

Focus Groups

Focus groups bring participants together to discuss experiences in a group setting, surfacing common patterns, collective themes, and points of divergence. They are efficient for gathering multiple perspectives simultaneously, while also providing rich qualitative data.

Purpose

- Identify shared perspectives and common themes.
- Explore group dynamics and collective meaning-making.
- Generate ideas collaboratively for program improvement.
- Provide funders or stakeholders with stories of group experiences.

When to Use — Options

- **Mid-Program** → Gather group input on what's working and what's challenging.
- **Close-Out** → Capture key reflections, program value, and recommendations.
- **Pilot/Testing Phase** → Solicit input on curriculum, design, or program prototypes.

What to Capture in Focus Groups

Category	Examples
Session Details	Date, facilitator, group composition.
Key Topics Discussed	Program value, challenges, skill development.
Areas of Agreement	Common themes across participants.
Points of Divergence	Where perspectives differed.
Suggestions	Recommendations for program changes.
Memorable Quotes	Compelling participant insights.

Sample Focus Group Questions

Warm-Up / Icebreaker

- “What’s one word or phrase that describes your experience in this program so far?”
- “What motivated you to join this program?”

Program Experience

- “What has been the most valuable part of your participation?”

- “What challenges have you faced while participating?”
- “How has this program impacted your confidence, skills, or sense of belonging?”

Group Reflection / Shared Perspectives

- “Do you notice any common themes in what we’ve all shared today?”
- “What are some experiences that many of you seem to have in common?”
- “Where do participants’ experiences differ the most?”

Improvement / Suggestions

- “If you could change one thing about the program, what would it be?”
- “What advice would you give to the next group of participants?”
- “What would make this program more supportive or impactful?”

Closing / Wrap-Up

- “What’s the biggest takeaway you’ll carry forward after this experience?”
- “How would you describe this program to someone considering it?”

Recommended Tools/Formats

Tool/Format	What to Know
In-person circle + notes	Great for building trust and fostering open dialogue. Encourages organic discussion and nonverbal cues, but requires a skilled facilitator to capture key points without disrupting flow.
Zoom with breakout rooms	Strong virtual option for focus groups or paired reflections. Breakout rooms allow multiple small-group discussions, but facilitators need to manage transitions and provide clear instructions.
MURAL / Jamboard / Miro	Interactive digital whiteboards for brainstorming, mapping ideas, or collaborative reflections. Excellent for visual learners and distributed teams, but can overwhelm less tech-comfortable participants.
Otter.ai / Descript	AI tools for recording and transcription. Useful for saving time on note-taking and quickly surfacing themes. Requires cleanup for accuracy, especially with multiple speakers.
Google Sheets for coding	Lightweight, accessible tool for tagging themes, quotes, or outcomes. Easy to share among coordinators, but lacks advanced qualitative analysis features found in NVivo or Dedoose.

Best Practices for Focus Groups

- **Limit group size.** 6–8 participants is ideal to ensure everyone can contribute.
- **Use a neutral facilitator.** Prevent bias and manage dominant voices.
- **Set clear ground rules.** Confidentiality, respect, and equal voice.
- **Incorporate activities.** Use sticky notes, ranking, or word clouds to engage.
- **Record and transcribe.** Focus on facilitation rather than note-taking.
- **Look for both consensus and outliers.** Minority perspectives often provide critical insights.
- **Respect participant time.** 60–90 minutes is the sweet spot.