Capstone
Focus Group Guidelines, Protocol, and Report

When to use focus groups:
• When you want discussion amongst participants, and when this discussion provides useful information (e.g., the discussion prompts others to agree, disagree, expand, etc.)
• When you don’t need in-depth information from each member
• When you want to learn of the perceptions, needs, experiences, or reactions of members

Key points:
• Size: 6 – 8 participants; you should recruit a few more people than you expect to participate
• Length of Time: Typically about 90 minutes
• Number of Questions: About 8 – 12
  o Questions are open-ended
  o Focus group should start with questions that are “safe” or non-confrontational
  o Start with having everyone introducing themselves and telling something casual about themselves (e.g., how long have you lived in Denver)
• Atmosphere: Should be relaxed and conducive to group conversation
• Characteristics:
  o The group should be homogenous, but it is best if the participants do not know each other
  o Heterogeneous groups or groups where the participants know each other well may inhibit or bias discussion
  o Different groups of participants may capture different perspectives

Leader’s Role:
• The leader’s role is that of a facilitator; the facilitator asks questions, encourages quiet participants to talk, and encourages talkative participants to give others the opportunity to speak up
• The facilitator should not reveal his/her own point of view or any background information other than what relates to the project or his/her credentials

Potential Problems:
• Group Think: With group think, the minority may be afraid or unwilling to disagree with the majority of group members
  o If you sense group think may be occurring, try “I’ve heard that some people think…(provide the opposing view). Do you or your (friends, colleagues, etc.) think that?”
• Dominating by a Few People:
  o If only a few people are talking, try “Thanks, Joe. Can I hear from some of the rest of you on this issue?”
• Some not Talking:
  o If some members are not participating, try “Susie, what do you think about (x)? What have your experiences been?”

Other Tips:
• Allow for pauses in conversation: it may take awhile after asking a question for people to answer
• Use probes: Ask for clarification or for more information if needed; e.g., “Can you tell me more about why you feel that way?”
• Summarize at the end: Provide a quick summary of the key points the group made, including differing viewpoints
  o Ask the group whether you missed anything
  o Ask the group if it accurately captured their conversation
  o Ask the group what they think or if they have any final thoughts
SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE
(Focus Group of women in IT)

BEFORE OFFICIAL START:

- As women arrive, give them a consent form and ask them to read it and sign if they’re willing to participate. Let them know you can answer any questions they have.

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon. Thanks for coming today. I’m _______________________ (NAME OF LEADER) and this is _________________________ (NAME), a research assistant on this study. I am a professor at the University of Colorado at Denver and I’ve received a grant from the Colorado Institute of Technology to study women in IT in Colorado. We want to learn more about what prompts women to pursue careers in IT and how they feel about their education and their work.

I am not affiliated with any high-tech industry or group. You’re the experts here. I want to learn about your experiences in IT. We’re going to talk for about an hour and a half. I’m just the moderator. I’ll ask questions, but I’d like to get a good discussion going. If you disagree with everyone else, speak up. Your experiences may reflect those of other people in IT.

Your remarks, however, are confidential. We will be tape-recording the session to help us remember the important points you make, but only my two assistant researchers and I will have access to this tape. No makes will be linked with remarks in our research. Confidentiality is important. We ask that you maintain the confidentiality of everyone here and not repeat any comments that were made at this focus group after it is completed.

So, please be open and honest with us. Your comments will help the Colorado Institute of Technology and education institutions in the state to improve their IT programs for women like you.

Are there any questions? PAUSE.

I. INTRODUCTIONS:

Let’s begin by going around the room and introducing yourselves. Why don’t you tell us who you are, the program you graduated from, and what you do now?

II. CHOOSING IT

Now, take a moment to think back to when you decided to pursue a career in IT. PAUSE.

1. What prompted you to consider IT?

    PROBE: When did you first begin thinking of IT as a possible career for you?

2. What experience did you have with technology before starting the program at ______________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION)?

    PROBE: Did you have experience using computers prior to this program? At home? School? Work?

* There are many different degree programs and careers in computing. For the sake of simplicity, we have used the term IT as an umbrella term for all of the programs and fields (computer science, computer information systems, etc.) that may lead to jobs in the information technology sector.
3. Before starting this program, did you know anyone who worked in the IT field?
   PROBES: If so, what kind of work did he or she do? Was it someone you were close to? How did that person’s work influence your choice?

4. Did anyone encourage you to pursue a career in IT?
   PROBES: Teachers, advisors, parents, friends?
   If so, what was your relationship to this person and how did they encourage you?

5. Did anyone encourage you to pursue a career in math or science?

6. What were your experiences with math and science in high school? Did you like it? Did you feel you did well at it?

7. Did you enroll here right after high school? If not, what did you do before coming here? What prompted you to return to school?

8. What other careers did you consider before choosing IT?
   Let’s talk a minute about why you chose __________________________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION).

9. What prompted you to consider __________________________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION)?
   PROBE: How had you heard of __________________________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION)?

10. Did you consider other schools? What made you choose __________________________ (NAME OF INSTITUTION) in the end?

III. PROGRAM EXPERIENCES:

Now, let’s talk a bit about your experiences in the program.

1. What do you think of the program?
   PROBES: Was it like what you thought it would be like? How? How was it different?

2. Did you ever feel uncomfortable being a woman in the program? Tell me about that.

3. Do you think you were treated differently than guys in the program? If yes, how are you treated differently? Who treated you differently (faculty, students)?

4. Do you feel the program prepared you for what you do now?

5. What else could the program have done that would have helped you?
   PROBES: Internships, tougher classes, more practical or more theoretical content, help with looking for jobs or applying to four-year schools?

6. Looking back, what part of the program was most helpful to you now?
7. What part was least helpful?

IV. WORKPLACE/EDUCATION

1. The IT field has been pretty tough lately. For those of you working in IT, how did you find your job?

2. Are you doing what you hoped you would do?

3. How satisfied are you with your job?

4. What’s the best part of your work?

5. The worst part?

6. Do you feel you’re treated differently as a woman in your organization? If yes, how? Who treats you differently?

7. Do you think you will continue your education at some point in time?

8. For those of you in school, what prompted you to continue on?

9. How did you choose your school?

10. Are you still in IT? If not, why did you change

11. If you were starting college again, would you still choose IT? Why? Why not?

Thank you all for taking the time to share your experiences! Good luck to you in the future!