

Returning Students

Focus Group Discussion Guide



Returning Students: SAMPLE Focus Group Discussion Guide

What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from returning 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 Returning Students Focus Group Discussion:

1. *To understand what motivates students to pursue higher education*
2. *To understand how students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs*
3. *To understand what impact responsibilities outside of school have on students' potential for academic success*
4. *To understand the importance of various college services in helping students reach their academic goals*
5. *To understand students' academic experience at the college*
6. *To understand the significance of relationships in student persistence and success*
7. *To understand what the college needs to improve and build upon in order to help students succeed*

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?

[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:

Facilitator asks participants to introduce themselves, including: a) name, b) program of study, c) academic goals, d) enrollment status (full- or part-time), and e) previous college experience, if any.

1. What is your educational goal? Degree? Certificate? Transfer? Upgrade skills for a promotion? Learn new skills to prepare for career change? Other?
2. If earning a degree or certificate is not your goal, why not?
3. What transportation do you rely on to come to school? Is the transportation you are using convenient and available when you need it?
4. In general, are the people closest to you – spouse, partner, parents, children, employers, friends, roommates, others – supportive of your choice to be in school and understanding about the time you spend in school-related activities?
 - If not, describe the situation. If you are not getting the support you need, has this ever been or might it be a factor in your decision about whether or not to attend school?

Outcome 1: To understand what motivates students to pursue higher education

1. When did you decide to go to college? While in high school? After high school? Did you work for a while before deciding to return to school?
2. Why did you decide to go to college? Did anyone urge you to go to college? Parents? Friends? High school teachers or counselors?
3. Why did you select a community college?
4. What were your goals when you started college? What did you hope to gain as a result of your college experience?
5. Have your goals changed since you've been in college? What are they now? What caused your goals to change?

Outcome 2: To understand how students perceive the college's effectiveness in meeting their needs

1. Tell us how you would complete this sentence: *"This college is like a _____."* Tell us more about your response.
2. In your opinion, what are the college's strengths?
3. In your opinion, what are the college's weaknesses?
4. How good a job do you think the college is doing in helping you achieve your educational goals? Excellent? Very good? Good? Fair? Poor?

Outcome 3: To understand what impact responsibilities outside of school have on students' potential for academic success

1. What responsibilities or activities do you have outside of school? (job, family, other)
2. How do these responsibilities/activities affect your ability to stay in school? Attend class? Keep up with your assignments? Study outside of class? Fulfill any other school responsibilities?
3. Does the college offer any support services to help you with your nonacademic responsibilities? If so, what are they?
4. If so, have you used any of those services? What, if anything, was helpful to you? Describe your experience using those services.
5. If the college does not offer any such support services, what type of services would you like to see?
6. *(If childcare has not been mentioned)* Do any of you rely on childcare services either at the college or elsewhere in order to attend classes? If so, where? Is the cost of this childcare manageable for you? Are the hours convenient for your class schedule? Have any issues surrounding childcare (*cost, location, hours, other*) ever made it difficult or impossible to attend classes at this college?

Outcome 4: To understand the importance of various college services in helping students reach their academic goals

Academic Support

1. What type of programs, offices, or services does the college offer to help you reach your academic goals? (Academic advisors in your department, "general" academic advisors, personal counselors, tutors, other)
 - How many have used each of the services you have listed?
 - Of the services you have used, describe your experience (helpful, not helpful)
2. Are there additional programs or services that you would like to see the college offer that you believe would help you academically?

Financial Support

1. How are you paying for your education?
2. What type of financial aid are you receiving? Is it adequate?
3. What type of financial support services does the college provide?
4. Have you used the services? If so, describe how the experience went. If not, why not?
5. Describe how the cost of college influences or affects your decision to attend.
6. What additional financial support services would you like the college to provide?

Outcome 5: To understand students' academic experience at the college

1. Class scheduling: How many are taking classes during the day? Evening? Weekends? Online? Combination?
2. For those who have taken a combination of day, evening/weekend and online classes, have you found any difference in the quality of those classes or the quality of the instruction you are receiving? If so, describe.
3. Quality of classes – How would you describe the quality of the classes you are taking? Are they challenging? Are there adequate course offerings in your major?
4. We'd like to hear about the types of classroom experiences you are having, what experiences you get the most out of and what types of experiences aren't as helpful to you.
 - How often do you ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion? Every class? Sometimes? Never?
 - How often are you expected to make a class presentation during a typical semester (*or quarter*)? More than four times per semester? Between one and four? Never?
 - How many of you work on class projects with other students *during class*? Frequently? Sometimes? Never?
 - How many of you work with other students on class projects *outside of class*? More than four times per semester? Between one and four times per semester? Never?
 - Think about a class you struggled with. How would you describe it? What made it tough for you? Did you talk with your instructor about the difficulty you were having? What was her/his response?
 - Think about a class where you really did well. How would you describe it? What made it work for you?
 - In general, are most of your classes like the first one you described – the one you struggled with – or like the second class you described – the one in which you did well?
5. Quality of instruction – In general, how would you describe the quality of your instructors?
 - 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? Style of teaching? Level of interaction with students? Availability to students outside of class? High expectations? Other?
 - In general, do you have contact with your instructors outside of class? When you contact an instructor, what kind of an issue are you usually contacting him or her about?
6. Online classes – For those who have taken online classes, describe your experience in accessing information presented in those classes and learning the content.
 - What are the qualities or characteristics of the best online instructors you have had?

7. How many are enrolled now or have been enrolled in courses that you were required to take before you could enroll in regular college credit courses, such as ESL, developmental math, developmental reading, other? What specific required courses have you/are you taking?
 - How many of you needed to repeat the class one or more times in order to move ahead into credit classes?
 - Does the college offer enough help so that students can pass these courses as quickly as possible?
 - What more do you believe the college should be doing to help students pass these courses as quickly as possible?
 - Have you ever considered not continuing in school because of these classes?

Outcome 6: To understand the significance of relationships in student persistence and success

1. When you think about your experience at this college outside of the time you spend in class, are there particular relationships you have developed here that come to mind?
2. Who are these relationships with? Other students? Instructors? Counselors? Academic advisors? Other staff members? Others?
3. How important would you say these relationships are to your success here? Which ones in particular? How are they important to you? Describe what impact they have on your success here (positive and negative).
4. If there are times when you have considered whether to continue attending this college, have any of those relationships have any impact on your decision? In what way(s)?

Outcome 7: To understand what the college needs to improve and build upon in order to help students succeed

1. Describe a time or an experience you have had at the college that has not been favorable. In your opinion, how could the college have made this experience more positive?
2. What advice would you give the college about one or two things the college could do to help students succeed?
3. In your opinion, what does the college do well that helps you stay in school?
4. What is the single most important factor that keeps you coming back to this college?

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.