

# Student Services Staff

## Focus Group Discussion Guide



# Student Services Staff: **SAMPLE** Focus Group Discussion Guide

*What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from student services staff 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 Student Services Staff Focus Group Discussion:**

1. *To learn about student services professionals' perceptions of entering student expectations and needs*
2. *To learn about current college initiatives that are designed to help entering students start right*
3. *To learn how student services professionals see their roles in helping entering students start right*
4. *To understand what the college does and could do to create opportunities for students to build relationships*
5. *To understand what kinds of preparation and support student services personnel receive and would like to receive to help them promote and support development of relationships*

## **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 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 services staff 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 worked at the college, d) area of responsibility.

### **Outcome 1: To learn about student services professionals' perceptions of entering student expectations and needs**

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 easiest 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. How would you describe the students at this college? Their academic goals? Their challenges? What helps or hinders their success at the college (such as job, family responsibilities, financial situation, lack of preparedness, other?)
6. How would you describe your students' expectations when they first enter the college?
7. Do you see differences in needs and expectations of students based on age, gender, socioeconomic factors, college readiness, learning styles, etc.? Please describe.
8. What is the greatest challenge *you* face in meeting your students' varying needs and expectations?
9. What do you believe is the *single most important factor* that helps students remain in school and achieve their educational goals?

### **Outcome 2: To learn about current college initiatives that are designed to help entering students start right**

1. In what ways do you address the challenge of providing consistent, accurate, current information to students as they go through the testing, advising, planning, financial aid and registration processes?
2. In what ways do you disseminate information to new students? In what ways do you use technology to disseminate information and connect new students to one another, faculty and staff, and services available at the college? (College website, Facebook or other social networking site, texting, email, YouTube, etc.)

3. Do you have ways to learn from new students about their experience entering the college? How do you do that? What do you do with the information you gather from students? Please describe a specific example of how you have used feedback from students to change/improve your college entry/intake process.
4. From your perspective, what key initiatives are having the greatest impact on student persistence, learning and ultimate success? How do you know? Why do you think the initiatives you listed are successful? Do you regularly use data to assess the progress and effectiveness of these initiatives?
5. Are there specific college initiatives or practices focused on the entering student experience? If yes, please describe. If not, do student services professionals ever have conversations about college practices impacting entering students? Describe the nature of those conversations.
6. Within the initiatives you discussed above (focused on entering students if the college has them), what is the role of student services? (If not focused on entering students, then we'll discuss student services role more broadly within college student success initiatives.)
7. In what ways do student services staff and faculty work together during the entering student process?

***Outcome 3: To learn how student services professionals see their roles in helping entering students start right***

1. Thinking about your own role within student services, what would you say are the most important things *you* can do to help new students get started on the right foot?
2. What would you say is the most important thing(s) *students can do* to ensure their own success?
3. Think for a moment before you respond to the following question: If you could spend your time with students exactly in the way you think would best promote their success, what would that look like? How close are you to that ideal? What factors make it difficult for you to create that ideal in reality?
4. Within community colleges, we lose the greatest percentage of our students during the first term of college and between the first and second term. What do you know about the numbers of students who registered for classes and who are still there on the census date (10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> class day)? Do you track that information? What do you know about the numbers of students who register, but never show up for class?
5. Do you have any kind of an “early alert” referral system in place with faculty so that contact is made with students who miss class during the first 3 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. Thinking from the perspective of your own role within student services and what you believe works best for students, what do you believe might help students stay in school? (Probe individual roles, including: admissions, registration and orientation; academic assessment and placement; financial aid; academic advising and planning; career counseling, other.)
7. Do you conduct exit interviews with students who decide to drop out of college?
8. Do you require anything of students who choose to drop a class? Instructor signature? Meeting with advisor? Anything else? If not, have you ever considered that? What, if anything, would get in the way of making that happen?

***Outcome 4: To understand what the college does and could do to create opportunities for students to build relationships***

1. When we ask students in interviews and focus groups about factors that help them stay on track to achieve their academic goals, they inevitably talk about the individuals they have met and the relationships they have formed at the college.

When you consider the initiatives you have already talked about that are designed to improve the entering student experience and/or increase student retention, learning and attainment, do you see relationship-building opportunities incorporated into those? If so, in what ways? Are there other intentional actions the college is taking to build and support relationships among students, between students and faculty, between students and staff? If so, please describe them.

2. Considering the multiple time commitments of a commuter student population, in what ways can student services realistically create opportunities for students to develop relationships with other students and with student services staff?
3. If there is something the college is not doing that you believe could increase students' connection with one another and with college faculty and staff, what would that be? What, if anything (in your view), gets in the way of implementing the type of opportunities you are talking about? What would make it possible for the kinds of opportunities you talked about to occur?
4. *(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?

4a. 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?

4b. 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?

***Outcome 5: To understand what kinds of preparation and support student services personnel receive and would like to receive to help them promote and support development of relationships***

1. What, if any, training opportunities does the college offer to help you increase your knowledge and skills so you can work more effectively to strengthen student engagement?
2. Is there any specific type of professional development opportunity you would like the college to offer student services personnel?

***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.*