

# On Advising

## Student Focus Group Discussion Guide



## On Advising: SAMPLE Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

*What follows is a sample focus group discussion guide that can be used to collect information from students regarding their experience with advising.*

*For supporting focus group materials such as recruitment tips, invitation e-mail templates, consent forms, profile sheets, and a comprehensive planning guide that outlines focus group staff roles and order of operations, visit <http://www.ccsse.org/focusgrouptoolkit>*

### Outcomes for the Student Advising Focus Group Discussion:

- 1. To understand students' earliest and continuing experiences with academic planning and advising.*
- 2. To understand how and to what extent advising impacted critical junctures during the students' academic career.*

### The Focus Group Session

#### A. Preparation

As participants enter, the coordinator should

- a. Ask participants to sign in
- b. Ask participants to sign consent form (if applicable)
- c. Ask participants to fill out profile sheet/response sheet
- d. Provide stipends (if applicable)

#### B. Overview of Focus Group Discussion

As focus discussion begins, the facilitator should

- a. Introduce him/herself
- b. Explain purpose of focus group
- c. Confirm that participants have signed the consent forms (if applicable) and reiterate that participants can stop participating at any point
- d. Describe his/her role:
  - To ask questions and keep the group on track

- Explains that discussion will move fairly quickly, even though people might have more to say about a particular topic
- e. Describe participants' role:
- To share experiences and opinions, both positive and negative
  - Explains that there are no right or wrong answers
  - Explains that everyone should participate in discussion
- f. Explain logistics of discussion:
- 90 minutes maximum
  - Arrangements for water and restroom break
  - Cell phones turned off
- g. Explain ground rules:
- One person speaks at a time; no side conversations
  - No one person dominates; everyone will have a chance to be heard
  - There are no right or wrong answers; the discussion is about participants' experiences.
- h. Introduce notetaker and if applicable, audio/video operators. Explain purpose of audiotaping/video recording/notetaking:
- For the purposes of highlighting “the student advising experience” at the college
  - Explains that no names will be used in reporting
  - Gives thanks from the college
- i. Take questions from participants

### **C. Focus Group Discussion**

#### **Facilitator Tips:**

- Remind participants of the value of differing points of view:
  - Does anyone see it differently?
  - Are there any other points of view?
- Probes (questions to elicit more detailed responses):
  - Would you explain further? Tell me more about that.
  - Can you give me an example of what you mean?
  - Would you say more?
  - Is there anything else?
  - Please describe what you mean.
  - Does someone have a similar/different experience?

*[Provided below is a bank of example outcomes and questions which can be used to form your discussion guide.]*

### **Background of, and general information about, participants**

1. Participant introduction, including: a) name, b) major, and c) other colleges you've attended.
2. What is your educational goal? Degree? Certificate? Transfer? Upgrade skills for a promotion? Learn new skills to prepare for career change? Other?
3. If earning a degree or certificate is not your goal, why not?

### ***Outcome 1: To understand students' earliest and continuing experiences with academic planning and advising.***

#### **Expectations and Experiences**

1. Before you came to college, what did you expect college to be like?
2. Did anyone tell you what college was like or what you should expect? If so, who was it? Family members? Friends? Teachers or others at your high school? People at work? Anyone who worked at the college?
3. Please share why you decided to attend this college.
  - a. Did you know what you wanted to come to college for? A degree? A job or career? Something else? (Note: let students name these areas and use their words in subsequent questions.)
4. When was the first time you stepped foot on this college campus?
5. How would you summarize what the process of getting started at this college was like for you? Think about the experiences you had up to the first time you actually went to a class. (Rate it on a scale in which 1 is really easy and 5 is really difficult.)
  - a. Explain your answer.
  - b. What made it easy? What made it difficult?
  - c. Describe your best experience as you went through the steps needed to start college. Describe your worst experience.
6. Prior to registering for classes, did you talk with anyone at this college about the process of getting started here? More than one person? If so, did you know what the individuals' jobs were at the college?
  - a. Describe the conversations you had with that person(s), the questions the person(s) asked you, the questions you asked the person(s).
  - b. Is there anything you wish they had told you that they didn't?
7. When you first started at the college, did someone (advisor or individual you initially met with) at this college ask you about your academic goals—such as what you wanted to go to college for?

- a. Did anyone talk with you about the benefit of having a goal or earning a certificate or degree?
  - b. Did someone at this college discuss with you about how long it will take for you to reach your goals?
    - i. Is this about the amount of time you were thinking it would take to reach your goals, or did you think it might take a shorter or longer amount of time?
  - c. Did a staff member at this college discuss job or career opportunities based on your career interests with you?
  - d. Did anyone at this college tell you about career services available to you (e.g. a career center on campus, technology that can help you search for jobs, etc.)?
  - e. Did the person that you met with initially discuss when your next advising session should be?
8. Before you signed up for classes at this college, did anyone talk to you about your commitments life outside of school (work, children, etc.)? If so, did that conversation involve planning how you would balance those commitments with your college work?
- a. Did it affect your thinking about how many classes you would take?
  - b. Has someone talked with you about commitments and life outside of school every semester that you've signed up for classes?
  - c. Did a staff member at this college ever recommend that you take more or fewer courses than you originally planned to take?
    - i. For part-time students, did a staff member ever suggest that you try to go full-time?
9. How did you learn about the steps you needed to go through to sign up for classes?
- a. Did someone talk with you about the process for registering?
  - b. Did someone talk with you about how to pick classes?
  - c. Were there any classes you were told you needed to take? Who told you about those classes?
  - d. What was the setting for this experience? In a group? Individual meeting? Online? If in a group—what kind of group—can you explain? (Trying to find out if group advising is part of Orientation or a student success course.)
  - e. How long was your first meeting with your advisor (or whatever term the student uses)? How long were subsequent meetings with your advisor?
  - f. Were you required to meet with this individual or attend this session? Or, was it suggested that you do this? If so, who or what suggested that you do this?
    - i. Were you able to get out of this requirement?
    - ii. How does a student get out of this requirement?
  - g. If you did meet with someone, did this person use any technology, like a website or computer software, to assist you? Tell us about it.
    - i. Did you meet with the same person each time during your advising meeting?
  - h. Did you have to do anything prior to selecting classes (placement tests, interview, meeting with an advisor, etc.)?
  - i. If you were told that you needed to take a developmental education class at this college, did someone clearly explain why to you?

10. At any time, were you assigned to work with a particular person at the college? (If the person identifies the individual as an assigned advisor, use that language in subsequent questions.)
- What is this person's title? What is this person's role at the college?
  - If you were assigned to an individual, do you still meet with that person? If yes, how often? What leads to those meetings? Do you ask for a meeting?
    - Is this person specific to your program/major?
  - Does the advisor/counselor contact you for a meeting, or you contact the advisor?
  - Do you meet with the advisor/counselor individually, with other students in a group, or both?
  - If you were not assigned to a specific person, have you been back to see the person you originally met with at the college? If not, why not? If so, what prompted you to meet with that person?
  - Has your advisor ever come to one of your classes? If so, what kind of class was it?
11. When you first started at the college, did you declare a major or program of study? [Need to be aware of possibly different language used in different colleges.] If so, what was it?
- Were you required to declare a major, program of study, or pathway before registering for classes?
  - When you were deciding on that major, program of study, or pathway, did you speak with anyone at this college about it? If so, what was this person's title? Did this discussion take place in-person, online, or over the phone? Was it one-on-one or in a group? Tell us about that experience.
  - Since you started at the college, if you declared a major, have you changed your major? If yes, what led to that change?
  - If you didn't declare a major when you first signed up for classes, what advice were you given about courses to take? Were there any classes you were told you needed to take? Who told you about those classes?
12. Did anyone talk with you about making a plan that lays out specifically what classes you will have to take each semester to reach your goals?
- Was making a plan required?
  - Did someone help you create a plan? If so, who?
  - If you have put together a plan, did you do it before you started college?
    - If not, have you put together a plan since then?
      - If so, when did you do it and what prompted you to do it at that time?
      - Did you put together the plan during your first term at this college? After your first term?
  - Was the plan written down?
  - Did you use a web-based program?
  - If you have not created a plan, do you intend to make one?
  - Do you review the plan each time you meet with an advisor?
    - If so, is this person the same person you originally met with?
  - Has your plan changed since you first started at the college? If so, what led to the change?

- i. What happens if you try to register for a course that is not listed on your plan?
  - j. When planning what courses you will take each semester, is there anyone you meet with to help you with selecting your courses?
    - i. Are you required to meet with an advisor each term before registering for classes?
13. Did anyone at the college talk with you about how you would be paying for college? If yes, who was it? *(Note: You simply want to learn whether this was somehow integrated in the advising experience or whether it was left to the student to handle it separately. In the interest of time, you can skip it and you definitely should not spend time digging into it.)*
14. How would you rate your satisfaction with the college's advising or counseling services (whatever language the student uses to describe) you've received? Highly satisfied? Satisfied? Dissatisfied? Strongly dissatisfied? Explain your response.
15. During the process of registering for classes, did you ever consider walking out the door and not attending this college? If so, why? What made you stay?
16. Is there anything you wish you had known before you came to campus to get admitted and register?

***Outcome 2: To understand how and to what extent advising impacted critical junctures during the students' academic career.***

1. For those of you have attended this college for two or more terms, have you ever met again with the individual who helped you plan your first semester (or choose your classes for the first semester)? If so, what led to that meeting/those meetings? If not, is there someone else you have met with? If so, what is that person's role at the college?
2. Think about the classes you have taken in the past and those you are enrolled in now. In any of your classes, does your instructor talk with you about career plans?
  - a. About completing an associate degree here?
  - b. About transferring to a four-year college/university after you complete your studies at this college?
  - c. About services available at the college to help you with your studies?
  - d. About regional employment opportunities based on your career interests?
  - e. About things you can do to succeed in your classes?
  - f. Is it helpful? Not helpful? Why or why not?
3. For the first-term students, in your classes, has there been any discussion about your program of study while you're at the college and/or the courses you're going to take in the next term?
  - a. If so, in which class(es)? (Student success? First year experience? Other?)
  - b. How does that discussion take place? Does your instructor in the class talk with you about these things? Does someone else come to your class to have these discussions?

- c. Do you have any assignments related to these discussions? Describe how this occurs. What's the result of these conversations? Do you have any assignments related to these discussions?
  - d. Do you sign up for your classes for the next term while in your classes or do you do that outside of class? If none of this occurs while you're in any of your classes, do your instructors ever suggest that you talk to someone outside of class to make your plans for the following semesters? (*Note: We're looking for whether the advising function is built into the class or whether they are simply referred to someone outside of class.*)
4. In general, thinking about your experiences in your courses, is there anyone other than you who you think is aware of your progress toward your overall academic goal? If so, who?
    - a. Does anyone stay in touch with you about your progress?
    - b. How? Through email? Facebook? Phone? Face-to-face meetings? Other?
    - c. Helpful or not helpful? Why or why not?
  5. Have you ever had an issue come up in your life outside of college that made it difficult for you to stay on track toward your academic goal?
    - a. If so, did you talk to someone about it? Was it someone who worked at the college? What was that person's role at the college? Why did you decide to go to that person? What did you discuss? What happened after you met with that person?
  6. Did anyone in the group ever think of dropping out of college?
    - a. If so, did you talk to a staff member at the college? If so, what was the person's role at the college?
    - b. What happened then?
    - c. Was the conversation helpful? Not helpful? Why or why not?
  7. Have you ever hit a snag in any of your courses—fallen behind in your classwork, not done well on assignments or tests, etc.?
    - a. When you've hit a snag in your classes, have you talked to a staff member at this college about it? If so, whom did you talk to?
      - i. Was the person your instructor or someone else who was part of one of your classes?
    - b. Did you go to the person or did the person contact you?
    - c. If the person contacted you, in what way(s)? Phone? Email? Facebook? Other?
    - d. How early in the term did the contact occur?
    - e. What happened after you talked with that person?
    - f. Did the person suggest anything you could do? If so, what were the suggestions? Did you follow up on those suggestions? If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not?
    - g. Have you ever gone to anyone or any place on campus for additional help with your classwork?
      - i. If so, what led to your going for extra help?
    - h. Has anyone at this college ever provided you with information about academic support services, like tutoring, writing services, or math labs? If so, who? What did this person say?
    - i. Has anyone at this college ever talked with you about study groups?

- i. If so, who? What did this person suggest?
  - ii. Did you follow up on those suggestions?
  - iii. If yes, was it helpful? Why or why not?
  - iv. If you didn't follow up on the suggestions, why not?
8. Complete this sentence: "Advising at this college is like..."
9. Think about the one experience you've had at this college that you would say was most helpful in your efforts to be a successful student. What was that experience? Who was involved, and what did that person or persons do?
10. If you could give the leaders at this college advice about the one or two most important changes the college could make to improve students' experience, what changes would you recommend? Why do you believe those are the most important changes?
11. If you designed advising at this college, what would it look like?
12. Some students told us they weren't satisfied with advising. Why do you think that is?

### **Summary & Close**

1. Right now, what is the single most important factor that is keeping you moving toward success at this college?
2. How confident are you that you will stay and complete your academic goals? 1 being not very, 5 being extremely confident. Explain your answer.
3. If you were giving advice to a friend who was planning to attend this college about how to be successful at this college, what advice would you give?

*Facilitator asks participants if they have any final questions or comments. Facilitator thanks them for their participation once more.*