

Focus Group Experience for Tutoring and Academic Assistance Programs (TAAP)

(Tutoring and Learning Services, Student Support Services, Disability Support Services)

TAAP held four focus groups during the week of April 23:

Group 1. College Study Strategies 10:30 class (plus students who completed class previously and students who had received tutoring through the TLS small group tutoring program) **12-17 attendees**

Group 2. Student Support Services - 6-8 attendees

Group 3. TLS Tutors -26 attendees

Group 4. Disability Support Services -8-10 attendees

Targeted participants: Through our research on focus groups, we learned we could target students who could provide us with the information we wanted to know. We did NOT have to select students at random. Since our objective was to gather information about our students' learning, we targeted students who we felt used our services enough to have made a difference in their learning and could therefore, provide us meaningful responses.

Invitation Process: Email, followed up by a post-card (DSS, SSS only) and another email. For the CSS class, we did NOT notify the students—we felt this might encourage them not to attend class period. Our email was written more as a request for their help as opposed to an invitation to a fun experience. We suggested that this was an opportunity to give back—that we had helped them and now we needed their help. It seemed to work—we had several students attend. We also asked for RSVPs to the SSS and DSS focus groups and sent reminders to them—we believe this also helped.

Incentives: We offered pay and food to the tutors and a “small gift” to the other groups (UI bookmark.) We also had snacks for the other groups but did not mention that in the emails.

Choosing Focus Group Facilitator and Scribe (notetaker): It's important to have a facilitator who is knowledgeable about the group process. We asked a person to facilitate our groups who was completing a masters' degree in rehabilitation counseling and who had taught history for many years at the college level. Our scribe for the last three groups was a POLYA instructor. Our scribe for the first group was one of our clerical assistants (graduating senior). NONE of our staff participated in the actual focus groups—we do not know who attended, although we did know who was invited and who RSVPed.

Prior Preparation for Facilitator and Scribe: Most communication was done by email; however, TAAP director did meet with facilitator a week prior to the focus group experience (for an hour) to discuss purpose of the focus groups and what we were hoping to learn. Director talked about TAAP as a unit, a bit of our history, and what each program's mission and operation was. Each program's learning outcomes were sent to both the scribe and the facilitator ahead of time, as were the focus group questions and the 1-2 learning outcomes that were associated with the questions. Additional information about each program along with information about the purpose of a focus group/how to conduct focus groups, etc. was also sent. Also a recap of why were doing focus groups and what we hoped to learn was also sent. All prior communication with the scribes was done via email.

Writing of Focus Group Questions: We decided to focus on only 1-2 learning outcomes per program. Program Coordinators, Learning Specialist and director wrote and refined questions.

Actual Focus Groups: Each focus group lasted an hour. Scribe took notes by hand.

Post-Focus Group: The notes were disseminated to all TAAP staff at the same time we met with both the facilitator and the 1st scribe to get their perceptions of the experiences. In hindsight, it would have been more helpful to have had a chance to review comments first.

Focus Group Analysis/Outcomes: We are still analyzing the information that was captured, to determine if it gives us information that specifically relates to our learning outcomes, and to determine if the questions were well enough constructed to garner what we wanted to know. Note: information captured cannot be generalized, as the “n” is too small and the participants were not selected randomly.

What we learned from the process:

1. That, overall, it was a very worthwhile experience. Our biggest fear—lack of student participation, did not materialize.
2. Inherent weakness: Did not have benefit of vocal inflection or body language in information that was captured. Next time: have scribe use a tape recorder or laptop, in order to capture verbatim responses. Erase tape before the information is given to staff. Possibility: Have two facilitators (to help direct flow of conversation/responses) and two scribes—one to focus on conversation and one to focus on non-verbal responses.
3. We need to consider the arrangement of our questions more carefully so they flow more logically from general to specific. The wording must be very clear (not academes) and sentences must be well constructed.
4. We need to preface the process by giving the facilitator a paragraph that helps students to prepare for what's to come -- the nature and order of questions. This will help the facilitator to keep the participants more on task because they will know certain information will be asked for in a later question. A half-sheet in writing that lists the questions in order may be helpful, as well (visual and textual learners will appreciate this).
5. Recorded comments should be passed through the facilitator for correction and/or addition first and then amended before they are sent to the program.
6. Need to prep facilitator and scribe better than perhaps we did; expectations and outcomes need to be clearer. We learned that the facilitator did not lead students back to the questions—if discussion seemed lively, facilitator let students talk freely.

Ideas for future: Conduct earlier in semester. Focus on different populations of participants: students who have not used services at all, students who used services very little or who did not follow through, students who used services 1-2 years ago, faculty, staff, etc.

Sources: We googled on “how to conduct a focus group, higher education” and got lots of hits!
Most helpful: University of Texas at Austin—Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment

http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/assessment/iar/how_to/methods/focus_groups.php;

http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/assessment/iar/how_to/interpreting_data/focus_groups/evaluation.php