

Entering Students

Focus Group Discussion Guide



Entering Students: SAMPLE Focus Group Discussion Guide

What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from entering students.

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 Entering Students Focus Group Discussion:

1. *To understand what students expect from higher education*
2. *To understand students' earliest experiences with the college*
3. *To understand how students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs*
4. *To understand what factors students believe would help them start right in college*

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 "student voices" 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) major, c) enrollment status, and d) other colleges you've attended.
2. What is your educational goal? Degree? Certificate? Transfer? Upgrade skills for a promotion? Learn new skills to prepare for career change? Other?

3. If earning a degree or certificate is not your goal, why not?

Outcome 1: To understand what students expect from higher education

1. Why did you decide to go to college? Did anyone urge you to go to college? Parents? Friends? High school teachers or counselors? Anyone else?
2. Why did you choose this college? Location? Cost? Academic reputation? A particular program? Other?
3. Before you came to this college, what did you expect college to be like? Where did those expectations come from? High school counselors and teachers? Employer? Friends? Family? Information you read? Other?
4. Think back to the first time you came to this campus. You're sitting in the parking lot or getting off the bus or subway, preparing to walk into the building to register for your classes. What's going through your mind? What are you worried about? What are you excited about?
5. Think to yourself and complete the sentence: *"This college is like a _____."* [Give them silent time here.] Tell us about your response.

Outcome 2: To understand students' earliest experiences with the college

Admissions Process

1. Now think about the first time you walked into a college building to get information, apply for admissions, register, or for any other reason. (Ask about online registration.) What did you see? Whom did you see? Were you greeted? By whom? How did you feel? Describe your experience.
2. Without naming names, are there particular individuals you remember meeting when you first arrived? Students? Faculty? Other college staff? How did you meet them? What were your impressions of the people you met?
3. How did you learn what steps to take to apply for admission, enroll, register, and sign up for classes? Online? On campus? From college staff? What offices or programs? From friends?
4. Did you take placement tests? Were they required or optional? Did you know you'd have to take them before you arrived? Explain the process you went through after learning about the placement tests. As a result of those tests, were you required to take any courses? If so, which ones? Are you taking them this term? What was your reaction to the results of your placement test?
5. During the process of registering for classes, did you meet with anyone on the college staff? If so, who was it? Advisor? Financial aid staff member? Faculty? Other students? Other?

6. Of the individuals you met with, were there representatives of particular offices who did a particularly good job of providing the information you needed? Advisor? Financial aid staff member? Faculty? Other students? Other? What made your contact with them helpful?
7. Were there representatives of particular offices who were not effective in providing you with the information you needed? Advisor? Financial aid staff member? Faculty? Other students? Other? What about your contact with them was not helpful?
8. Did you participate in any type of session or class designed to help you get started at the college? (Orientation)? Face-to-face? Online? If so, was it required or optional? How long was it (hours/days/academic term)? Did you find it helpful? What did you learn? If it was helpful, in what ways? If not, why not? If you did not participate in any type of orientation session, do you believe that would have been of value to you? What would you have wanted from that session?
9. Did you enroll in any other specific classes or programs that you were told would be particularly helpful for new students? (*Listen for student success class, 1st year experience, learning community, other*) Were you assigned to a group of students you'll be taking classes with?
10. On a scale of one to five, with one being the easiest and five being the most difficult, how would you rate the ease or difficulty of registering for classes? Explain your answer.
11. During the process of registering for classes, did you ever consider walking out the door and not attending this college? If so, why? What made you stay?
12. As you think back to your early experiences at this college, is there anything you wish you had known before you came to campus to enroll and register?
13. Think back to your first week here and the people you met in class and outside of class. Who in the college knew your name at the end of the first week?

Advising and Planning

1. Before you registered for your first classes, did you meet with an advisor? If so, was it required or optional? Did you meet with an advisor face-to-face? Online? If online, did you have any personal contact as well? Required?
2. What was the nature of your conversation with the first advisor you met with? Academic and career planning? Goal-setting? Discussion of your academic strengths and challenges? Choosing a program or major? Course selection? Other?
3. Did anyone work with you to set goals? Have you laid out a plan for your time at school? Have you declared a major? Do you have a plan for earning your degree or certificate or for taking the classes that you need to transfer?

4. Since you first came to this college, have you been assigned to a particular advisor? Is this the same person you met the first time? If you've declared a major, do you have an advisor in your program? Have you been to see an advisor – either in your program or a general advisor – since your initial advising session when you first arrived? Why or why not?
5. How would you rate the quality and usefulness of the advising you've received? Excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? Explain your response.

Financial Aid

1. Before you came to this college for the first time, did you know that you might be able to receive financial help to go to college? If so, when and how did you learn about it?
2. Did you meet with a financial advisor when you first arrived on campus to start the college entry process? Why or why not? Were you required to do so?
3. Are you eligible for financial assistance? How do you know? Did you fill out any forms to determine whether you're eligible? If you don't know whether you're eligible, why haven't you looked into it?
4. Did you apply for financial assistance? If not, why not? If you think you might be eligible, why haven't you applied?
5. Have you received your financial assistance? If so, how long did it take from the time you began the process to the time you received the aid?
6. If you haven't received the funds yet, what does the financial aid advisor tell you about when you'll receive the money?
7. Describe the process you went through from the time you applied to the time you received the money.
8. On a scale of one to five with one being the easiest and five being the most difficult, how would you rate the ease or difficulty of going through the financial aid process?
9. How would you rate the quality and usefulness of the financial aid advising you received? Excellent? Good? Fair? Poor? Explain your response.
10. Is there anything you wish you had known about getting financial assistance before you arrived on campus for the first time?

Academic Experiences

1. How many classes are you enrolled in?
2. Are you enrolled in two or more linked classes that a group of students take together? (learning community or other name)?
3. Think about your first day in class at this college. What was it like? Did any of your instructors explain their expectations for students in the class? If so, what did they tell you? How do those expectations match with your own expectations for your college experience?

4. During your first couple of classes at this college, did your instructors have any activities to help you and other students get to know each other? To help the instructor get to know you and to help you get to know the instructor?
5. Of the classes you first attended, think about a positive experience. Describe it. What made it good for you?
6. Think about any class experiences you've had so far that have not been so good. What about that experience didn't work for you? What could have improved that experience for you?
7. Think about an instructor whom you would say is your best so far. What are the qualities or characteristics that individual has that help you learn? Style of teaching? Availability to students outside of class? High expectations? Other?
8. Describe a typical class with the instructor you just talked about. What works for you in that class? What happens during the class period? How much time does the instructor lecture? How much time do you work with other students? What else are you doing during that class?
9. Are you currently enrolled in any developmental/remedial/college prep classes? So far, what is your experience in this class(es)? Is the material challenging? Is the class interesting? Is it linked with any other classes? What do you understand about how this course fits into your course of study at this college? Will you receive credit for this course? How do you feel about taking this course?
10. Have you had contact with any of your instructors outside of class? If so, how often? Did the instructor initiate the contact or did you? How did the communication take place? Face to face, email, phone, other? If you had contact outside the class, what kind of topic or issue were you discussing? Do your instructors hold office hours or set up other structured ways for you to meet with them? Do they ask you to come see them during those scheduled hours? Have you done that yet? Why or why not?
11. Describe your experiences in classes so far. Looking across all your classes, how often do you work with other students during class? In what ways? Do you find it helpful to work with other students during class? If so, why? If not, why not?
12. Do you have any tutors working with your instructors in class or in extra class sessions to provide extra help if you need it?
13. Describe how you use technology in your classes – both during class and outside of class. Do you have a college e-mail address? Do you use it? If not, why not?
14. How often does your instructor give you assignments that require work on the computer? How frequently do you use the computer lab at your school? If not, why not?
15. Have you worked with other students outside of class? In what ways? (Explore class projects or activities related to coursework.)
16. Do you stay in touch with other students outside of class? If not, why not? If so, in what ways? E-mail? Text? IMs? Blogs? Phone? Other? How often?

17. Have you missed any classes so far? If so, why? How many? If so, did you hear from your instructor or anyone else about those missed classes? Describe the conversation you had with that individual.
18. So far, for each of your classes, how much time per week are you spending studying (reading, completing assignments, practicing, reviewing notes, etc.) outside of class? Is it enough to help you complete your work and feel prepared? Do you feel you need help prioritizing and balancing school work with other commitments you have? Have you had any experiences at the college that help you develop time management skills?
19. Do you know how well you're doing in your classes so far? If so, how do you know? Did your instructor give you that information or did you go to your instructor to find out? If you don't know how well you are doing so far, are you concerned about it? Do you plan to talk to your instructor?
20. Have you dropped any classes so far? If so, why? Were you required to talk with your instructor or an advisor before you dropped? Did anyone have to sign off on the drop?

Support Services and Other College Services

1. Have you participated in or are you currently participating in a student success/student development/student life skills course? Were you required to take the course? Do you receive credit for it? If so, how many credit hours? Is the course useful? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
2. Has anyone given you information about services available to help you with your coursework if you need that help? Tutoring? Study groups? Labs? Other? If so, who gave you this information? Have you used any of these services yet? Why or why not? If you need additional help, how likely is it that you will use one or more of these services? Why or why not?
3. What, if anything, have you learned about any ways you can become involved at this college? Where did you get your information? Are you considering becoming involved in any particular activities while you're in school? Why or why not? Are there other activities or kinds of activities that you might become involved in if they were available to you? If so, what?

Outcome 3: To understand how students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs

1. After your first several weeks, in your opinion, what are the college's strengths? What is the college doing well that is helping you feel comfortable and able to stay on track?
2. What aspects of college cause you the most worry or stress?
3. Is college different from what you expected it to be? If so, in what ways?

Outcome 4: To understand what factors students believe would help them start right in college

(Divide participants into groups of three or four and ask them to design the recommended components of the entering student process. Ask them to draw their design or make lists on the flipchart paper. Allow 10 minutes for this exercise and then ask each group to present their ideas.)

1. Now it's your turn to give advice to the college. If you could design the entire entering student experience in the way that you believe would best meet your needs, what would it look like? What would be the key components? Include what you would see when you first arrived, whom you would meet with and what you'd talk about, what steps you'd go through to get everything in place and register for classes. Of the things you're talking about, what do you believe should be required for new students?
2. How close is your picture of the ideal entering student experience to what you actually experienced? Why do you think what you're describing would work better than what you experienced?
3. Of the things we've talked about, if you could suggest what you believe are the one or two *most important* things the college could do to improve the experience for a new student here, what would you recommend?

Summary & Close

1. Right now, are you considering not continuing here? If you are, what is the reason? What would cause you to leave?
2. Right now, what's the single most important factor that is keeping you moving toward success at this college?
3. How confident are you that you can stay and complete your academic goals? One being not very, five being extremely confident. Explain your answer.
4. If you were giving advice to a friend or sibling who was planning to attend this college about what the student could do to be successful here, what advice would you give

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