**Administration & Finance Program Reviews**

**Focus Group Handout**

**(Updated Summer 2023)**

**Administration & Finance Program Review-related Focus Groups**

Some Administration & Finance program reviews may include focus groups because they can assist with the gathering of rich data about customer and constituent opinions, perceptions, ideas, etc. Use of focus groups is optional.  
  
**Focus Group**

A focus group is a gathering of 8–12-unit constituents or stakeholders assembled to discuss unit performance through a moderated discussion. The focus group discussion is purposeful, yet informal. It is intended to be a *discussion.*

* Questions are prepared in advance
* There is always a focus group moderator and at least one notetaker
* Focus groups for program reviews are not recorded on audio or video tape
* Normally, more than one focus group is conducted for each program review
* A focus group is not a survey; not all questions must be answered by all participants

**The Focus Group allows:**

* Participants to speak openly and honestly
* An understanding of the "language" of unit constituents
* The understanding of perceptions and misconceptions
* Thorough exploration of the issues
* For rich responses
* Hearing the unit's "story" from the group's perspective
* Generation of ideas for unit improvement

Often, a focus group is used after a survey to FOCUS ON issues and concerns uncovered by the survey.   
  
**What a Focus Group is NOT**

* A statistically reliable survey
* Research of a representative sample of respondents
* A gripe session
* A lecture
* A source of statistical conclusions

**Steps in Planning a Focus Group Session**

1. Arrange the time, date, and location
2. Determine 8-10 participants who share a connection with the unit being studied
3. Send out initial invitation letters/emails 2-4 weeks in advance
4. Arrange for light refreshments, if possible
5. Make telephone calls or email a follow-up reminder to participants
6. Finalize questions and strategy
7. Send final reminder email one week prior

**The Focus Group Process**

1. Ask one or two committee members to take notes (sometimes it is difficult for one person to keep up)
2. Ask the participants to introduce themselves using first name only and by describing their relationship with the department
3. Ask questions in “round robin” format using the same order for each successive question
4. Participants may “pass” if they prefer not to answer any specific question. Always check with those who do not answer prior to moving to the next question.
5. Transcribe notes without names

**Focus Group Moderator Strategies**

* Use an inverse pyramid approach to the open-ended questions you will ask:
  + Start with broad questions
    - What do you think are the one or two most significant ways in which this department influences your work life?
    - What is the most positive aspect of working with this department?
  + Work toward more specific questions and questions that may be more emotionally charged
    - Let's talk about your last interaction with the department. Describe how it went.
    - Name a problem you experienced with the department. What was it and how was it resolved?
* Incorporate ways to help participants relax
  + Refreshments, short opening ice breaker, introductions, etc.
  + Promise to start and end on time (60-minute maximum)
  + Assure individual confidentiality/anonymity
* Be alert - look for opportunities to ask follow-up questions or pursue topics initiated by the group members
* Spread the conversation around, don't be afraid to call on the more introverted participants and gently interrupt those who tend to dominate the conversation
* Remember the goal is to harvest perceptions, ideas, constructive criticism and solutions, etc.
* Assure the members of the group that their opinions matter. (In fact, their opinions are all that matter in a focus group such as this.)

**Sample Focus Group Questions**

* Let's talk about how you interact with the unit. What does that usually look like?
* What are stories you can share that illustrate the unit's strengths and weaknesses?
* What are areas in which the unit doesn't seem to understand your particular needs?
* If you were put in charge of the unit, what's the first change you would implement?
* As a group, let's see if we can list three ways in which the unit could be more effective.

NOTE: Avoid defending the unit, do not criticize participant responses unless they are obviously inappropriate, and do not correct inaccurate factual information that is shared by participants unless you can verify the inaccuracy and correct the record.