

On Advising

Advisor Focus Group Discussion Guide



On Advising: SAMPLE Advisor Focus Group Discussion Guide

What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from advisors regarding their experience with advising.

For supporting focus group materials such as recruitment tips, invitation e-mail templates, consent forms, profile sheets, and a comprehensive planning guide that outlines focus group staff roles and order of operations, visit <http://www.ccsse.org/focusgrouptoolkit>

Outcomes for the Advisors Focus Group Discussion:

- 1. To understand the nature of the advising process—from the college's earliest connection with students through the students' academic experience at the college.*
- 2. To better understand the role of advisors in a college that emphasizes intrusive advising and their perspectives on academic planning and advising.*
- 3. To understand advisors' perspectives on which key components of the advising process and specific practices within the advising process are most critical for student success—what works and what doesn't.*
- 4. To learn, from the perspective of advisors, whether this practice in and of itself is important for students to experience, or if certain features within this practice are most significant to student success.*

The Focus Group Session

A. Preparation

As participants enter, the coordinator should

- a. Ask participants to sign in
- b. Ask participants to sign consent form (if applicable)
- c. Ask participants to fill out profile sheet/response sheet
- d. Provide stipends (if applicable)

B. Overview of Focus Group Discussion

As focus discussion begins, the facilitator should

- a. Introduce him/herself
- b. Explain purpose of focus group

- c. Confirm that participants have signed the consent forms (if applicable) and reiterate that participants can stop participating at any point
- d. Describe his/her role:
 - To ask questions and keep the group on track
 - Explains that discussion will move fairly quickly, even though people might have more to say about a particular topic
- e. Describe participants' role:
 - To share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
 - Explains that there are no right or wrong answers
 - Explains that everyone should participate in discussion
- f. Explain logistics of discussion:
 - 90 minutes maximum
 - Arrangements for water and restroom break
 - Cell phones turned off
- g. Explain ground rules:
 - One person speaks at a time; no side conversations
 - No one person dominates; everyone will have a chance to be heard
 - There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about participants' experiences.
- h. Introduce notetaker and if applicable, audio/video operators. Explain purpose of audiotaping/video recording/notetaking:
 - For the purposes of highlighting "the advisor voice" at the college
 - Explains that no names will be used in reporting
 - Gives thanks from the college
- i. Take questions from participants

C. Focus Group Discussion

Facilitator Tips:

- Remind participants of the value of differing points of view:
 - Does anyone see it differently?
 - Are there any other points of view?
- Probes (questions to elicit more detailed responses):
 - Would you explain further? Tell me more about that.
 - Can you give me an example of what you mean?
 - Would you say more?
 - Is there anything else?
 - Please describe what you mean.
 - Does someone have a similar/different experience?

[Provided below is a bank of example outcomes and questions which can be used to form your discussion guide.]

Background of, and general information about, participants

1. Participant introduction, including: a) name, b) how long you've worked at the college, d) area of responsibility.

Outcome 1: To understand the nature of the advising process—from the college's earliest connection with students through the students' academic experience at the college.

1. Put yourself in the shoes of a prospective student walking into the college for the first time to enroll and sign up for classes. Through the eyes of that student, complete the sentence, "This college is like a..." Please explain your response.
2. Walk us through the experience for entering students, including the admissions and registration process, assessment, academic and financial aid advising, etc.
 - a. What do you think are the strengths of that process? How do you know?
 - b. What do you think are the areas in need of improvement? How do you know?
 - c. What components of the entering student process are required?
 - i. What happens if a student does not follow the requirements?
 - d. What components are optional?
 - e. At what point in the entering student process do students first make contact with a staff member? (During a step on a checklist? Orientation? Other?) How and when does that come about?
3. Which students are required to see an advisor? All entering students? If not all—all First-Time-In-College students? Part-time students? Students placing into developmental courses? Other criteria?
4. How are students and advisors paired? All students meet with a staff academic advisor? Students with declared majors meet with specific faculty advisors? Random/next in line? Other?
5. What is the setting for the initial advising experience? In a group? Individual meeting?
 - a. Is this the same for all students or are there criteria that determine whether a student participates in initial group or individual advising?
 - b. Is the experience the same for full- and part-time students? If not, how is it different?
 - c. For day and evening students?
6. What is the nature of the first conversation students have with an advisor?
 - a. How much time is allocated for the initial advising session? How much time is allocated thereafter?
 - b. What is the expected outcome from the first advising session?
 - c. What, if anything, is the "product" of the visit? A course schedule? A written plan?
 - i. How do students know during which term they need to take each course?
 - ii. If applicable, how do students know the campus on which they need to take each course?

- d. Is there an online product component?
 - e. Is an academic plan developed? If so, what is included on it and how is it created?
 - f. Is the next advising visit scheduled during this first appointment?
 - g. Is this conversation different for full-time and part-time students? If so, how?
 - h. In general, do you learn much about your students' lives outside of school (work, children, other family responsibilities, extracurricular activities, etc.)? If yes, how do you become aware of it? If yes, does having this information about students' lives outside of school impact how you advise them?
7. What are the general responsibilities of an advisor?
- a. Does this include financial advising? If yes, explain.
 - b. Does this include career counseling? If yes, explain.
8. Are students assigned to a specific advisor? All entering students? Some entering students?
- a. If the latter, what determines whether a student will have an assigned advisor?
 - i. Probe about FT vs. PT if not specifically mentioned
 - b. How many students are typically assigned to each advisor?
9. During the first advising session, is there a discussion around the student's enrollment status—whether the student will be a part-time student or a full-time student? If so, what is typically discussed? How do students select their enrollment status? How often is enrollment status discussed with the student after the initial advising session?
10. Describe the advising process for students during their entire time at the college.
- a. What are the college's expectations for advising visits during a student's first term? (If the college has not identified expectations—then change the questions to advisors' expectations)
 - b. What are the expectations for advising visits during a student's first year?
 - c. What are the expectations for advising visits beyond the first year?
 - d. What are the expectations for each visit?
 - e. Are there any expectations for students between visits with an advisor?
 - f. If students do not immediately develop an academic plan, when does that happen? (*Note: Ask whatever questions you need to ask to uncover the specific design and implementation for the advising process at the college—the components, the timetable, the products, etc.*)
11. Discuss how students' academic goals are incorporated into their advising sessions.
- a. Do advisors discuss the benefit of having a goal of earning a certificate or degree with students?
 - b. How do students know which classes they would need to take in order to reach their goals?
 - i. How do students know if a prerequisite is required?
 - ii. What happens if the student has enrolled in a course but has not taken the prerequisite?
 - c. How do students know how long it will take for them to reach their goals?
 - d. How do students find out about job or career opportunities based on their career interests?

- e. How do students find out about available career services (e.g. a career center on campus, technology that can help them search for jobs, etc.)?
12. Are students required to declare a major, program of study, or pathway before registering for classes?
- a. If so, are students required to speak with anyone at this college to select their major, program, or pathway choice? If so, what is the title of this person?
 - b. If so, does this discussion take place in-person, online, or over the phone/via text?
 - c. Do advisors use any technology, like a website or computer software, to help students with the declaration process?
 - d. If students are not required to meet with anyone at this college before declaring a major, program, or pathway, how do students get information about plans and programs available at this college?
 - e. If students are not required to declare a major when they register, what advice do staff give students about courses to take?
 - f. Are students required to talk to anyone if they want to change their major, program, or plan?
 - i. What is the process for changing a major?
 - g. Are students required to talk to anyone if they want to transfer to another college/university?
 - i. How do students know which courses will transfer?
 - ii. How do students know which courses will transfer into their major at the transfer institution?
 - h. What is the advisor's role regarding transfer?
 - i. How do students know when they are eligible to graduate?

Outcome 2: To better understand the role of advisors in a college that emphasizes intrusive advising and their perspectives on academic planning and advising.

1. Are students assigned to an advisor for the entire time they are in college? Is it only until they declare a major? Other?
2. If you need to talk with a student about enrolling in developmental education courses, what do you say?
3. Consider the different support services students have the opportunity to interact with both before they begin classes and while they are attending the college – e.g., career exploration and counseling, transfer advising, financial aid advising. Are any of these services integrated into the advising process you are describing or do students access those services independently, if desired?
 - a. Do you send students to these services based on your interactions with them?
4. Think about advising full-time students and part-time students. Do you see any differences in how part-time students are advised compared with full-time students? If yes, how do they differ?

5. Think about advising returning students and transfer students. What are the main differences in how these two groups of students are advised compared with entering students.
 - a. What is required for returning students?
 - b. What is required for transfer students?

6. Walk me through the advising process from the advisor perspective:
 - a. How do advisors know when a student has been assigned to him/her?
 - b. How many students do advisors typically see in a day?
 - i. How does this differ by the time of year?
 - c. How often is an advisor expected to communicate with a student before the student registers for classes? Each term?
 - d. Is there an expectation about when an advisor contacts a student (e.g., if they are struggling in class)?
 - e. Are there expectations for how often an advisor calls a student?
 - f. How many emails per term are typically sent by an advisor to a student?
 - g. What student data do you review on a daily, weekly, term basis?
 - i. Is this the same for all students? FT/PT?
 - h. What kinds of data does a supervisor use to evaluate the performance of advisors?

Relationship to the classroom:

7. During the beginning of the academic term, does the advisor visit classrooms to inform students about the availability of advising?
 - a. If so, in which classes do these visits occur?
 - b. What information is shared with the students?

8. During the academic term, does the advisor have a specific role related to students' progress in their classes?
 - a. Is there a mechanism in place for keeping the advisor apprised of student progress? An early alert system? Other?
 - i. Describe the process and the advisor's role in the process.

9. What, if anything, is the advisor's role in intervening with/providing additional support to students who are having difficulties in their classes?
 - i. Do advisors at this college monitor or reach out to students about their progress in courses? In what way(s) do advisors contact students (e.g., in person, phone/text, e-mail, Facebook, or other ways)?
 - ii. What role do advisors play in connecting students to available support services, such as supplemental instruction, study groups, tutoring, writing or math labs, and other services?

10. How do faculty and advisors communicate with one another and/or collaborate on issues related to students' progress?
 - a. What role do classroom (face-to-face and online) faculty play in connecting students to available support services, such as supplemental instruction, study groups, tutoring, writing or math labs, other?

11. As an advisor, do you believe the students who did not get advising should have done so?

Outcome 3: To understand advisors' perspectives on which key components of the advising process and specific practices within the advising process are most critical for student success—what works and what doesn't.

1. From your perspective as a faculty or staff member at this college, what are the most common challenges students face when they begin college?
 - a. In your view, does the advising process currently in place at this college help students address those challenges? If so, in what ways?
 - b. If not, are there steps you believe would be important for advisors to take to help students overcome those challenges?
2. When you think about the advising role with students, what aspects of the process would you say are most beneficial to students? Explain why you believe these aspects are helpful to students.
 - a. Are there aspects of your process that you would say are not particularly helpful to students? If yes, what are they? Why would you say they are not helpful?

Outcome 4: To learn, from the perspective of advisors, whether this practice in and of itself is important for students to experience, or if certain features within this practice are most significant to student success.

1. If you designed advising at this college, what would it look like?
2. Why do you think all students aren't satisfied with advising?
3. When you think about students' experiences before they start college, are there any additional steps you believe the college could take to help students transition successfully into the college? Would you see any of those steps falling within the advising function?
4. When you think about students' experiences during their first term, first year, and beyond, are there any additional steps you believe the college could take to help more students be successful? Would you see any of those steps falling within the advising function?

Summary and Close:

1. When you think about the components of the advising process in place at the college, what, if any, are the most important steps you believe the college could take to strengthen advising for entering students?
 - a. For students during their first year?
 - b. For students who have been here longer than one year?

2. How has your job changed since you started advising students?
3. How have you been trained to meet the change?
4. What resources or training do you think could make you more successful in your role as an advisor?

Facilitator asks participants if they have any final questions or comments. Facilitator thanks them for their participation once more.