

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA  
DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS  
ASSESSMENT TEAM**

**Questions and Answers About  
Interviews and Focus Groups**

*What is an interview?*

- A qualitative assessment method utilizing information from discussions with participants
- Structure varies, but the duration of an interview is approximately thirty minutes to an hour
- You must have predetermined questions or topics discuss

*What is a focus group?*

- A structured interview with groups of people (6-10 people) about a one to two hours about specific topic
- A facilitator and one note taker should be present
- You must have a list of questions or topics to determine what is discussed, but the facilitator can make adjustments to the list and ask follow up questions during the discussion

*Why should I conduct interviews and focus groups?*

- You are able to gather rich data, thick descriptions and ask follow up questions
- You are able to comprehend the why factor and understand methods for improvement
- You can better understand survey data. For example, if survey results show that students did not learn the expected outcome then interviews and focus groups can be conducted to assist in determining where the breakdown occurred and discover improvement methods

*What are examples of outcomes for interviews and focus groups?*

- Students will demonstrate knowledge of the available campus resources
- Students will demonstrate effective and appropriate confrontation skills
- Students will demonstrate effective time management
- Students will articulate the impact of the surrounding diversity

*How do I choose topics to discuss?*

- It is important to understand that individual interviews may provide a sense of security, however, discussing sensitive topics may be uncomfortable in a group setting and as a result students may not provide truthful responses
- If the topic is not sensitive, then focus groups may be a method to hear diverse viewpoints and thoughtful responses

*What are some considerations when conducting interviews and focus groups?*

- Time frame - If your time is limited then focus groups will allow you to gather more information with larger numbers of students. Interviews are faster and easier because you schedule one on one appointment which students are more likely to attend.

- Size of the population – For a large population, focus groups are best because you will be able to reach more students with every meeting while with small populations you will be able to conduct interviews as well as focus groups.
- Assistance - For focus groups, a note taker and facilitator is preferred and for interviews the interviewer can ask questions and take notes.
- Budget - Interviews and focus groups should be taped therefore a tape recorder, tapes, and transcription of the tapes are needed (outsourcing transcription is costly). In addition, incentives such as food, cash, and raffles will help attract students.

*Who do I invite to participate?*

- Avoid bias when selecting participants because it does not provide a valid sample
- You can conduct a purposeful sampling, in which you choose participants from various student subgroups such as students from diverse student organizations, commuter students, ethnically diverse students, etc.
- You can review the demographics of the participants to ensure the sample is diverse
- You may want to utilize a key informant, which is a specific person you believe will provide the most information about the assessment subject. A key informant can help you access additional students or resources to utilize for the assessment.
- You can use convenience sampling in which interviewees are chosen based upon availability

*How many participants is enough?*

- Ask yourself: What size will be useful? What is the purpose of the inquiry?
- Balance your responses, you should avoid saturation (you continually hear the same responses again and again without new information)

*What is the structure of the interviews and focus groups?*

- Interviews can be unstructured, semi-structured or structured.
- Unstructured - informal conversations
- Semi-structured - guided interviews in which a prepared list of topics is addressed as well as the interviewer can explore unclear responses and new ideas
- Structured - predetermined questions and cover a number of topics, all participants are asked the same questions in the same way and order. Follow-up questions and unexpected responses are not allowed.
- You do not have to choose one technique, you can combine

*What are the order and content of the interviews and focus groups?*

- Introductions are always important to introduce yourself (the interviewer) and describe your role in process. You should explain the purpose of the study, topics to be covered and expected ground rules
- Interviewees should understand what information will be shared and used for the study. If audio taping or note taking, then ask for permission and explain that you are doing so to ensure you attain accurate information
- Order questions in groups of commonality or similarities. You should practice your questions a head of time to guarantee they make sense

- At the end of the session, debrief with participants to thank them and remind them of the study's purpose and ask for permission if you need to contact them in the future for clarification

*What are some tips for establishing rapport?*

- Speak clearly
- Show interest
- Control negative body language
- Remember your role
- Stay on track
- Seek clarification

*Reference:*

Bresciani, M.J., Zelna, C.L., & Anderson, J.A. (2004). Assessing Student Learning and Development: A Handbook for Practitioners. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), 48-57.