

Focus Group, Interview, or Survey? Which is right for your academic program?

Presented by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
Assessment Office
April 2011



Today's Agenda

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Program assessment overview
- 3) "Quick Guide" highlights
- 4) Questions to help you choose a method
- 5) Wrap Up



Workshop context

- Jan 2011 Assessment Office Workshop Survey
 - When would people like to attend workshops?
 - What workshop topics would people like covered?
- Results
 - Early afternoon: Mon/Tues/Wed/Thurs
 - February-April
 - Grad. Assessment; Adv. Curriculum Mapping; Engaging Faculty in Assessment; Focus Groups, Interviews, and Surveys
 - No small group activities



Session Outcomes

As a result of this session:

- You will know to ask
 1. What is my assessment question? and,
 2. How will the results be used?
before you select a method.
- You will be able to state the different reasons for using focus groups, interviews, and surveys.



PROGRAM ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

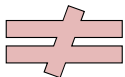
"The systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development."

~Palomba & Banta (1999)



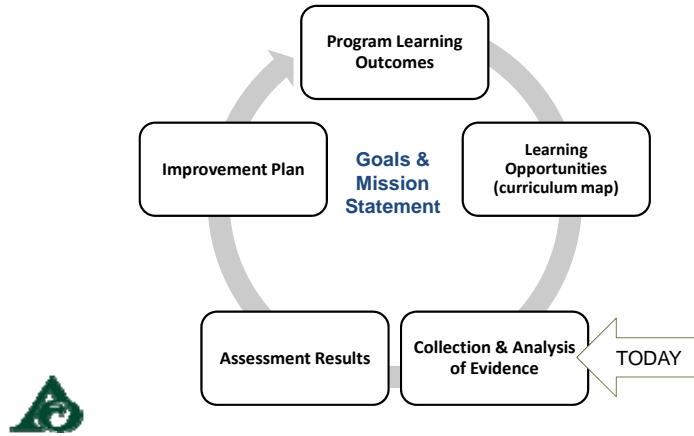
Program Assessment

Program Assessment  Improvement Evolution

Program Assessment  Individual Evaluation



Assessment Cycle



“Direct” and “Indirect”

- “Direct” evidence of student learning
 - Student products, behaviors
 - Reveals *what* students know and can do
- “Indirect” evidence of student learning
 - Self-reported perceptions, attitudes, beliefs
 - Reveals *how* and *why*
 - Note: Indirect methods alone do not provide adequate information about student learning.

Scenario

A program came to us for advice on conducting focus groups.

The program faculty wants to know why students choose or do not choose X as their major. Some faculty members suspect that if they offered 2-tracks, they would attract more majors.

Start with the end in mind

1. What do you want to **know**?
2. How will the results be **used**? Will they move the program **forward**?
3. What **evidence will be persuasive** to program faculty (or other stakeholders)?



“Quick Guide” highlights

Method	Why use this method?	Keep in mind
Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large groups for low cost • Cover many topics • Anonymity & confidentiality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey construction • Response rate • Limited clarification
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides rich, in-depth info • Allows for follow-up Q's • Stories & quotes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilled interviewer • Recruiting difficulties • Record & transcribe
Focus Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas build • Diverse views on a topic • Collect info in a short time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained moderator & note-taker • Group composition • Record & selectively transcribe



No matter which you choose

- Labor intensive
 - Planning, recruiting, coordinating, conducting, analyzing, reporting
- Sampling
 - Who should participate?
 - How do we contact them?
- Pilot test, pilot test, pilot test
 - Questions
 - Technology
- Will take more time than anticipated



When to use...

	Survey*	Inter-view	Focus Group
To understand what, how often, to what extent	X		
To understand how or why		X	X
To get information from many people (100+)	X		
To test a new idea	X		
To get feedback on a new idea		X	X
To get in-depth information		X	
To contextualize survey findings		X	X
To gather a wide range of responses			X



* With closed-ended questions

Questions to help you decide

1. What is your assessment **question**?
2. How will the results be **used**? Will they move the program **forward**?
3. What do you already know about the topic?
4. From **whom** will you collect data to answer your questions? Is this method appropriate for them?
5. Is this method realistic in terms of **resources** and **logistics**?
6. Will the **evidence and method be persuasive** to program faculty (or other stakeholders)? Will they **act** on the results?



Scenario

A program came to us for advice on conducting **focus groups**. The program faculty wants to know why students choose or do not choose X as their major. Some faculty members suspect that if they offered 2-tracks, they would attract more majors.

How would you suggest your colleague proceed?



Scenario

1. What is your assessment **question**? What do you really want to **know**?
2. How will the results be **used**?
3. What do you already know about the topic?
4. From **whom** will you collect data answer your questions? Is this method appropriate for them?
5. Is this method realistic in terms of **resources** and **logistics**?
6. Will the **evidence and method be persuasive** to program faculty (or other stakeholders)? Will they **act** on the results?



Wrap-Up

- Questions?
- Please complete & return an evaluation
- Next workshop:
Increasing Faculty Involvement in Program Assessment
Tuesday, April 26, 1:30-2:45 pm



Thank You!

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QUICK GUIDE TO SURVEYS

Survey

A common method to gather information from individuals, generally in the form of a questionnaire, which may be distributed in hard copy or online or administered by phone.

- Surveys ask people to self-report their perceptions.
- Surveys usually answer “what,” “how much,” and “how often” research questions.
- Survey questions are typically closed-ended questions (i.e., respondent chooses from a set of pre-determined responses). One or two open-ended questions may appear at the end.

Why conduct a survey?

- Reach many people, regardless of their physical location
- Can cover a variety of topics in a brief amount of time.
- Can administer to large groups for a relatively low cost.
- Analysis of closed-ended responses usually quick and straightforward.
- Anonymity and confidentiality are possible.
- Reliable surveys are commercially available and can often be customized.

Things to keep in mind

- Construction of a survey requires expertise, time, and clarity of purpose.
- Survey developers need to know all relevant options to create the appropriate set of closed-ended responses.
- Low response rate is a challenge.
- Respondents have limited opportunity to clarify responses.
- What people say they do or know may be inconsistent with what they actually do or know.
- Open-ended responses can be difficult and time-consuming to analyze.

Hints and tips

- Keep the survey as brief, clear, easy to complete, and as appealing as possible.
- Ask questions that directly pertain to your research question. Do not ask a question because it would be “nice to know.”
- Don't ask a question if you are unwilling or unable to act on the response.
- Avoid overlapping response options – response options should be mutually exclusive.
- Give “Unsure,” “Don't Know,” or “Not Applicable” options when appropriate. Give the option to select “Other” and then fill-in-the-blank.
- Pilot test the survey as well as the distribution mechanism. Make sure the questions are consistently understood and that respondents are willing and easily able to answer the questions.
- Create “buzz” with pre-survey communication.

Sources: Mary Allen, *May 2008 UHM Assessment Workshop*
Barbara Wright, *2009 WASC Retreat on Student Learning and Assessment, Level I*

QUICK GUIDE TO FOCUS GROUPS

Focus Group

A facilitated discussion with 8-10 similar participants who are asked a series of carefully constructed open-ended questions about their attitudes, beliefs, and experiences.

- A focus group session typically lasts 90-120 minutes.
- A moderator guides the group discussion to generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs.
- One or two recorders/note takers capture the "group memory" on large sheets of paper or on a visible screen.
- An observer may assist with trouble-shooting (e.g., showing a participant the restroom location) and taking notes on non-verbal cues such as level of agreement/disagreement.

Why conduct focus groups?

- Group dynamic allows participants to build on one another's responses and generate ideas that might not have been thought of in an individual interview.
- Rich, diverse views on a topic are captured.
- Moderator can ask follow-up questions.
- Information from a small group is collected in a short amount of time.

Things to keep in mind

- Requires a trained moderator and experienced recorder/note taker. Quality and usefulness of the discussion depend on the skill of the moderator.
- Takes time to identify and recruit similar participants.
- Participant confidentiality and anonymity are limited, at best.
- Some participants may not feel comfortable voicing their opinion in front of others.
- Three to four focus group sessions (with different participants) may be needed before themes emerge.
- Analysis of information usually involves at least two people (for validation purposes) and often requires several iterations.

Hints and tips

- "Over recruit" by 1-2 people in anticipation that 1-2 will be absent.
- Create a comfortable atmosphere (e.g., provide food and refreshments, follow the appropriate cultural protocols for that group).
- Have participants make name tents for themselves when they arrive.
- Preview the focus group room. On the day of the focus group, allow enough time to set up and break down.
- If recording the sessions, a complete transcription may not be necessary. Consider using the recording to verify notes and capture quotes.

Sources: Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2001). *Focus Groups in Social Research*. Sage, Thousand Oaks: CA.

Morgan, D. (1998). *The Focus Group Guidebook*. Sage, Thousand Oaks: CA.

QUICK GUIDE TO INTERVIEWS

Interviews

One-on-one conversations designed to elicit in-depth information.

- An interview typically ranges from 30-60 minutes.
- Skilled interviewers guide the conversation without judgment or bias.
- A clear recording of a 60-minute interview takes a good transcriber 2-3 hours to transcribe and results in about 15-20 pages of single-spaced text. (Some digital recorders and audio files work with voice recognition software.)

Why conduct interviews?

- Provides rich, in-depth information from an “expert.”
- Reveals the “why” and “how” behind the “what.”
- Allows for follow-up questions and clarification.
- May range from highly structured to exploratory; may include questions about many issues.
- Stories and quotes can be compelling evidence for stakeholders.

Things to keep in mind

- Labor intensive at every stage: planning, recruiting, coordinating, conducting, transcribing, analyzing, and reporting.
- Takes more time than surveys or focus groups.
- Takes time to identify and recruit participants.
- Before the interview, participants need to know the time commitment and the topic of the interview.
- The process can intimidate some participants, especially if asked about sensitive or personal information.

Hints and tips

- Conduct the interview in a quiet, private environment that allows the interaction to be uninterrupted.
- Take steps to put the participant at ease.
- Do more listening than talking.
- Be patient: Give the participant time to process the question and develop a thoughtful response.
- Paraphrase the participant's response and ask him/her to confirm your accuracy. Alternatively, ask for specific examples or more details that will clarify his/her response.
- Take brief written notes during the session and digitally record the interview. Your notes will be useful if the recorder fails. Bring extra batteries!

Sources: Mary Allen, *May 2008 UHM Assessment Workshop*
Barbara Wright, *2009 WASC Retreat on Student Learning and Assessment, Level I*