding of the methodology may be valuable.

APPLYING FOCUS GROUPS TO STUDENT AFFAIRS ASSESSMENT

As regional accrediting organizations, state governing boards, and professional associations increasingly demand that colleges and universities prove their effectiveness, every institutional service becomes part of the accountability process. While student affairs has not historically received the same attention as academic areas concerning accountability, that situation appears to be changing in light of research showing the importance of cocurricular experiences in higher education (Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The Council for the Advancement of Standards (1986) has, for instance, prepared guidelines for acceptable practice in many student affairs areas.

Charleston Southern chose focus groups as a means of assessment to emphasize its interest in receiving students' perceptions of the University. In his classic study at Harvard, William Perry met with students once a year over a 4-year period to ask them questions about themselves and their university experiences. Perry ultimately asked the graduating seniors to identify the best feature of their Harvard education and they indicated the interviews he conducted (Wrenn, 1988). The dual benefit of producing a final product for the consumers (feedback to the university) and for the participants (an indication of the university's concern for student opinion) is consistent with the values inherent in student affairs practice.

Until recently, the only measures of effectiveness for student services at Charleston Southern were two surveys students completed upon entering and leaving the University. Both questionnaires were lacking: entering students had little basis for judging student services and exiting students' feedback tended to be general due to limitations in the survey format. The surveys produced an "average" student profile that did not offer substantive information. More quality and depth of information regarding student perceptions was needed than could be gathered through surveys.

Focus groups were therefore implemented using student groups that represented various campus subcultures. Using subcultures as the basis for the groups meant that each group might have some shared assumptions and values that would make its feedback more valid and specific to its members' experiences (Schein, 1985). Since a subculture is likely to have a relatively consistent perception, group members representing that subculture may stimulate responses and feedback more readily among themselves.

Student affairs department directors and student leaders at Charleston Southern were asked to identify primary subcultures on campus. Their responses were then compiled into a list reviewed by the Dean of Students and the Director of Institutional Research in order to eliminate overlapping subcultures. Six student subcultures were eventually identified: (a) campus ministries students, (b) minority students, (c) freshmen, (d) traditional-age commuters, (e) adult commuters, and (o uninvolved resident students.

Participants for each group were identified through various means, depending on the nature of the group. Campus ministries students, for example, were identified through a list provided by the campus ministries director. Freshmen, on the other hand, were selected both randomly and by identifying individuals felt to be representative (e.g., the class president). The goal was to involve 8-10 students in each group.

Each focus group was conducted in a video taping/viewing room in the library. The room provided several advantages: (a) it was a neutral location, (b) it was free of distractions and interruptions from outsiders, and (c) it was easily set up for videotaping. Videotape was judged the best medium for later review and possible sharing with other campus administrators.

The Dean of Students was appointed to lead the focus groups because of his counseling experience and his recognition among students. The Director of Institutional Research participated as an observer with occasional involvement in the discussion. The Dean used prepared questions as a guide for the points of discussion (e.g., The mission of Charleston Southern is "to promote academic excellence in a Christian environment." Do you see that being done? How would you assess the status of both parts of this mission?). Students were told they could be completely honest and that any comments would be held in confidence if requested. AU students were given the opportunity to comment on a topic before the group moved on to the next item for discussion.

CONDUCTING A SUCCESSFUL FOCUS GROUP

Once the nature of a focus group is identified, participants must be found. The actual selection need not conform to strict sampling techniques since the goal is not to generalize to a larger population. Attention and interest spans are limited, so a focus group should not last more than two hours and should be located in a setting relatively free from distractions, where the participants can feel at ease.

A record should be made of the focus group session. Basically, three options exist: (a) a person taking notes, (b) an audio recording, and (c) a video recording. While videotaping might be preferable, it can make people uncomfortable, plus sound quality is not always reliable. We used videotape and a conference microphone, supplemented by a person taking notes. Regardless of the method employed, participants must be informed of how the session is being recorded and how it will be used. It is best to have a written consent form signed by each participant. Be as unobtrusive as possible in recording the session and grant anonymity when requested for best results.

A successful group moderator will set the session's tone, encourage participation, probe people's feelings, attitudes, or behavior, and be a good listener. The moderator should guide participants through the discussion, being careful to summarize group consensus. Additionally, the moderator should not show any bias through approving or disapproving body language or comments. Typically, a counselor or similarly trained person on a college campus serves this role well.

Since the point of a focus group is to obtain perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas, the moderator should ask open-ended and discussion-provoking questions. They should be focused on what researchers are most interested in knowing and should be prepared prior to the group session so they are available to the moderator during it. The moderator should be careful, however, to allow time for full discussion and probing rather than insuring that all questions get asked.

While participants benefit from focus groups sessions by sharing their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and ideas, researchers should show consideration and appreciation for their time and effort. Reciprocity typically involves a cash payment or gift, but one can be creative in the offered inducement. Participants at Charleston Southern received free meal coupons.

USING RESULTS FOR ASSESSMENT

The results of focus group sessions can be used in both short- and long-term applications. In the short term, they can be useful for identifying problems needing immediate attention. If, for example, a student indicates that an emergency phone was not working then immediate action would be necessary. In the long term, results can be used in conjunction with other assessment efforts to make significant changes in the direction, scope, and level of programs. Long-term decisions based on focus groups require careful consideration of videotapes, recordings or transcripts for trends and patterns.

In an empirical study, a high level of rigor would be applied to the analytical process. Such a process might involve defining the discrete categories of responses and selecting a team of coders trained to review transcripts for responses they would classify or "encode" within one of the categories. The researcher in this study would want first to test the team of coders on a sample of data and calculate an inter-coder reliability coefficient to discern the level of concurrence between individual coders.

While such a process may yield highly accurate data, the time required for it may render the focus group data useless for application purposes. In studying the cultural dynamics of an individual campus, any data have a limited "shelf life" because the responses are artifacts of that culture and subject to change according to new events and conditions. It is often more useful for researchers to subjectively scan focus group tapes and transcripts, bypassing input on conditions not subject to control and concentrating on that which is readily addressable. Perhaps more importantly, researchers can look for those common elements within each group's responses that may be keys to understanding the underlying values or assumptions of the group.

At Charleston Southern, for example, a common element that emerged was the tendency of minority students to gather information by word-of-mouth rather than through formal communications media such as the campus newspaper or student government. The unanimity of minority focus group participants concerning the perceived isolation of predominantly minority student organizations began discussions that led to creation of an informal Inter-Club Council. While such an analysis process is by necessity somewhat intuitive, it can yield more timely, and consequently more useful, insights than a more rigorous process. Identifying how the analysis will be handled prior to conducting a focus group is an important precaution against the inherent bias of researchers in interpreting qualitative data.

PROBLEMS WITH FOCUS GROUPS

As with any research method, there are numerous ways focus groups can go awry. In general, the biggest problem is that they appear to be a quick and loose methodology. A properly conducted focus group, however, requires as much, if not more, careful attention to detail as quantitative studies. Researchers should be familiar with a few key problems though.

One problem is moderator effect. Even well trained and thoughtful moderators can sometimes inadvertently lead rather than facilitate a focus group by indicating empathy with a particular group member. Another problem is locating participants. In fact, the participants in whom researchers are most interested may often be the most difficult from whom to get participation. A third problem is the volume of data produced by focus group sessions. just a few can produce pages and pages of transcripts requiring many hours of analysis, hours added to the time already spent preparing for and conducting the groups. Thus, researchers need a strategy for dealing with the data prior to conducting the sessions.

CONCLUSION

Focus groups require commitment from the directors of a study. In addition to devoting time and resources to directing the groups, they must analyze and interpret the findings. But the benefits of doing so are worthwhile. Focus groups can overcome the limitations of quantitative designs, such as limited scope of response or profiles of "average" persons who do not really exist. They can also be used to help design or to supplement quantitative studies. Finally, focus groups can provide meaningful data to researchers, while conveying genuine interest in the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants.

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