Focus Groups from A to Z: How to Conduct Focus Groups to Enhance College Health Practice

Health Promotion Section
Research Committee

American College Health Association

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Introduction

By the end of the session, attendees will be able to effectively plan focus groups.

By the end of the session, attendees will be able to describe strategies to employ to effectively moderate focus groups.

By the end of the session, attendees will be able to analyze focus group transcriptions for qualitative themes.

By the end of the session, attendees will be able to use focus group data to inform practice-based decisions.

Objectives
1) Introduction to focus groups
2) Planning for focus groups
3) Developing a focus group script
4) Conducting focus groups
   - Activity
5) Analyzing focus groups
6) Applying focus group findings to practice
   - Activity
7) Resources
• What is your level of experience with focus groups?
  • Beginner
  • Intermediate
  • Advanced
• What are you most interested in learning about during this session?
  • Planning focus groups
  • Developing focus group scripts
  • Moderating focus group scripts
  • Analyzing focus group scripts
  • Using focus group data to inform practice-based decisions
  • Two or more of the above
• 36.6% of HP Section members identified conducting focus groups as an area in which additional information and skills training would benefit their health promotion practice (2012 Health Promotion Section Needs Assessment)

• 50.4% of participants stated that additional training in “applying research to health promotion practice” would benefit their work (2012 Health Promotion Section Needs Assessment)

• “Evidence-Informed Practice” (Standard 6) of the Standards of Practice for Health Promotion in Higher Education
Introduction

Carefully planned series of discussions

Participants usually selected on the basis of a shared set of attributes

Designed to obtain thoughts, feelings, opinions, insights, attitudes, misconceptions, and/or beliefs about a defined area of interest

Take place in an informal, permissive, nonthreatening environment

Each group conducted with a small # of people by a skilled moderator who uses a detailed protocol

Introduction

• Suggest or react to ideas
• Examine attitudes or opinions and why they are held
• Clarify potential options
• Recommend a course of action
• Evaluate
• Identify strengths and weaknesses of programs
• Provide information for designing surveys
• Clarify findings from implemented surveys

When to Conduct FGs?

Section 1:

Planning for Focus Groups
Section 1

Overview

- Research Purpose, Plan, & Approval
- Sampling Strategies
- Recruitment
- Determining number of people in each focus group & number of focus groups
- Logistics of planning
- Deciding on a moderator
Section 1

- **Research Purpose**
  - Goal/research question

- **Create your research plan**
  - Conceptualizing the research question, study, developing questions, and arranging logistics can take anywhere from 6-70 hours

- **Determine if IRB approval is necessary and submit application**
  - Approval requirements varies by institution

- **Upon approval, move onto next steps**

**Purpose, Plan, Approval**

- **Goal:** Improve the Condom Distribution Plan
- **Question:** What are the barriers to accessing condoms on campus?

**IRB Approval Not Needed:** Program evaluation and performance improvement (data not being published)
Purpose of study should guide who to invite:

- List (class, group)
- Time-location
- Snowball samples
- Piggyback
- Convenience

List: Students, RAs, Cultural and Resource Center staff, Student Health Cashiers
### Section 1

**Notification for Participation:**
- Personalize invitation
- Positive, upbeat invitation via in-person or online communication
- Provide convenient meeting times for the desired group
- Student Newspaper, social media

**Promote Incentives for Participation:**
- Money, Food, Gifts
- Opportunity to share opinions
- Contribution to an important research project
- Build on existing community & relationships

**Recruitment:** Emails to all parties invested in distribution

**Incentive:** Food provided
Section 1

Determining Size

• 5 to 10 people per group, 6-8 preferred

• Participants have certain characteristics in common related to the topic

Characteristics: Involvement in existing condom distribution program PLUS participants who didn’t know about the plan

• In determining the number of groups needed, continue conducting interviews until little new information is provided.
  – Often first two groups provide a considerable amount of new information
  – By the third or fourth session, a fair amount may have already been covered. If this occurs stop.
Section 1

Logistics

- Reserve space
- Determine if refreshments will be provided
- Create comfortable environment
- Provide circle seating
- Record group feedback
  - Audio
  - Video
  - Assistant Moderator
Section 1
Moderator

Characteristics:
• Skillful in facilitating group discussions
• Uses pre-determined questions
• Establishes permissive & comfortable environment
• Sufficient knowledge of topic
Section 2

- Generating Questions
- Types of Questions
- Strategies for Questions
- Creating the Script
- Following the Script
- Examples

Overview
Section 2

Generating Questions

• Make a list of open-ended questions
  – Conversational
  – One-dimensional

• Review your purpose statement and eliminate questions as needed

• Review your purpose statement again

• Think about logic and flow (general to specific)

• Pre-test questions with students

• Share with stakeholders
Section 2

1. Opening Questions (if time allows)
   - How long have you been a student at the University?

2. Introductory Questions
   - How did you first learn about the condom distribution program?

3. Transition Questions
   - Think back to when you first learned about condom distribution on campus, what were your first impressions?

4. Key Questions (majority of questions)
   - If you could, what would you change about condom distribution on campus?

5. Ending Questions (if time allows)
   - Is there anything we should talk about but haven’t?
AN EXAMPLE

Questions for a Focus Group on Dental Flossing

Engagement questions:
1. What is your favorite toothpaste?
2. What do you notice when you look at other people’s teeth?

Exploration Questions:
3. Who in particular has influenced your dental habits?
4. What are the pros and cons of flossing your teeth?
5. When you floss, how do follow through? When you don’t, why not?
6. How do you feel when told about possible damage caused by not flossing?
7. How do you feel about yourself when you floss regularly? When you don’t?

Exit question:
8. Is there anything else you would like to say about why you do or do not floss your teeth on a regular basis?

Note: Flossers and non-flossers in separate groups.
Section 2

- Choose among alternatives
  In addition to Student Health, condoms should be located in the Dorms, the Student Union, Restrooms, or somewhere else?

- Make a list
  What are the top three barriers to accessing condoms?

- Fill in the blank
  If condoms weren’t at Student Health, they would be at ______.

- Rate with blank card
  On a scale of 1-10, rate how strongly you feel condoms should be available at ______.
Section 2

- Draw a picture
- Develop a campaign
- Role playing
- Foster ownership

Strategies for Questions cont.

If condoms were available at Student Health AND Dorms, how would you promote that to students? What would you say?

Imagine you are getting condoms from your RA. Can you take us through that experience?

If you could create the condom distribution program from scratch, what would it look like?
Section 2

Creating the Script

1. Opening
   • Welcome the participants
   • Introduce the purpose
   • Explain what a focus group is and how it will work
   • Make introductions

2. Ask questions

3. Closing
   • Allow for open discussion
   • Explain how the data will be used
   • Discuss expected completion date
   • Thank the participants
Section 2

- Increases credibility of results
- Increases comprehensiveness of data
- Makes data collection more efficient
Section 3: Conducting Focus Groups

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Section 3

Overview

• Moderator Characteristics
• Moderator Skills
• Generating Probes
• Important Tips
Section 3

• Skillful in group discussions
• Uses pre-determined questions
• Establishes permissive environment
Section 3

- Select the right moderator
- Use an assistant moderator
- Be mentally prepared
- Use purposeful small talk
- Make a smooth & snappy introduction
Section 3

- Use pauses and probes
- Record the discussion
- Control reactions to participants
- Use subtle group control
- Use appropriate conclusion
Section 3

• Repeat the question
• Pause for the answer
• Repeat the reply
• Ask when, what, where, which and how questions (but NOT why)
• Use neutral comments
• Request explanation or follow-up
Section 3

Important Tips

• Must inform and remind students that participation is voluntary AND confidential
• Facilitator must ensure the experience is, and remains, respectful
• Facilitator must not misrepresent their role or intentions
• Participants should be given anonymous codes (e.g. numbers instead of names)
• Balance rapport and professionalism
• LISTEN
• Remain neutral
• Silence encourages elaboration
ACTIVITY: Mock Focus Group
Section 4: Analyzing Focus Groups
Section 4

Overview

• Analyzing Quantitative Data
• The Process
  – Preset v. Emergent Themes
• Quantifying Qualitative Data
Section 4
Qualitative Data

• There is no “best way”

• The process you choose depends on:
  – The question(s) you want to answer
  – Available resources
Section 4

The Process

**Step 1**
Process & Record Data
  – The role of transcription

**Step 2**
Get “to know” your data

**Step 3**
Data Reduction
Step 4

Identifying Meaningful Patterns

- Content Analysis
- Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis, naturally emerged:
  Distribution
  Education
  Barriers
Section 4

• Preset (Deductive) Coding
  – Categories selected a priori
  – Categories defined BEFORE analysis

• Emergent (Inductive) Coding
  – No a priori categories selected
  – Categories emerge from data
  – Categories defined AFTER (or as a result of) analysis
Step 5
Interpreting the data

Categories:

*Distribution*
- Products
- Accessibility, availability, and accountability

*Education*
- Communication channels
- Topics

*Barriers*
- Institutional
- Personal/Behavioral
Section 4

Quantifying Data

- Enumeration
  - Frequencies
  - Percentages
  - Cross tabulations
Section 5: Applying Focus Group Data to Practice

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ACTIVITY: Using focus group data to inform practice decisions
Ideal Program:
- Promotes independence and education
- Accessibility: locations and time of year
For More Information...

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Resource List & Contact Info
Research Committee

• To get involved in the ACHA Health Promotion Section Research Committee, contact:
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Questions & Discussion
Focus Group Resources

**Websites**


University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. (n.d.). *Using focus groups in program development and evaluation*. Available at: http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/focus.pdf.

**Books & Articles**


*Developed for:*