Faculty

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Center for Community College Student Engagement

Faculty: SAMPLE Focus Group Discussion Guide

What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from faculty about their interactions with 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 Faculty Focus Group Discussion:

1. *To learn about faculty perceptions of entering student needs and expectations*
2. *To understand how faculty see their role in helping entering students succeed*
3. *To learn about ways faculty are intentionally creating opportunities for students to make connections within the college*
4. *To understand what kinds of preparation and support faculty receive and would like to receive to help them promote and support student success*
5. *To understand how faculty envision an entering student experience that would best meet the needs of new students*

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 "faculty 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?

[Starting on the next page 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 taught at the college, c) full or part-time status, d) teaching field, and e) if adjunct, experience outside the college

Outcome 1: To learn about faculty perceptions of entering student needs and expectations

1. Put yourself in the flip flops 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. From your perspective, describe the experience for entering students, including admissions and registration process, assessment, academic and financial aid advising, etc. What are the strengths of that process? How do you know? What are the areas in need of improvement? How do you know?

3. What components of the entering student process are required? Which ones are optional?

4. On a scale of one to five, with one being easy and five being difficult, how do you think your new students would rate their experience with your college's front-door processes? Explain your answer.

5. Please describe your students. In general, what qualities do they bring to the learning enterprise? What are their strengths? Their challenges?

6. In your opinion, what is the *greatest* challenge your students face in achieving their academic goals?

7. In your opinion, what is the *greatest* strength your students bring to the learning enterprise?

8. Do you see differences in needs and expectations of students based on age, gender, socioeconomic factors, college readiness, learning styles, etc.? Please describe.

9. What is the greatest challenge *you* face in meeting your students' varying needs and expectations?

10. What do you believe is the *single most important factor* that helps students remain in school and achieve their educational goals?

Outcome 2: To understand how faculty see their role in helping entering students succeed

1. At this college, before classes begin, what role do faculty play in the registration process? In what specific ways, if any, are faculty involved with students before classes begin? Is there any other way you would like to see faculty involved with entering students?

2. At this college, what role do faculty play in advising students? How much of your time would you say you spend advising students? Do you believe you should be spending more or less time advising students? Explain your answer.

3. Thinking about your own classes, what would you say are the most important things **you** can do to help your students succeed? Inside the classroom? Outside the classroom?

4. What are your expectations for your students' performance? In what ways do you communicate those expectations?

5. Does this college have any kind of an "early alert" referral system in place between faculty and student services so that contact is made with students who miss class during the first three weeks (more or less)– either by faculty or by advisors? If so, describe. In that system, what's working well and what isn't having the desired outcome? If you do *not* have an early alert system, what, if anything, would get in the way of putting a system like that in place?

6. What would you say is (are) the most important thing(s) **students can do** to promote their own success? Inside the classroom? Outside the classroom?

7. In general, do you believe students are doing all they can to promote their own success? Explain your answer. If no, what, if anything, do you believe faculty can do to motivate students to take more responsibility for promoting their own success?

Outcome 3: To learn about ways faculty are intentionally creating opportunities for students to make connections within the college

1. Think back to the beginning of this term and the first couple of times your classes met. How did you get started with students at the beginning of the term? What information did you give them? What, if any, activities did you engage them in?

2. Think about a class in which everything is clicking just right. You feel like students are learning, everyone is getting what they need from the class. Describe that class. What's going on? What are *you* doing? What are *students* doing? How are people working and learning in that class? What percentage of the time would you say your class measures up to that ideal? When your class isn't operating at your ideal level, what's getting in the way? What are the most important things you can do to reach that ideal? What are the most important things students can do to reach that ideal?

3. Describe one of your typical classes. What percentage of the time would you say you spend lecturing? What percentage of the time would you say you devote to students working with other students, in groups or pairs? Do you intentionally structure your class time to incorporate different types of instruction? Why or why not?

4. In what ways do you use technology in your classes? How responsive would you say students are to those uses of technology? (Internet research, course management tool such as Blackboard, YouTube, blogging, Facebook or other social networking site, video games, other?)

5. To what extent do you build additional academic support into your curriculum – supplemental instruction, tutoring (face-to-face or online), skill labs, etc.

6. In general, to what degree do you maintain contact with students outside of class? In what ways? Phone? E-mail? Through course management software (Blackboard, etc.)? IM? Texting? Social networking site? Informally on campus? Other? How often? For what purposes? How responsive are students to contact you initiate? What percentage of your students would you say initiate contact with you?

7. In what ways do you make efforts to make connections for students outside of class? With other students? With college programs and activities? With support services? Other?

8. Generally speaking, when is the first time within the term that you give students feedback on their performance? In what ways do you provide that feedback?

Outcome 4: To understand what kinds of preparation and support faculty receive and would like to receive to help them promote and support student success

1. As you consider the diverse needs and experiences of your students, how prepared do you feel to teach to their various learning styles and proficiency levels? Very prepared, somewhat prepared, somewhat unprepared, not prepared at all.

2. What, if any, faculty learning opportunities does the college offer to help you increase your knowledge and skills so you can more effectively address your students' diverse needs and experiences? Is there any specific type of learning opportunity you would like the college to offer faculty? (Listen for and probe evidence of mentoring, faculty development on active learning strategies, such as group work, service learning, collaborative learning, etc.)

Outcome 5: To understand how faculty envision an entering student experience that would best meet the needs of new students

1. *(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.)*

   If you could design the entire entering student experience in the way that you believe would best meet the needs of new students, what would it look like? What would be the key components? Include what students would see when they first arrived, whom they would meet with and what would be the outcomes from those conversations, what steps they'd go through to get everything in place and register for classes. What would be required? What would be optional? Include also what role faculty would play in the entering student process and how they would work with students and student services staff. What would you change or discard that you are currently doing? What would you create? What kind of evidence would convince you that the system you design is effective?

   1a. (Ask participants and capture responses.) How far are you from that ideal? What gets in the way of making it happen? What would have to happen for your design to be possible?

1b. If you could choose what you believe is the *most important* change or improvement in a college policy and/or practice that you believe would improve the experience for entering students, what would that be? Why? What gets in the way of making the change you're suggesting? Take you out of the classroom. Look at bigger picture of this college. If you could change X, it would really make a difference in the success of the students?

Summary and Close

1. What do you believe is the most important thing *you can do* to help new students *start right* at this college?

2. What do you believe is the most important thing *students can do* to *start right* at this college?

3. What do you believe is the most important thing *the college can do* to help new students *start right*?

4. What advice would you offer other community and technical colleges that are beginning efforts to improve the entering student experience and ultimately student retention and success?

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