

Guided Pathways

Student Focus Group Discussion Guide



Guided Pathways: Students SAMPLE Focus Group Discussion Guide

What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from students about their experiences with guided pathways at your college.

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 Focus Group Discussion:

1. *To understand how and to what extent students experience “getting on a path” at the college.*
2. *To understand how and to what extent students experience “staying on a path” at the college.*
3. *To understand how and to what extent students experience “teaching and learning” at the 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 focus group staff
- b. Explain purpose of focus group
- c. Confirm that participants have signed the consent forms and reiterate that participants can stop participating at any point
- d. Describe facilitator’s role:
 - To ask questions and keep the group on track
 - Explain 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
 - Explain that there are no right or wrong answers
 - Explain 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 student experience at this college
 - Explain that no names will be used in reporting
 - Give thanks from the college

- i. Take questions from participants

C. Focus Group Discussion

Facilitator Tips:

- a. Remind participants of the value of differing points of view:
 - Does anyone see it differently?
 - Are there any other points of view?

- b. 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 introductions, including: a) name, b) major, and c) 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 how and to what extent students experience “getting on a path” at the college.

1. For those who recently graduated from high school, did someone at your high school talk to you about careers?
 - Were you encouraged to consider a career choice?
 - Did someone talk to you about colleges and programs at this college?
 - What were those conversations like?
2. While you were in high school, did you meet with anyone from this college? If so, where? At your high school? At the college?
 - If you met with someone from this college while you were still in high school, what was the conversation about? Information about program and career options? Other?
3. Please share why you decided to attend this college.
 - Did you know your college goal? A degree? A job or career? Something else? *[Note: Let students name these areas and use their words in subsequent questions.]*
4. How would you describe what the process of getting started at this college was like for you? Think about the experiences you had up until you first went to a class. Rate the whole process on a scale in which 1 is really easy and 5 is really difficult.
 - Did you talk to a college staff member?
 - If so, what was that person's job/title?
 - If so, describe the conversations you had with that person(s), the questions the person(s) asked you, and the questions you asked the person(s).
 - Is there anything you wish college staff members had talked to you about that they didn't?
5. When you first started at this college, did someone—an advisor or individual you initially met with at this college ask you about your college goals such as a certificate, degree, transfer, job, etc.?
 - Did someone at this college discuss with you about how long it will take for you to reach your goals and how much it might cost?
 - Is this about the amount of time you were thinking it would take to reach your goals, or did you think it might take a shorter or longer amount of time?
 - Did anyone talk with you about your commitments outside of school and help you think about how to balance school with those other commitments?
 - Did a staff member at this college discuss job or career opportunities with you, based on your career interests?

- Did anyone at this college tell you about career services available to you (e.g., a career center on campus, technology that can help you choose a career or explore jobs, etc.)?
 - What types of activities have you participated in at this college to explore your chosen career? *[For example: Visited an employer or work site, job shadowing, used an online career exploration tool, anything else?]*
6. Did this college assist you through a process for choosing a general area of study *[e.g., metamajor, academic or career community—use the term being used by the college]* or even a *particular* program (or major)? What was involved in that process?
- What types of activities have you participated in at this college to identify a general area of study *[e.g., metamajor, academic or career community—use the term being used by the college]* or a specific program (or major)?
[For example: Explored the college website, talked with an advisor, attended an orientation session providing information about careers, metamajors and programs of study, participated in a course where choices about careers, metamajors, and programs of study were discussed, anything else?]
7. How did you learn about the steps you needed to go through to register for classes at this college?
- Did someone talk with you about the process for registering?
 - Were you required to meet with this individual?
 - Did someone talk with you about how to pick courses? If so, did the person talk about the sequence, or what order, to take the courses in? Was there a sequence of courses prescribed by the college?
 - Were there any courses you were told you were required to take? Who told you about those courses?
 - Did someone talk with you about *how many* courses you should take in your first term? Did you discuss the possible benefits of attending college full-time (taking 15 credits)? If that discussion took place, what was your response?
 - What was the setting for this experience? In a group? Individual meeting? Online? If in a group—what kind of group—can you explain? *[Trying to find out if group advising is part of orientation or a student success course and if it takes place in the context of a metamajor.]*
 - If you did meet with someone, did this person use any technology, like a website or computer software, to assist you? Tell me about it.
8. What about math? How did you decide what math to take *[multiple measures, placement test, interview, something else]*? Did someone tell you what math to take? If so, is it required that you take a specific kind of math? Did the person explain why? If so, did you understand?
9. Did someone tell you that you were required to take a student success course? A first-year experience? *[For both, use the language used by the college]*

10. At any time, were you assigned to meet with a particular person at this college? (If the person identifies the individual as an assigned advisor or counselor, use that language in subsequent questions.)
- What is this person's title or role at the college?
 - If you were assigned to an individual, do you still meet with that person? If yes, how often? What leads to those meetings?
 - Is this person assigned to work with students in your program/major?
 - Does the advisor/counselor contact you for a meeting, or do you contact the advisor?
 - Do you meet with the advisor/counselor individually, with other students in a group, or both?
 - Do you meet with someone other than an assigned advisor/counselor? If so, why?
[Some students don't click with their assigned advisor and seek guidance from someone else—faculty or another advisor. It would be helpful to hear this.]
11. Since you started at this college, if you declared a program or major, or a broad area of study, have you changed your mind?
- If yes, what led to that change?
 - Do you know the steps to go through to change your program or major?
12. Did anyone at this college talk with you about making a plan that lays out specifically what classes you will have to take each semester to reach your goals—a full program plan showing what courses you need to take and in what general sequence you should take them to meet your goal?
- Was making an educational plan required?
 - Did someone help you create a plan? If so, who?
 - If you have put together a plan, did you do it before you started classes at this college?
 - If not, have you put together a plan since then?
 - If so, when did you do it and what prompted you to do it at that time?
 - Did you put together the plan during your first term at this college? After your first term?
 - Was the plan written down? Is it available online for you to refer to?
 - Did you use an online tool or program?
 - Do you review the plan each time you meet with an advisor?
 - If so, is this person the same person you originally met with?
 - What happens if you try to register for a course that is not listed on your plan?
 - What happens if you try to register for a course in a different order than what is listed on your plan?
 - When planning what courses you will take each semester, is there anyone you meet with to help you with selecting your courses?
 - Are you required to meet with an advisor each term before registering for classes?
 - When registering for your courses, has there ever been a time when you needed to take a course, and it was not available when and where you wanted to take it? If so, what did you do?
 - How relevant are your courses to your program of study or career goals?
13. For those of you who are interested in transferring to a four-year college or university, has anyone talked with you about the process of transferring (application, financial aid, etc.)?
- If yes, explain.

- If yes, has anyone talked with you about which courses will transfer and apply to your intended program or major at the four-year university of your choice?

Outcome 2: To understand how and to what extent students experience “staying on a path” at the college.

1. Talk about your first semester and the classes you took in that first term that were part of your program. If you needed help, what kind of support was available (tutoring, labs, supplemental instruction, advising)?
 - How did you find out about the available support?
 - Did you use it? Was it required? Was it part of the class?
 - If you used it, was it helpful?
2. How do you track your own progress toward attainment of your college goal?
 - Do you have an electronic method/way of tracking your own progress? If so, describe this.
3. Who at this college helps you stay on your path? If it’s an advisor (or whoever they name), how many times have you met with your advisor during this academic year?
 - If you did meet with your advisor, what did you discuss?
4. If you are not making progress in your major or program of study, what happens? Does anyone at this college contact you? Do you get some type of communication from the college?
5. Think about the classes you have taken in the past and those you are enrolled in now. In any of your classes, does your instructor talk with you about career plans?
 - About completing an associate degree here?
 - About transferring to a four-year college/university after you complete your studies at this college?
 - About services available at the college to help you with your studies?
 - About regional employment opportunities based on your career interests?
 - About things you can do to succeed in your classes?
 - Have you ever hit a snag in any of your courses—fallen behind in your classwork, not done well on assignments or tests, etc.? When this happens, what do you do? Where do you go for help? Does anyone at the college reach out to you? Do you reach out to them first, or do they reach out to you first—how does it work?
 - If someone reaches out to you, is the person your instructor or someone else who is part of the college?
 - If the person contacted you, in what way(s)? Phone? Text? Email? Social Media? Other?
 - How early in the term did the contact occur?
 - What happened after you talked with that person?
 - Did the person suggest anything you could do? If so, what were the suggestions? Did you follow up on those suggestions? If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not? If you didn’t follow up on the suggestions, why not?

6. Have you ever gone to anyone or any place on campus for additional help with your classwork? If so, to whom or where did you go?

Outcome 3: To understand how and to what extent students experience “teaching and learning” at the college.

1. Think about your major or program of study. Do you clearly understand what you should know and be able to do in terms of your major or program of study when you complete your coursework here? How do you know this?
 - Does this college provide ways for you to document and monitor what you are learning?
2. How would you describe your best courses? What happens in them?
 - Do you work with others? If so, describe this group work.
 - Are there projects assigned that help you learn the material? If so, please describe.
 - Do you have opportunities to apply what you are learning? If so, describe this.
 - Follow up: Are hands-on learning opportunities part of your classes (e.g., internships, field work, group projects, service learning, clinical placements, etc.)? How often? Are those experiences helpful to you? If yes, describe how those experiences are helpful to you.
 - Think about a class where you really did well. How would you describe it? What made it work for you?
3. Have you ever participated in academic support services at this college such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, writing or math labs, etc.?
 - If so, who suggested it?
 - If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not?
 - If support services were suggested to you and you didn't follow up on the suggestion, why not?
4. Have you ever participated in a study group at this college?
 - If so, who suggested it?
 - If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not?
 - If a study group was suggested to you and you didn't follow up on the suggestion, why not?
5. Think about an instructor who you would say is one of the best you have had. What are the qualities or characteristics that individual has that help you learn? For example, style of teaching? Level of interaction with students? Availability to students outside of class? High expectations? Other?

Summary and Close

1. How confident are you that you will stay at this college and complete your academic goals? 1 being not very confident, 5 being extremely confident. Explain your answer.
2. If you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important changes the college could make to improve students' experience—especially as it relates

to students getting on a path to achieve their goals and following through to the end of that path—what changes would you recommend?

3. If you were giving advice to a friend who was planning to attend this college about how to be successful at this college, what advice would you give?

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