

Best Practices for Running Focus Groups

September 9th, 2025

Presenters

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Guest Speakers

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Training goals

01

Understand how focus groups are used in Cooperative Extension for needs assessments and evaluations

02

Understand when and why to conduct focus groups as part of needs assessments and evaluations

03

Understand best practices for designing focus groups for needs assessments and evaluations

04

Learn practical tips on conducting focus groups

Agenda

10:00	Welcome
10:05	Introduction and overview of using focus groups for needs assessments and evaluations in Cooperative Extension
10:40	Samuel Ikendi, UCCE Academic Coordinator
11:00	Break
11:05	LaJoy Spears, Cooperative Extension Program Development and Evaluation Specialist
11:25	Activity and Discussion
11:55	Wrap-up

What is a focus group?

What:

- A carefully planned discussion between a small group of people (6-12) on a topic identified by an evaluator or research team
- Conducted in-person or on video conferencing platform
- Typically one to two hours

History:

- Developed by sociologists, embraced in market research, adapted and grown across social sciences

Why focus groups?

- To explore: identify which questions to ask about the topic and pilot test ideas
- To strengthen and diversify data: e.g. expand on and/or complement survey results
 - Learn about shared and different perspectives on a situation or issue
 - Synergistic effect: comments from one participant trigger responses from others
- To better understand and respond to communities: foster trust and build relationships, understand common needs



Comparison between focus groups and other types of discussion groups

	Focus Groups	Other Small Discussion Groups (e.g. study circles)	Other Large Discussion Groups (e.g. town halls)
Purpose	Encourage divergent thinking, disclosure of personal perceptions and behaviors, and connections among participants' experiences	Study and/or generate ideas and solutions	Build consensus, educate, or persuade
Participant selection	Selectively invited, based on similar characteristics and/or relationships to topic	Invited or required to participate; similarities may be a limitation	Open to everyone in an organization or community
Identify problems	Recommended	Recommended	Limited use
Design programs	Recommended	Limited Use	Not recommended
Evaluate programs	Recommended	Not recommended	Not recommended
Build consensus	Not recommended	Recommended	Recommended

Planning focus group sessions

- Identify groups participants with shared characteristics based on what you need to learn
 - Groups of homogeneous participants helps encourage open conversation by addressing power dynamics, cultural/linguistic differences, etc.
- Run multiple focus group sessions for different perspectives
 - Necessary to answer research questions
- Ideal number of participants/group is 8-12; invite twice as many

Planning focus group sessions, continued...

- Plan early to anticipate scheduling conflicts
- Plan logistics based on participants' needs
 - online vs. in person
 - time of day
 - transportation
 - childcare
 - food
- Allow 1.5-2 hours per session



Protocol

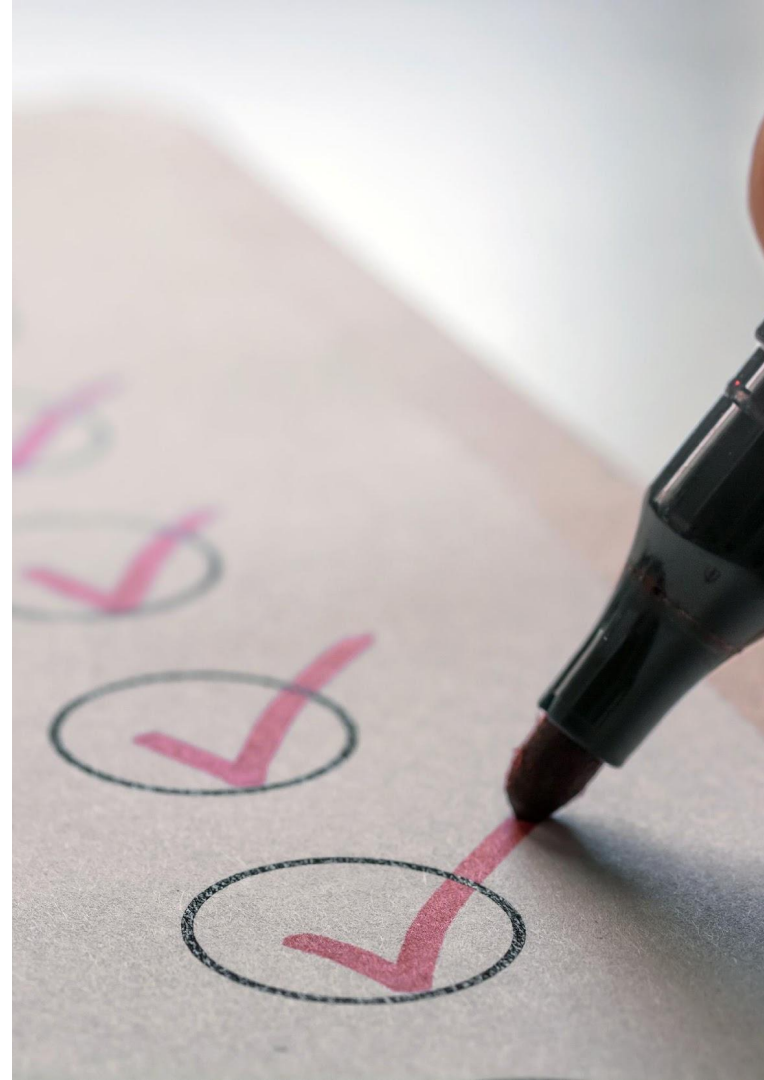
Outlines procedures and questions to conduct focus groups in a systematic way

Introduction:

- Introduce facilitator/data collection team
- Discuss purpose of the focus group and why participants were selected
- Share focus group guidelines/group expectations
- Discuss confidentiality and explain that their participation is voluntary
- Explain if the focus group is being recorded and why, obtain consent

Questions: From general to specific, ask key questions earlier

Close: Summarize key points, thank participants



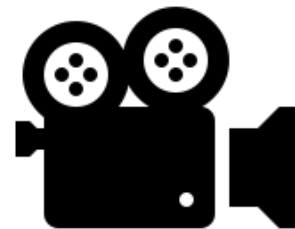
Formulating questions

- Questions should relate to your research or evaluation question - avoid tangents
- Ask open ended questions, avoid yes/no questions
- Avoid leading questions
- Use simple, clear, neutral language
- Pilot test questions
- Include prompts
- Limit # of questions (recommend 4 to 8)



Data collection options

- Audio recording (hardware or software) + transcription
- Video recording (Zoom, etc.) + transcription
- Note taker (plan B?)



Always ensure data security and confidentiality

[UC ANR Guidelines for AI Tools](#): “Any use of ChatGPT should be with the assumption that no personal, confidential, proprietary or otherwise sensitive information may be used with it.”

UC Davis IRB correspondence: “Researchers should reduce the risks to participant privacy or data confidentiality by using software that has been vetted by IT for the level of data being provided...”

Best Practices in Facilitation

- Honor the knowledge and experience of the participants
- Practice good listening and communication skills
- Maintain a permissive and non-threatening environment
- Refrain from sharing your personal views
- Keep conversation going and balance diverse opinions
- Try to connect with emotions and unconscious behaviors of the participants

Best Practices in Facilitation

- Use skillful probing, have pauses, and good body language
- Encourage both positive and negative feedback. Deal effectively with negative feedback
- Refrain from asking too many “why” questions
- Be empathetic
- Use humor, as appropriate
- Emphasize how you will use the data

Challenges and Strategies to Overcome

“Unfocus”
(Franz, 2011)

Distrust about
the use of data

Power
dynamics

Participants not
showing up

Noisy venues

Cultural
differences

Language
barriers

Gender-specific
considerations

Heterogeneous
sample

Plan for tech
failure

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Strategies to Overcome the Unique Challenges Faced in Conducting Focus Groups in Extension

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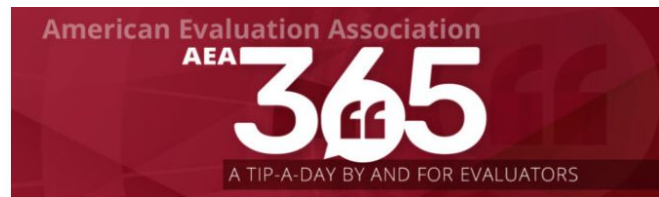
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Extension Education Evaluation TIG Week: Using Focus Groups in Extension Evaluation by Vikram Koundinya

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Hello AEA365 Readers! My name is **Vikram Koundinya**, and I'm an Evaluation Specialist at University of California (UC) Cooperative Extension System. My extension teaching is focused on evaluation capacity building of our extension professionals and programmatic staff. I also have a faculty appointment in the Department of Human Ecology at UC-Davis. My research focuses on evaluation methods, needs assessment, and outcomes measurement.

Methodological Limitations

- Not anonymous
- Confidentiality also can not be guaranteed
- Consent is difficult
- Moderators skill level
- Dominant voices
- Peer influence and bias
- Heterogeneity
- Resources for in-depth analysis
- Recruitment of sample
- Multiple focus groups needed